

History is Placing a Man in the Context of his Times: Interview with the Late Ashin Das Gupta (1932–1998)

One of the finest historians of modern India, Professor Ashin Das Gupta was engaged in teaching and researching for nearly four decades. Born in Calcutta in 1932, he spent his childhood in small towns in West Bengal. He came back to Calcutta to finish school and had lived there ever since. He taught History at the Presidency College, Calcutta University and the Visva Bharati University in India and at St Antony's College (Oxford), the University of Heidelberg and the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, USA. He was also the Director of the National Library and the Administrator of the Asiatic Society, both in Calcutta. Towards the end of his life Das Gupta was suffering from a crippling disease. But his mind was as sharp as ever throughout. Sitting in a wheelchair, he kept on dictating essays, both in Bengali and English, almost until the end. It was shortly before his death that he was asked for an interview by Itinerario, and in spite of the condition of his health, he kindly agreed to it. Itinerario found the issues raised during the interview and the comments of the historian very interesting and wanted to go back to him once more. But unfortunately he passed away before that opportunity came. The views of the late historian on history, social science and Indian politics are still very valid. That is why Itinerario decided to publish this interview as its homage to the memory of Das Gupta. Dr. Mrs. Uma Das Gupta kindly gave us permission to publish the interview.

Ashinda, would you tell us something about your childhood and school days?
All I remember of my childhood is travelling all over West Bengal. Being a civil servant, my father had a transferable job. I attended small schools in different towns and one school was no different from another. The schools were not rich; they were quite poor. They were no inspiration but I loved some of those small-town schools in Hijli, Burdwan, Katwa, Nalhati, Bishnupur, Bankura and Arambagh. So, I was brought up in rural West Bengal up to Class IX. Then we moved to Calcutta and stayed there.

You were a student of Science. When did you choose History as the subject of your study and what made you change the course of your study?

After I left school, I studied science for two years. I had my aptitude tested in the Science College. They said ‘go and take up Arts (Humanities).’ Then I gave up Science and chose History.

Many people we know remember you as an ‘Ishan scholar,’ among the most distinguished awards of Calcutta University. It is still considered remarkable that, being a student of History, you scored higher than students of the Science faculty and won this scholarship. You created a record that has not been broken so far. What else did you do besides studying?

Yes, I was an Ishan scholar. What I did beyond my studies at college was to enjoy debating and writing. Of course, the life of the college was in the Coffee House. I used to write a lot on political issues in the Presidency College Magazine. My near contemporaries were A.K. Sen, Sukhamoy Chakrabarty and Barun De who belonged to the Sushobhan Sarkar school of thinking—they were ‘left’ of Centre... I used to have debates with them... the funny thing about Calcutta is that they remember you as an Ishan scholar and have no idea of what happened afterwards!

You were a student of Narendra Krishna Sinha...

In college I remember the teaching of Sushobhan Sarkar. We read a lot of European history with him. He recommended simple textbooks. I liked his lectures immensely. He was very simple and lucid. The thing I did not like about his lectures was that he was asking questions on the subject and answering them himself for the students. What became clear to me much later on, but not at that time, was that these were complete lectures, not unfinished. Then when I studied with Narendra Krishna Sinha at the MA level and heard him asking questions on the subject, I realised the value of asking questions. At the beginning several others joined N.K. Sinha’s class but he discouraged them from staying on. Only I remained in his class and he was delighted with that. He said with a chuckle ‘the others fled’! His class was made up of me asking the questions and him answering them. After completing my Master’s at the Calcutta University, I started research. After one year of research I went to Cambridge on a State Scholarship of the Government of India.

Did you notice any difference in the method of teaching History in India and in England?

I was a student of Eric Rich at Cambridge. He was the Vera Hamsworth Professor of Imperial History at Cambridge University and later became Master of St Catherine's college. I also got to know T.G.P. Spear who was at Sellwyn College in Cambridge. I think what I gained from Cambridge was a 'take off' from N. K. Sinha's teaching. That same method was pushed ahead at Cambridge—that was the value of asking my own questions and finding answers to them. That was a proper introduction to research.

Your favourite historians...?

At that time my favourite historian was Postan. I thoroughly enjoyed his *Medieval*. Among my contemporary historians I am a great admirer of Arasaratnam. I met him first in The Hague and we became good friends. Among my Gurus I would list first Sushobhan Sarkar, second N.K. Sinha, and third Mrs M. A. P. Meilink-Roelofs. Later two other scholars came very close to this circle—C. R. Boxer and Holden Furber.

What do you understand by History; how would you define history?

History is a subject where there is difference of opinion about its definition. History is not written in any one way, in any one manner, so it cannot be said that History should be written in this way or that. Still, for the sake of a better analysis it is necessary to have a definition. In broad outline, History to me is placing a man in the context of his times. If one can do that one becomes a good historian. If one cannot then one should not write.

Would you mind saying a few words more on this point?

