

## Professor Dipak Banerjee who chose first things first

I first met Professor Dipak Banerjee in 1961 or 1962 in a classroom in Presidency College, Kolkata when I had Economics as a pass subject and he used to lecture to us in Microeconomics. I had seen him much earlier of course during 1958 or 1959 when he was a frequent visitor to my uncle's house in the evenings. They were very close friends and apparently they always had a very good time because one would hear guffaws and there would always be the smell of cigarettes and cups of teas would be sent in. I was of course not allowed inside, so did not know what all they discussed nor what was so funny. In fact it was the fact these teachers seemed to be having a grand time which alerted me to the possibility of being a teacher myself. Somehow in the classroom, things changed and DB, as we used to refer to him, seemed to be a really stern task master.

In fact our honours classes were in the main building and from there, the trudge to the Economics Building which had just been completed, was a long one and there were many distractions on the way. I was told that if one was late, then DB would throw you out; in fact, a senior told me that DB had thrown someone out of the window. I laughed, thinking it was a joke and the senior rebuked me: you think he cannot lift you? He has been a porter in the UK and while in England he was quite accustomed to pick up weights which were heavy. That was the first sign that I had that DB was different. The stories that one heard about him were really all quite fantastic: that he had run away from home, working his way on a cargo ship and some how landed in the UK; while there he had worked at many menial jobs to support his stay. He had done well in examinations that he took as an External Student for the B.Sc degree of the LSE and done so well in the Part I that he was given a scholarship to complete. This was just like a fairy tale. I had a secret feeling that even if I was late for his class, he would not throw me out of the window: he was my uncle's friend after all; but still I was not very sure and used to run all the way to be there as soon as I could.

The lectures were simply great: I did not realize that at the time; I thought if you taught you should be able to explain things as clearly. I realized much later how many of us who teach can never reach his levels of clarity of expression. It was soon that he left us to go to the LSE; he also went for a visiting position to Berkeley thereafter. I went ahead completed my honours and my MA in Pure Mathematics and by the time the results were announced in 1967 (we were the 1966 batch!), DB was back teaching at Presidency. I had by then made up my mind to pursue Economics: most of my friends were doing economics in any case. There did not seem to be any prospect of a job with a Pure Maths MA; but switching to Economics was easier said than done. I got lucky by landing a job as a Research Assistant in IIMC attached to the Economics Group and decided to really learn Economic Theory. I learnt that DB was teaching a few students some advanced stuff; I requested his permission to join and it was readily given. There were three of us and we would meet once a week for a couple of hours; he taught us some Linear Algebra and Analysis; and then went on to discuss Linear Economic Models. I felt that we were doing advanced stuff because a friend at MIT was being taught a similar course by Robert Solow and we would discuss, in letters, how tough some of the problems were in David Gale's Book: it was being used by both DB and Solow. Of course I had some

advantages over the other two in the class; they had done Economics; and so often when they could not solve some of the exercises, and I could, he would say: look, he (meaning me) has done maths, so he should be able to solve them in any case, but you should also try and you too can solve these problems. I learnt quite a lot and his wit helped relieve the tedium considerably. He would often say in bengali “gollaye jachhe” (literally meaning going to zero; but the pun was that it also meant that something was being wasted or destroyed) when there was some tendency to approach zero. It was an excellent learning experience; people in MIT were doing the same thing so we felt we were right on top. My first skirmishes into research started around the same time with things that DB asked me to read and write and investigate. If I recall correctly, it began by his posing a question on something in Samuelson’s Foundations: something related to qualitative economics. His comments on things that I wrote were always incisive: if some thing was not clear he would say so without beating about the bush. His statements may have felt harsh at times; but they were always delivered with a twinkle in his eyes and there was always some thing which made you laugh.

He decided that he knew me well enough to recommend me to graduate school and he wrote to just two places: one to Essex and the other to Rochester: the first had Morishima then and the second had McKenzie. Essex had no money but Rochester did and so I ended up there. I remember a dinner at his home just before I left for Rochester: his telling me what to expect in the US: he said that “in the US you will have all the things that your well off relations and friends have: a fridge, a music system, a car and so on. You might even have a TV”. But look, he told me you are going to study: so remember what comes first. I can hardly reproduce the atmosphere of that conversation in Bengali. He went on to many things. He said “Forget about going 30 miles to buy a fish which just tastes like hilsa: if you are interested in hilsa stay in Kolkata and visit Gariahat market regularly”. Then he went on to tell me about how to behave in the US; I remember asking him whether one should carry gifts for teachers; he said no, not unless you get to know them well enough. And when you get to know them well enough, you can take a bottle of scotch; I had no idea about this. Black Label he said would be a good thing to take; and he said that will always be appreciated.

Over the years, DB has been a shining example to all of us; his witticisms and his sharp comments on things he disapproved of, were always delightful: I suspect they didn’t win him too many friends; but then he just did not seem to give a damn. We all realized that he had a soft spot for only his students and some times even when he was chiding us for some thing that he thought should have been done and we did not, he would say some thing which would always soften the blow. I cannot think of too many people who lived the way he did. He had chosen his priorities and he kept them to the very last. He of course taught us economic theory but more importantly, I think he was teaching us how to live.

He had come to JNU for an official visit in 2004 to participate in a Conference to honour Professor Tapas Majumdar on the latter’s 75<sup>th</sup> birthday; I think they were perhaps the closest of friends. It was good to see them enjoying the balmy Delhi weather. We all remarked how happy they looked. We knew then of course that DB was seriously ill, but that was only inside information: one could not make it out by looking at him. I remember that Satish Jain and I tried to get him to write for us; for the web journal that we were going to start. You fellows are silly, he said; you are asking the wrong person;

ask Tapas. When we told him that Professor Majumdar had agreed to write and he should too; his response was sharp as ever; he said that he had written once only and we should know that such a person had very little chance of penning another piece. There was no hesitation to tell us to lay off: and I think that he liked both of us. But he had chosen; his priorities were clearly defined and there would be no compromises. It is not surprising that his only piece in print was called just that: "Choice and Order OR First things first".

January 23<sup>rd</sup> in West Bengal is well known: Netaji Subhas Bose's birthday; this year Saraswati Puja or Basant Panchami was also on the same day. But for those of us who knew DB, we would henceforth remember the day as the day the Umpire raised His finger and DB completed a splendid innings.