

ACHARYA PRAFULLA CHANDRA RAY — VI

(Continued from the issue of April 2014)

P. C. Ray, The Social Worker

THE scientist Satyendranath Bose, a pupil of P. C. Ray, remarks about the Acharya's life ([3], p. ix):

His saintly life is a beacon light to all who wish to dedicate their lives in the service of humanity.

An epitome of compassion, Prafulla Chandra Ray never failed to respond to a call for help whether from an individual or from a mass of people in distress. During his rural life, when he was still a young boy, Prafulla Chandra used to take care of the poor people who fell ill but did not have the means to procure the prescribed diet. With his mother's consent, Prafulla Chandra used to take food items like sago, arrowroot and sugarcandy from his mother's stores and distribute them among the sick. Years later, the villagers would readily respond to the Acharya's appeal for donations for flood-victims, for they dearly loved their "Peeceerai" ([10], p. 17). M. Gupta records ([3], p. 65) that when the Acharya used to visit his village home during the Puja and summer vacations, he would take with him a few gunnybagfuls of sugarcandy, sago and barley to be distributed among the needy.

One can also see the social worker in P. C. Ray in his choice of the first research theme after his return to India: the investigation into the adulteration of ghee and mustard oil which were practically the only source of fat for the people in Bengal. (cf. *Mother India*, November 2013, p. 960)

The Acharya's organisation of relief during famine and floods became a legend. During the Khulna famine in 1921, when there was no relief measure from the colonial Government, the Acharya launched a vigorous campaign, collected subscriptions, and began relief work by his own arrangement. Volunteers joined him in large numbers from the districts of Faridpur and Barisal (now in Bangladesh); economic assistance came from various parts of India. The work was so well-organised that adequate relief reached all the afflicted people.

The very next year, at the time of the Durga Puja festival in September 1922, a devastating flood swept through North Bengal after a heavy downpour in the region during 25-27 September. It was "the most terrific of its kind in the memory of the living generation" ([5], p. 249). Villages in districts like Pabna and Rajshahi (now in Bangladesh) got completely submerged, the water level rising up to 7 or 8 feet at

places. About 2000 square miles, with a population of over a million, were covered by the flood and a vast tract of land remained under water for about two months. Almost all the dwelling houses of the area were washed away; the residents of the afflicted area had to take shelter on higher lands near the railway line and elsewhere. About a hundred people lost their lives. Those who survived lost their means of livelihood as all crops and livestock were destroyed — about 12,000 cattle perished. Even according to a Government report, properties worth crores of rupees were lost in the flood-ravaged areas of the affected districts. Faulty construction of railways and roads, obstructing the natural drainage, was the main cause of the calamity. Waterways had been drastically curtailed six years before, already resulting in a serious flood in 1918 and a minor flood in 1920. A year before the devastation in 1922, the villagers had petitioned the Magistrate of the Bogra district urging that a bridge be constructed, in place of a narrow culvert, for the outflow of the immense volume of water during any monsoon deluge; their prayers had been dismissed.¹

Again, with the Government indifferent to the enormous tragedy (for which they were largely responsible), it was the fragile 61-year-old Prafulla Chandra Ray, ably assisted by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose (“whose heart always melts at the sight of suffering humanity”), who launched the relief and rehabilitation programme. The “Bengal Relief Committee” was formed, with P. C. Ray as President, comprising members of various political, industrial, social and youth organisations including the Congress and Bengal Chemical who were to work in friendly coordination. In response to the appeals from Ray and his team, money and relief materials started coming from all corners of India, from all segments of the society — whether rich or poor. Contributions also came from Indians settled in Japan and Africa.

The relief work was undertaken on a war footing. Separate rooms and halls in the spacious buildings of the Science College were used by the Bengal Relief Committee for its General office, the Treasurer’s office, the Stores, the Despatch department, and Stations for receiving donations in cash and in kind. The Committee also formed a Publicity Bureau to supply authentic updated information to the public. About 200 volunteers, in batches, were engaged at the Science College and the relief centres in the flooded areas. Heaps of old and new clothes, blankets, etc., were collected and distributed regularly. The Acharya himself prepared the bundles of clothes and medicine packets. “This vast organisation worked on with clock-like

1. Acharya Ray writes on the basis of his personal inspection of the railway line after the flood had subsided ([5], p. 236): “It will be evident to any impartial reader that the Government was wilfully and criminally responsible for the great havoc. . . . The petitioners were ignorant village folks but they had the intelligence and shrewd commonsense to realise that unless the narrow culverts were replaced by bridges of long span they would always be liable to the calamity of a flood. And this is exactly what happened. The fact is that railway lines are constructed with an eye to the interests of foreign shareholders. The less the cost, the greater the expectation of dividend; hence many a natural waterway is either filled up with earthwork or shortened . . .” Unfortunately, even in Independent India, disasters still get invited by haphazard construction activities, driven by vested commercial interests, ignoring potential hazards.

