In Memoriam

Professor A.B. Mukerji
(1929-2011)

The first thought that came to my mind after being informed of the passing away of Professor Mukerji was that "The only cultural geographer of India, and a distinguished one, has departed from our midst". Professor Mukerji died on 31st January 2011 at Chandigarh, at his home. Ms Mukerji was by his side when the end came

Indeed, A.B., as he was known among his close friends, was a quintessential cultural geographer, one in the line of Carl Sauer and David Sopher, not always harping on the utilitarian aspect of the discipline. We will genuinely miss him and feel his absence acutely every time a discussion on culture or cultural geography of India takes place.

Anath Bandhu, literally translated as 'brother of the orphans' was born on 27th November 1929 in Jhansi, a district town in the state of Uttar Pradesh (India) where his father was teaching geography in an intermediate college. Apparently, Prof Mukerji inherited his interest in geography as a legacy from his father. The family, following the premature death of his father shifted base and moved to Allahabad where he became a part of the larger family of his grandparents.

Much of Mukerji's education took place at Allahabad, a nerve centre of education in Uttar Pradesh. He graduated from Allahabad University and subsequently received his Masters in Geography from the university in 1951. The year also marked the beginning of Mukerji's career in education with his joining of a college as a Lecturer in Geography at Modinagar, where he spent first five years of his life as a teacher, getting a feel of collegiate teaching. His subsequent assignment as a Lecturer in 'Geography and Field-Work Study' at a Rural Institute at Udaipur in Rajasthan was what got him deeply interested in cultural studies especially the evolution and morphology of Rural House Types as governed by regional environment and the cultural tradition of the local community. This also prompted him to deepen his understanding of rural landscape by further studies and research, an interest that led to his joining the University of Louisiana in 1957 as doctoral student in the department of geography and anthropology. He received

his Ph.D. from the above university in 1960. One may mention that during his doctoral studies, Mukerji had the benefit of attending some lectures of Professor J. Russel in physical geography and particularly Alluvial Morphology, a reflection of which is seen in a few papers he wrote on geomorphic themes related to *choe* terraces.

Professor Mukerji's career in education spread over almost four decades, from 1951 when he first took his teaching assignment at Modinagar till 1989 when he formally retired from Panjab University as a Professor of Geography. He continued his research and teaching in different capacities, on re-appointment, as Emeritus Professor of the University Grants Commission and as Visiting Professor in several Universities in India and abroad. The best part of Prof Mukerji's career as a university teacher was his association with the Geography Department at Panjab University, Chandigarh. The Panjab University is the university with which the wife-husband professorial duo is associated, the former as a Professor of English, and A.B. as a Professor of Geography. The duo contributed greatly to the development and the reputation of their respective departments, and both were recognised as outstanding teachers and an asset to the university. With a senior colleague in Professor G.S. Gosal, the founder of the department and initiator of Population Geography in India, and several young and talented and dedicated colleagues, Mukerji's contribution to the growth of the department and infusing quality and excellence in teaching and research is well recognised not only by his students and colleagues but by a large section of geographers' fraternity in India. Mukerji's dedication to teaching and research firmly puts him in the category of a role model for younger geographers. The reputation of Chandigarh school of geography owes a great deal to Mukerji's dedication to research, his encouragement to his students and his respect for the views of his colleagues. His was no mean contribution in turning geography department at Chandigarh into a 'model school of geography' in the country that enjoys the status of a Centre of Advanced Study, a status only a few geography departments in the country enjoy.

Indeed, Professor Mukerji was one of the very few outstanding geographers the country has produced in the last half century. He did not wield much power in the 'managerial circles' of the capital, yet he influenced young geographers by his erudition expressed in his well organised and equally well delivered speeches and thought provoking writings.

Mukerji's research area of abiding interest was 'Rural Settlements', their spatial patterns, spacing and organisation; House Types and their layout and architecture in response to environment and the cultural tradition of the regional communities. He was also attracted by the cultural traditions of different communities in India, from scheduled castes of Andhra Pradesh to Muslims and Chamars of U.P., and the Jats of Ganga -Yamuna Doab. '*The Chamars of Uttar Pradesh*' (New Delhi, 1980) reflects his purpose, style and approach to social and cultural geography in the Indian context. It must, however, be said that though a pioneer and a strong exponent of cultural geography in an environment reeking with utilitarian values, Prof. Mukerji seldom, if ever, demonstrated a keenness to peep into a region's art, literature and culture or develop an insight into the region's cultural tradi-

tion in the backdrop of its historical legacy, which every community so jealously guards. Instead, he confined himself largely to the visible landscape, a geographer's delight. A geographer of stature, he limited his research to what he considered purely geographical. Thus, one can see an array of themes, often diverse and unrelated, written on by Mukerji. This is perhaps the trait of many talented geographers in India, living to the tradition of what is recognised as 'holistic', integrative, inclusive and comprehensive - a landscape approach.

A prolific reviewer, with the advantage of his vast reading, Prof Mukerji reviewed scores of books in different disciples on a variety of themes, not always related to geography. I know of no other Indian geographer who was such a keen reader and reviewer of books. A man of scholarship and a book–lover, he was always keen to know and read the latest publications, particularly those discussing society and social themes in India.

A founder member of the Institute of Indian Geographers (registered in Feb.1979, based at Pune), Prof Mukerji was a great support and a pillar of strength to the Institute struggling to survive in its infant years, the eighties of the last century. He delivered lectures, participated in the annual conferences, and encouraged his colleagues and students to join the Institute. The Institute will always be indebted to him.