We can think of a man in different ways, but the contrast between a lone man and a man living in a society is to be noted. History cannot reach a man who is really lonely. An individual has his existence, but no history. A man becomes part of history only when he is part of society. I do not mean that many lonely human beings come to an agreement on a certain date to create society and state and then they become history. The lone man and the man living in society have been related to each other from time immemorial. History only explains the life of the social man. It is acknowledged that history is not just the story of kings and dynasties—it is the story of ordinary people. Those who keep this in mind, in their writing the special individual tends to form part of the larger crowd. It is needless to say that if history is considered to be the story of kings and

dynasties, that story would not explain the life of man as part of society. On the other hand, when the historian is in search of the crowd in order to move away from the history focused on one person, it becomes difficult for him to bring out the human side of that crowd.

Is that in your view the point where History differs from Social Science?

Social Scientists do not like this human aspect of History. So far Social Science has not been able to say anything on the special contribution of a particular person. The more there is an emphasis on 'analysis' in Social Science and the more History is trying to become the 'science of the society,' the more human faces are disappearing from the account of the past. In an attempt to rid History of the people of the upper strata of the society, Social Science in the West is putting more and more emphasis on statistics. In special cases, and depending on the questions being asked, one must have recourse to statistics, but that exercise must be only a part of the total effort to understand the man of the past. The relationship between History and Social Science is complex. Without entering into that large topic, I would only say that it would satisfy no one if the human aspect were removed from the study of the past. I have said that History explains the life of man as part of society; but that man also has a human side, and if we put too much emphasis on statistics that might result in an immense loss. Whatever the historian chooses to write on, and no matter how he writes his story, it is history because it is a reconstruction of the past. Apparently this may sound very simple, but in fact this is a complex statement. One has to know about what is meant by historical past. Past and 'historical past' are not the same. Scientists say that man is very young compared to the earth. The coming of man is a very recent development in the history of evolution. Since history deals with the past of man as part of the civilized society, it concerns only a fraction of the past in general. Past, on the other hand, is being created every moment. Yesterday is a thing of the past today; the last moment is also past at this moment. Where will the historian draw the line? So far, historians, even when they have studied modern history, have lagged behind the present. Recently, something called 'recent or contemporary history' has come into being. It is more modern compared to modern history. But there are still some doubts about it. The historian dealing with the past has a clear advantage. The results of the events of history are known, and that is why it is possible to analyse those events in a scholarly way. It is known that Siraj was defeated in the battle of Plassey. Since the historian is aware of this fact, while writing on the subject he automatically focuses on the role of Mir Jaffar.

The reader is surprised to note that a detailed analysis of the character of Siraj-ud-daula, the circumstances at that time and the historical role of Clive only leads one to think that it would be more surprising if the battle had ended in a different way. If, suppose, Siraj had been victorious, no doubt historians would have found some qualities in his character, the role of Madanlal would have been more emphasised and poor Clive would have faced strong criticism. History knows everything because history is a thing of the past. Recent history, on the other hand, is not. For that reason it would not be wrong to think that 'contemporary' and 'history,' these two thoughts, are conflicting with each other. If, suppose, as a result of the forward march of communalism the power of the state rested with some Hindu organisation and a merciless Ramrajatva was established in India, historians would then focus on the role of the Visva Hindu Parishad and modern men like you and me would be considered a failure. But those who are trying to write that history at present would have to combine the roles of journalist and historian. A historian to me is the journalist of the past, and the journalist a historian of the present.

The historiography of Indian maritime history is a rather recent trend. Together with Tapan Raychaudhuri, Arun Das Gupta and a few others you are one of the pioneers of this trend. Why did you go for the maritime history of India?

On the day I got my MA degree, N.K Sinha said to me 'Ashin, get out'—so I went to work on the coast and thus got out of Bengal. My first book was on Kerala (Malabar). But as I worked on the coast, I realised that in order to explain the coast Indian developments were not enough—you have to go out of India. That is the beginning of my move into maritime history. I have studied mainly the period from 1500 to 1800, which I would characterise as the Age of Sail. The Age of Sail can only be written by European historians mainly from the European documents. I am very grateful for the European expansion in the Asian Seas. But the point is that historians always have to challenge the documentation on the subject.

Would you like to comment on the recent trends in Indian historiography?

I think this is a very exciting time for Indian History. There is a very definite attempt to break away from the elite and go to the masses in writing history, as also to explore new themes. I would specially single out the study of the Indian mind. Naturally it is not possible to do this from British administrative documents. So there is an effort to stand our history on its own head. There is a determination to explore and use vernacular

sources, but up to now the results have been meagre. This does not mean it is not exciting.

Could you comment on present day Indian politics?

No.

Your classes on Gandhi were famous. Could you say a few words on Gandhi—what do you think of him as a person and a politician and his relevance for the present?

I think very highly of Gandhi. But I think he was asking for the impossible. India would always admire Gandhi but India would never follow him. This admiration is very important. It makes Gandhi relevant to India for all time.

As you know, activities on part of the fundamentalists in different parts of India during the last few years have brought the question of communalism to the forefront these days. How would you analyse it in the Indian context? What do you think secularism in India should mean?

Secularism in India has come to mean a message of unity of all religions. I do not believe this can be changed. Even an atheist can accept this. So let it be. We shall be extremely lucky if we can achieve this much of secularism.

What are you currently working on?

I am basically trying to put down my thoughts about India and the Indian Ocean since the days of Vasco Da Gama. I am doing this both in English and in Bengali. I am particularly keen on Bengali because it is a tough challenge to reduce complex thoughts into simple language, which will communicate them directly to those reading in Bengali.