regularity and precision.” ([5], p. 240) Apart from the Acharya and Netaji Subhash Chandra, special mention should be made of Dr. J. M. Dasgupta, Satis Chandra Dasgupta, Dr. Indra Narayan Sen, Jatindra Nath Ray, Kshitish Chandra Dasgupta, Profs. Prafulla Chandra Mitra, Meghnad Saha and Niren Chowdhury, who all worked hard and in harmony, over a long period. Their work spoke for their planning excellence, organisational capability, high integrity and kindness. It was the personal supervision and influence of the Acharya that ensured such a disciplined and selfless service. A former student of the Acharya records ([6], p. 62):

Those who have visited the Palit Research Laboratory, the place of Prafulla Chandra’s activity at that time, could not but be struck [at] the wonderful organisation of the relief work. . . . It is not too much to say that the soul of this stupendous organisation was Acharya Prafulla Chandra. It was simply by the power of his personality and character that this noble endeavour has been brought to such a wonderful success. The achievement of this relief will ever remain engraved in golden letters in the national history of Bengal.

After the water receded, the relief committee got the agricultural land of affected villagers ploughed by tractors and supplied (for free) a large quantity of seeds. They built sheds, rebuilt the houses of the peasants, arranged medical aid for the sick, and introduced spinning wheels and handlooms. The work of village reconstruction continued for some years.

We quote below excerpts from a long report by a special correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* ([5], pp. 242-47):

. . . In these circumstances a professor of chemistry, Sir P. C. Ray, stepped forward and called upon his countrymen to make good the Government’s omissions. His call was answered with enthusiasm. . . .

. . . He is also a real organiser and a real teacher. I heard a European saying, ‘If Mr. Gandhi had only been able to create two more Sir P. C. Rays he would have succeeded in getting Swaraj within this year.’ A Bengali student told me, ‘If any Government officer or any of the Non-Co-operating politicians² had called for subscriptions the public would not have given even three farthings. But when Sir P. C. Ray calls everyone knows that the money will be spent and well spent, and not wasted.’ I had the good fortune to see Sir P. C. Ray . . . The volunteers were busy under his eye, bringing order out of disorder, and arranging for the despatch of the clothes to the scene of the relief operations. The next day I caught a glimpse of him assisting two young students to carry out some experiment in chemistry, and it seemed to me there

2. Politicians in the Non Co-operation Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in 1921.

was affection between the teacher and the taught. . . .

. . . Government have lost immensely in prestige over the whole affair, and that Non-Co-operation has won³ what Government have lost, thanks to the fine work of Sir P. C. Ray's volunteers.

C. F. Andrews reported that owing to the severe strain and lack of proper food and rest, some of the volunteers on the field used to fall sick; they would be nursed back to health at the camp hospitals after which they bravely returned to their duty without any further break. He described the work of the Bengal Relief Committee as "one of the noblest efforts made in modern India on behalf of distressed humanity" ([5], p. 248).

History repeated itself nine years later, in 1931: another furious flood in the region, again a Government official declaring that the Government is not a "charitable institution" ([5], p. 251) and again an organisation "Sankat-tran-Samiti" sprang up under the Acharya's leadership, got the required financial resources from his countrymen, and did commendable relief work.

Under the instruction of the Acharya, the volunteers of the Bengal Relief Committee had also provided swift service to the people of Bihar affected by the devastating earthquake of 1934. During the Midnapur flood of 1940, though an infirm Ray could no longer render active service as before, he issued appeals to his countrymen to generously contribute to the Midnapur Central Flood Relief Committee which was organising the relief.

The first-hand experience of the misery caused by floods had a deep impact on Meghnad Saha, the beloved pupil of Acharya Ray. Saha went on to become the architect of river-planning in India — it was he who prepared the original plan for the Damodar Valley project.