Off the Academic Track

My association with A.B. was periodic, limited to conferences, seminars and academic visits. Our interaction grew with his involvement in, and support for, the growth of the Institute of Indian Geographers in the late seventies. Professor Mukerji was one of the founding members of the Institute and a member of its Governing Council for several terms. During the discussions at the conferences, one always waited for his comments, the comments that were forthright in his criticism and profound in his observations. He would not hesitate even to ridicule the speaker if he perceived some kind of absurdity in a lecture or presentation of a research paper. His test of a good research was always originality and depth of scholarship and not the utilitarian significance of a theme.

The wit and humour, a characteristic feature of Mukerji's writings, can be seen in some of his popular, yet very sensible, observations about geography in general and Indian geography in particular. While writing about "What ails Indian Geography", in an edited volume, Mukerji referred to the 'managers of Indian Geography' as 'funders' and their indiscriminate decisions as 'blunders', thus coining a new phrase 'Funders blunders', a phrase that has become a much liked 'quotable quote' among Indian geographers. In the same vein, he introduced another phrase 'gerontocratic grinding', a malady that afflicted Indian geography. The younger generation of geographers especially enjoyed reading his articles and used these phrases with telling effect without hurting anyone. These observations of Professor Mukerji found their echo even in some geography departments of American universities with some India specialists on their faculty.

Some of the occasions that are etched in my memory reflect his ways of appreciating or dismissing views expressed in seminars. Here are a few. The occasion, the Annual Meet of the Institute of Indian Geographers at Vadodara, Professor Mukerji

in Chair presiding over a technical session of geomorphology, the speaker, a Reader in an University, and the presentation was about soils - their mineral and granulometric properties. After the speaker finished with the presentation of his paper, one of the delegates wanted him to distinguish between soil, sediments and rocks. Despite the simplicity of the question, the speaker started fumbling. Professor Mukerji, the Chairman of the Session, came to his rescue and observed smilingly in Hindi '*Are Bhai nahin samajhate ho, soil means mitti and rock means chattan*'. The observation evoked a peal of laughter among the audience and the speaker was saved from embarrassment.

Mukerji knew no golden mean; no equivocation and no political correctness. More often than not, he was frank and outspoken. I have heard him criticize scholars who, he thought, don't deserve the positions they held or indulged in trivialities, away from any scholarly pursuit. His admiration for scholars, he appreciated, was unstinted. Quite willing to support younger scholars and others whom he decided to help, he would go all out, suggesting ways to get things done and even advocating the cause of such an individual pointing to his or her merits. His favourite phrase that still resounds in my ears were -'*Madad karni hai to char ane, aur ath ane ki nahin , poori karni hai.* I like this motto.

His role models were Carl O. Sauer and David Sopher. Like the former, he thought of geography as a discipline inseparable from human history as much as the earth, and deliberately strayed into anthropology, history, archaeology and sociology. Many younger geographers see him as a geographer in the traditional sense of practicing geography as an integrating discipline. An admirer of David Sopher, the Syracuse University professor, who pioneered the Geography of Religion and saw culture as a system of beliefs and practices, Mukerji's accent was ever on concrete cultural landscape, and not so much on its historical evolution, and contemporary organization. One may mention that though he had a deep interest in cultural landscape, he also contributed to the growth of physical geography, particularly geomorphology. His study of '*Choe terraces*' of Punjab Siwaliks where he appears to have discovered alternative sequence of glacial and interglacial formations, speak of his interest in the metabolism of physical landscape. Later, before he developed a recurring inadequacy of vision, he had developed interest in land-slides, and wrote an article based on newspaper reports, pinpointing the locations of these occurrences, and explaining their causes, using Survey of India maps, and applying his own knowledge of the Siwalik Himalayas.

Sometime in the nineteen eighties, Prof Mukerji was invited by the University of Pune as a Visiting Professor in Geography. By that time, he had already started experiencing difficulty in deciphering small prints, yet he was keen on teaching basic geomorphology, and for this he followed Thornbury's 'Principles of Geomorphology', a text book many of us thought outdated. Yet, what I learnt from the students struck me – his elaboration of basic principles of geomorphology was so organized that the students thought of him as a wonderful teacher. This propelled us to think of our deficiency and reflect on the need to improve our teaching. While at Pune, he had wonderfully cordial relations with all the colleagues including some doctoral students who used to assist him in his work. A teetotaller, he,

like most Bengalis, liked fried fish which, unfortunately, the university guest house could not provide.

Once in the decade of the eighties, I invited Prof. Mukerji to join me on a field trip to Mahabaleshwar, a small forested plateau in the Sahyadris, and also a Hill Station, about 120 km from Pune that was the area of our ecological study. Among others in the group were, Prof. V. N. Misra, an archaeologist, the then Director of Deccan College, Pune, and Prof R. D. Dikshit, a well known political geographer. I took them round and gave an idea of what we were doing with the help of biologists. After our return, Prof. Mukerji delivered a lecture in the department and what he appreciated most was the field orientation of Geography Department of the University of Pune. This boosted the morale of the teachers and the students alike, coming as the appreciation was from a senior distinguished geographer.

While we deeply mourn his death, we shall ever remember Prof Mukerji with respect for his scholarship, with admiration for personal integrity and with amusement and laughter for his frailties which bedevil all of us in some measure. To me, Prof Mukerji was a gentleman and the paragon of a university teacher

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