

IN MEMORIAM

Amitabha Basu

(1938–2009)



Professor Amitabha Basu passed away on 12 December 2009 after a brief illness. And India lost an extremely bright, innovative and humane anthropologist of international repute of the contemporary times. We, his students, lost our mentor and teacher who inspired and trained us not only to become a good anthropologist but also to become and remain a good human being. It becomes really

painful for us to accept this sad event and we still feel that he is always with us.

Professor Basu was born on 6 January 1938 in Calcutta (now Kolkata), hailing from a very respectable family of the city. He began his schooling from an orthodox educational Institution in the city and completed his school education in 1954. He completed his Bachelors in Anthropology in 1958 and became a gold medallist by having been ranked first in his Masters in Anthropology from the University of Calcutta in 1960. His brilliant doctoral research on the population genetics aspects of the Pahiras, an Indian tribal population culminated into awarding of the degree of Doctor of Science (the highest possible degree for research endeavours) to him from the University of Calcutta in 1969. This work of Professor Basu was extremely appreciated by Curt Stern, the renowned human geneticist which was published in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* in 1969. The academic inspiration that he received for this work was from his teacher, Dr. Sasanka Sekhar Sarkar, considered to be the doyen of Indian Physical anthropology. Professor Basu imbibed both Dr. Sarkar's broader and holistic canvass of academic anthropology and philosophy for life throughout his lifetime.

The professional anthropology for Professor Basu began with his joining the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI), Kolkata in 1967 and he got involved in one of the interesting projects measuring urban stress in the then Calcutta slum populations. This project was undertaken in collaboration with Dr. S. L. Shapiro and it was very fa-

avourite one of Professor P. C. Mahalanobis, the founder of the ISI. Professor Basu was awarded Fulbright post-doctoral fellowship and worked in the Department of Anthropology, University of North Carolina at the Chappel-Hill, USA during 1967-1969. He received intellectual stimulation and academic adoration from late Professor William Pollitzer during this time and worked on demographic-genetic aspects of the Haitian populations. Further, his visit to the Department of Human Genetics, University of New Castle-upon-Tyne, UK in 1974 provided him the opportunity for academic interaction with Professor D. F. Roberts and there he took interest to be trained on human chromosome techniques. Upon his return to India and his rejoining the ISI in its Research and Training School as the Senior Lecturer, he established a Human Chromosome Research Laboratory. However, around 1976, a shift in his research focus was visible. He didn't want to remain a physical anthropologist any more describing only the nature and extent of genetic variation among groups and sub-groups of populations for determining population micro-evolution, or determining genetic abnormalities. He wanted to study biocultural adaptation in man, the initiation of which was noticed in his first work in the ISI among the Calcutta population. He searched for opportunities to undertake studies on human biocultural adaptation with a multi-disciplinary approach. His overarching research goal was to study different dimensions of the same including the limits to adaptability. Lately, he was interested to investigate into the survival strategies and coping mechanisms of the impoverished populations. He, furthermore, wanted to pursue a socially relevant biocultural anthropology that does have academic challenge and necessity in one hand, and practical value in terms of human welfare on the other.

He was reasonably successful in his much desired research endeavours in the years to come. This was the time when International Biological Programme came into existence and an world wide attempt was made to study human adaptability in diverse environments. He initiated a research programme titled »Human Adaptability Programme« in the then Anthropometry and Human Genetics Unit of the ISI, possibly first of its kind in India. The flagship project under this programme under-

taken in 1976 was purported to study human biological vis-à-vis cultural variation in relation to altitude. This bioanthropological work among the Sherpas of Nepal and Kalimpong has been a pioneering contribution in the field of Himalayan high altitude studies. Over a period of 22 years, i.e. from 1976 to 1998, under the auspices of the Human Adaptability Programme, Professor Basu undertook projects in ISI that investigated various aspects of human population biology in the perspective of biocultural adaptation among rural and urban, tribal and local populations of the Indian State of West Bengal. The topics of research included effects of migration, socioeconomic factors, sociocultural factors, labour productivity on objective and subjective measures of health, physical and psychological domains of women's health in relation to working status, food practices and its health implications, economic conditions vis-vis health status of the elderly, and health and well-being of the impoverished urban squatter dwellers. The fact remains that Professor Basu happened to be a pioneer in India in initiating bioanthropological research pertaining to these important topics among various Indian populations including their vulnerable segments. Many of the salient and interesting findings of all these researches have found place in many technical refereed journals of anthropology, human biology, ecology, nutrition, public health, medical research and so on published from India and abroad. Professor Basu trained his 9 Ph. D. students through these research projects and fortunately all of them are presently established as practising anthropologists in India.

Professor Basu in all had almost 300 research publications, singly and with his students and colleagues. He had many conference presentations both in India and abroad. He was a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute, UK, and Member of Society for the Study of Human Biology, UK, Life Member, Indian Anthropological Society, Kolkata, Founder Member of the Indian National Confederation and Academy of Anthropologists and Sasanka Sekhar Sarkar Society for Human sciences, Kolkata and Fellow, West Bengal Academy of Science. He actively contributed to growth of many of these Indian organizations. He was also associated with many Indian Universities in the matters of post-graduate education in anthropology. He served as an Associate Editor for the Journal of the Anthropological Society of India and a Consulting Editor for Collegium Antropologicum for long, till he breathed his last. He was recipient of several prestigious awards given to him by various organizations in recognition to his academic contributions.

Professor Basu was deeply impressed by the academic orientation and achievements of Professor Paul T. Baker.

Baker's study in the Andes inspired him much. Many of Baker's students were also very familiar with him. Further, his academic association with Professors G. H. Harrison, D.F. Roberts, E. J. Clegg, P. Rudan, I. DeGarine, H. Forsius has been noteworthy. Professor Basu was instrumental in bringing many of world's renowned biological anthropologists to ISI for academic interaction. He was one of very academically popular biological anthropologists among his Indian colleagues, as well.

Professor Basu was a serious field anthropologist. He favoured empirical research. He gave supreme importance to ethically sound data collection based on establishment of genuine rapport with the research participants. He hated so called »hit and run« approach. His students have been fortunate enough to experience his field training during their doctoral research. He used to say: »you need to leave a sweet taste to everybody's mouth in the field«.

Professor Basu was not only much concerned about the growth of his discipline at global and national levels, but he was equally concerned also about the social and political problems of the contemporary world and paid academic attention to various such local problems and sociopolitical movements. He, in fact, was an ardent believer of socialism and supported leftist movement in India from his young age. Further, he was a genuine art lover. Paintings of legendary artists like Van Gogh were very close to his heart.

Professor Basu used to love ISI very much and did have a passionate involvement with this Institution. He was one of the very loved and adored faculty members of ISI, too. Professor Basu was liked by all categories of workers in ISI.

Professor Basu didn't form his own family. He chose to be a bachelor. But remained a beloved member of his elder sister's family during his last days. His nephew and nieces were his loved ones. He also considered his students to be his family members, and dreamt of their academic achievements. He not only guided his students in the realm of academics, he socialized them to be a productive and socially sensitive human being. Again, each of his colleagues, and friends did have a sweet and special kind of relationship with him which they will cherish ever.

The sad demise of Professor Basu compels all to miss for ever a gentleman of highest integrity and a conscientious scientist of high stature.

Barun Mukhopadhyay