P. C. Ray's Munificence

The Acharya personified the Oriental ideal of "plain living and high thinking" to the fullest extent. He lived an austere life, a life of Spartan simplicity, and gave away most of his earnings in donations and charity. His calorically adjusted and balanced diet cost less than Re 1 per day. Because of his dress, comprising of the cheapest costume of coarse hand-made fabric, he was often mistaken for his laboratory peon or servant.⁴ His bed consisted of a light mattress, a pillow and a bed-sheet spread on a *khatia*. This, and a few almirahs packed with books, made up the entire

3. Most of the volunteers in the relief operations were activists of the Non Co-operation Movement.

4. Prof. Charuchandra Bhattacharya, a student of Acharya Ray at Presidency College in 1901, recalls ([8], p. 232) that, on the first day, he was puzzled to see the Acharya coming to class wearing a coat identical to the one worn by the bearer. Later, he came to know that the Acharya had made 4 coats from a piece of cloth; he gave two to the bearer and used the other two!

furniture in his room. A true ashram life! Even in the hot summer months, no electric fan was to be seen in his room.

Extremely frugal in spending for himself, he was generous in spending for a cause and for the needy, viz., for poor students, for the cause of science especially chemistry, for indigenous industries, for the support of the widows, orphans and destitutes, and so on.

In the words of the Acharya ([9], p. 553):

The idea that education is not for the poor, that it is only a luxury for the rich, appears to us atrocious — we Orientals cannot stand it — our whole traditions are against it.

There are numerous instances of the Acharya giving financial support to needy students. Nilratan Dhar (the famous scientist and one of Ray's former students), writes ([8], p. 160):

For many years Acharya Ray contributed Rs. 400 per month for helping the needy students of the Calcutta colleges and paid liberally to the Sadharan Brahma Samaj and to Brahma Girls' School . . . I gratefully acknowledge his help of 40 pounds (Rs. 500) when I proceeded to Europe for research work as a State Scholar in 1915.

Similar reminiscences have been recorded by many others about P. C. Ray's financial help during their student days. The incredible extent of his donations reminds one of the great Vidyasagar. It is estimated that Acharya Ray used to spend over 90 per cent of his salary (which ranged from Rs. 250 initially to Rs. 800 per month) at Presidency College on charity. Gopal Krishna Gokhale, while introducing Acharya Ray to Mahatma Gandhi in 1901, said ([10], p. 2):

This is Professor Ray. He gets a monthly salary of Rs. 800 but he keeps only a sum of Rs. 40 for himself, giving away the rest for the cause of the country.

Mahatma Gandhi, himself a symbol of ascetic denial, spoke (in 1931) about his first impression of P. C. Ray in 1901 ([7], p. 4):

It was difficult to believe that the man in simple Indian dress and wearing simplest manners could possibly be the great scientist and professor he even then [in 1901] was. And it took my breath away when I heard that out of his princely salary he kept only a few rupees for himself and the rest he devoted to public uses and particularly for helping poor students. Thirty years made no difference to the great good servant of India. Acharya Ray has set us an exam-

ple of ceaseless service, enthusiasm and optimism, of which we may well be proud.

At least 45 Institutions (listed in [9], pp. 405-06) benefited from the munificence of Acharya Ray; we shall mention a few specific instances.

After his retirement from Presidency College in 1916, P. C. Ray used to get a monthly pension of Rs. 430 out of which he would spend about Rs. 200 to meet his expenses, including travel; the rest would be given away in charity ([3], p. 63). He would also return the honorarium for lectures, examination fees, etc, for the advancement of science education. In February 1918, P. C. Ray delivered his famous addresses at the University of Madras on "Chemistry in Ancient India" and the "Antiquity of Hindu Chemistry". The honorarium that he received for these lectures was offered back by him to the University for creating an annual prize called Wedderburn prize to be awarded for the best original work in Chemistry. The prize was named after Sir William Wedderburn⁵ who passed away on 25 January, 1918, a few days before Ray's lectures. P. C. Ray made a similar gift to the Punjab University ([6], p. 68).

On turning 60 (in 1921), P. C. Ray submitted his resignation from the post of Palit Professor of Chemistry. But the University extended his service by 15 years. The Acharya did not draw his salary (Rs. 1,000 per month) for these 15 years; in 1936 he returned the amount of Rs. 1,80,000 and requested the University to utilise it for setting up a modern research laboratory for Inorganic Chemistry and instituting a research fellowship in the Chemistry Department.

In 1922, he donated Rs. 10,000 to the University of Calcutta for funding an annual prize for research in chemistry to be named after Nagarjuna, the great ancient Indian chemist. The money represented the best part of his life's savings. In 1936, when retiring from the University, he donated another Rs. 10,000 for a prize in

5. Sir William Wedderburn (1838-1918) was a liberal statesman remembered for his contributions towards administrative reforms in India. His life-long efforts to solve the problems of Indian peasants must have touched Acharya Ray, prompting him to institute the Award in his memory.

Belonging to a reputed Scottish family, William Wedderburn served the Indian Civil Service (ICS) in Bombay from 1860 till 1887. His father and elder brother too were ICS officers; his elder brother was killed in the 1857 uprising. Along with A. O. Hume, William Wedderburn was a founder of the Indian National Congress (1885) and served as its President in 1889 and 1910.

As an official of ICS, Wedderburn was deeply concerned with the peasants' misery due to famine, poverty and debt. He suggested establishment of co-operative agricultural banks to provide credits at reasonable rates. He participated in the work of the Indian Famine Union set up in 1901 to investigate famines and propose preventive measures. Wedderburn also advocated the principle of local self-government suggested by Lord Ripon. He wanted Indian judges to be given the same status as their European counterparts. His support for Indian aspirations annoyed the administration and he was denied the position of a Judge at the Bombay High Court. In the British Parliament, which he entered in 1893, Wedderburn voiced Indian grievances. As the Congress President in 1910, he attempted to reconcile the differences between the Moderates and the radicals, and to bridge the rift between Hindus and Muslims.

Zoology and Botany in memory of Sir Asutosh Mukherjee, due to whose initiative and support science research and education could flourish at Calcutta University. He gifted Rs. 10,000 to the City College. He founded an Educational Society in his village and provided Rs. 10,000 for its funding. The Indian Chemical Society was started with a donation of Rs. 10,000 from him for its building fund.

P. C. Ray did not accept any salary from Bengal Chemicals; that money was spent largely for the welfare of the employees. He had shares in Bengal Chemicals and other companies worth Rs. 56,000. He formed a Trust to utilise the dividends for the cause of khadi and service to villagers.

While he virtually wished nothing for himself, he struggled to ensure respectable remuneration and social stature for those who pursued science. It appears that he had taken up with the Government the question of raising the emolument of science students to the standard of the Indian Civil Service ([3], p. 157).

An incident that took place when the Acharya used to stay in the Science College brings out the economic philosophy practised by Acharya Ray. In those days, two bananas costing one pice (one-fourth of an anna, i.e., 64 pice equals one rupee) were procured daily for the Acharya's household. One day, N. Adhikari, a youngster staying with the Acharya (later a Manager at Bengal Chemical), procured two bananas of a larger variety. Initially pleased to see the fruit, the Acharya got infuriated on knowing that those bananas had cost three pice (i.e., about 5 paise) and severely reprimanded him for "learning the way of a Nawab" ([3], p. 66). Two hours later, Dr. Prafulla Chandra Ghosh⁶ came to the Acharya for monetary help (and advice) for the activities of his Abhay Ashram. The Acharya wanted to know the amount required. Dr. Ghosh replied "Three Thousand". The Acharya, whose bank balance at that time was Rs. 3,500 only, signed a cheque of Rs. 3,000 (an amount 64,000 times what was spent injudiciously by the hapless Adhikari) and gave it to Dr. Ghosh.

M. Gupta records ([3], p. 65) that P. C. Ray gave him a cheque for the school at Baghil⁷ and that this cheque wiped off his last remaining bank balance. Acharya Prafulla Chandra has been aptly compared with Rishi Dadhichi ([1], p. 188; [9], pp. 365-66).⁸

6. The Gandhian leader and social worker whom we have mentioned in Part V (*Mother India*; April 2014, p. 313 fn. 4). In 1921, Dr. P. C. Ghosh had established the "Abhay Ashram", a welfare organisation which became a shining model for constructive work in village restoration and renovation, propagation of khadi, agricultural development, national education and medical assignments. Under the leadership of Dr. Ghosh, the Abhay Ashram provided splendid service to the victims of devastating floods in East Bengal. Dr. Ghosh also made several efforts to support and develop the village industries.

7. The village of Krishna Kumar Mitra, the maternal uncle (*mesho*) of Sri Aurobindo.

8. Dadhichi, revered among the greatest sages of Indian mythology, had sacrificed his life to enable the Devas to manufacture the all-powerful weapon "Vajra" from his bones. Dadhichi's bones, the Vajra, form the symbol in the medal of the Param Vir Chakra, India's highest military award for self-sacrifice.

9. The illustrious student of the Acharya, who was a pioneer in biochemical research and education in India, whom we mentioned in Part V (*Mother India*; April 2014, p. 319 fn. 13).

“A new generation came up which knew not Joseph.” Quoting this Biblical sentence, Bires Guha⁹ observes ([8], p. 182) that new generations have come up in India which have not known Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray. Writes Dr. Guha ([9], p. 265):

It is necessary that our young people know the dedicated life of this great man, the like of whom I have not met. His slogan may be summed up in the words, “patriotism, sincerity and hard work”. Is it too much to expect that our young people who have now got the inestimable boon of political freedom will work unremittingly with this slogan on their lips to build up a great India for which he lived and died?

Einstein once remarked that generations to come will scarcely believe that a man like Mahatma Gandhi “ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.” Will generations of Indians care to remember and emulate the life of Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray? Or will they take the easier option of treating the well-documented legacy of this devoted son of Mother India with a haughty cynical disbelief?

As Dr. Bires Guha emphasises ([8], p. 182):

But we have to remember him and his legacy *not for his sake but our own*.

Epilogue

While reviewing P. C. Ray’s autobiography [5], H. E. Armstrong wrote in *Nature* (1933):

A more remarkable career than that of P. C. Ray could not well be chronicled. The story told is not only fascinating: it has an altogether special value, as a presentation of a complex mentality, unique in character, range of ability and experience.

In order to understand such a complex mind, we juxtapose below a few apparent paradoxes in P. C. Ray’s life, writings and activities.

An academician steeped in research, writing books and moulding students, P. C. Ray was unsparing in his criticism of the intellectual snobbery of the Bengali middle class, urging them to venture into industrial and business enterprises.

Passionate about literature and history, P. C. Ray promoted the cultivation of science.

Himself a D.Sc. in Chemistry, Ray condemned the craze for degrees.

Methodical and punctual in his habits, P. C. Ray was casual in matters of dress, manners and conventions.

Averse to power and luxury, Ray advocated the creation of wealth by the development of industries and trade.

Himself an industrialist, P. C. Ray raised his voice against relentless capitalism and mechanisation and the ruin of village life.

Deeply fond of the peasantry, P. C. Ray never approved of their idleness.

At the service of the colonial Government during the best years of his life, P. C. Ray remained a staunch patriot to his last breath.

The same P. C. Ray, who looked to the future and began a new dawn of chemical research in modern India, looked to the past and recovered the forgotten history of chemical research in ancient India.

Again P. C. Ray, who brought to light an important aspect of ancient Indian achievements, was contemptuous of any lazy pride in past glory.

Merciless and intolerant in his criticisms of the defects and evils in contemporary society, P. C. Ray dearly loved his country.

Living like a pauper but donating like a prince, he literally gave away all he had to his fellow-countrymen.

His sacrifices flowed spontaneously “untainted by vanity and unsullied by any desire for fame, but promoted solely by a strong and sincere emotion to help forward the cause of national regeneration” ([6], p. 71).

Dr. Prafulla Chandra Ghosh observes ([8], p. 259) that there have emerged in India greater scientists than P. C. Ray, more capable industrialists, teachers as simple and dedicated as P. C. Ray who too loved their students, social workers who, like him, served the distressed, and patriots who have made greater sacrifices. There have been thinkers like P. C. Ray who combined a modern outlook with a reverence for the ancients; thinkers who believed in big industries and yet favoured the spread of cottage industries in villages; people who, in spite of being city-dwellers, appreciated the simple charm of rural life; leaders who worked for the progress of the people of their respective provinces without any hostility to people from other areas; and authors who have been more effective than P. C. Ray in lovingly articulating the defects, lapses and weaknesses of their own provinces. But, as Dr. P. C. Ghosh remarks, it is rare to come across *all these qualities* in a single individual and, in times of crisis, the nation needs a person like P. C. Ray.

Dr. Bires Guha points out that not even a fraction of the Acharya’s exhortations “which he constantly made to his people out of the anguish of his heart has yet been implemented in the lives of our people.” He adds ([8], p. 182):

Still the star of his life continues to send its beneficent light on the path of our nation. Let us be guided by it in our onward march to build the India of his dreams, India — which he loved so truly and so well.

J. C. Bose concludes his profound tribute to his dear friend P. C. Ray with the words ([7], p. 6):

The association of plain living and high thinking is always very rare; in addition to these there is in Sir P. C. Ray the element of vigorous action which knows no rest. The combination of such qualities in a single individual is indeed rare in any country, and there can be no higher example for the younger generation to emulate than the life of this great teacher.

We end our tribute with excerpts from P. C. Ray's autobiography ([5], p. 541):

. . . there is a connecting link pervading my life-work . . . my activities are but parts in a comprehensive piece. . . Whatever field I have ploughed I have ploughed as an humble instrument in the hand of Providence: my failures are my own . . . But my successes, if any, are to be attributed to the guidance of the All-knowing, who chose me to be His humble instrument. After all, a Divinity shapes our ends.

(Concluded)

AMARTYA KUMAR DUTTA

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