

Fond Reminiscences

**of
two of the most exceptional teachers
and human beings that I ever met**

**S.K. Bose
&
R.K. Gupta**

2021

Bose Sahib (Sudhir Kumar Bose - 1902 to 1983)

I got to know Bose Sahib in 1970, when I joined the philosophy department to read for an MA in philosophy. Though Bose Sahib no longer took classes or tutorials, having retired from college and been appointed lecturer emeritus, fortunately he was a regular participant of the college philosophical society (philosoc) and that is where I got to know him.



Bose Sahib was of delicate health and one of my pleasant duties as the newly appointed secretary of philosoc was to escort him from his home to college, in time for philosoc, and then back home after the meeting. I was living with my parents, in Rouse Avenue (now Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Marg), not too far from Bose Sahib's palatial home off the main road of Darya Ganj.

Those days I had access to my parents car, and every Friday morning I would ring up Bose Sahib to check whether he was feeling well enough to venture forth to College. As long as I knew him, Bose Sahib never owned a phone, and we contacted him by ringing up the medical-books shop

that had rented a room in his palatial house, and they were very promptly fetched him whenever there was a call.

Mostly he would be eager to attend philosoc, and I would drive down and park my car next to the police station opposite his house. I would then walk across and help him cross the road, and then we would drive to college, down ring road, to avoid the bad traffic. These many drives to and from college, mostly just the two of us, provided a great opportunity to get to know him. During these drives he would talk to me at length about his life experiences, and his thoughts and preoccupations.

We also had some unforeseen excitement during these trips. I remember both of us driving back from college one December evening, in 1971. It had already got dark and we noticed that the street lights were off, but thought it was an electrical glitch. As we turned into Khyber pass, our car was suddenly surrounded by a mob who was shouting and screaming, and banging fists and sticks on the bonnet. They even tried to open the doors

and pull both of us out, but fortunately both doors were locked from the inside. I lowered the window and heard shouts demanding that I put off my headlights, which I did. Fortunately, just then another car appeared behind us with its headlights blazing, and the mob got distracted.

I then asked one of the people hanging around, what was happening. "Pakistan has declared war on us", he said, "and has launched air strikes against our air force stations. Delhi and other cities are under black-out".

As we were busy with the philosoc, we had missed all this and had no idea that our blazing headlights were a clear violation of the black-out and, what was worse, a potent provocation for mob violence.

It took us over two hours to drive, without headlights and street lights, to Darya Ganj, and another half an hour for me to get home. But I was hugely impressed by the calmness Bose Sahib showed even when the mob was attacking us, and how our near escape from a possible manhandling by the mob did not affect him at all.

Bose Sahib was a legendary storyteller, with an outstanding sense of humour. There was hardly a situation for which he did not have an anecdote, and hardly an anecdote that was told without a chuckle. He was also the first person who made me realise that humour could be an effective means of communicating important thoughts and ideas.

He had a wealth of stories, that he was very fond of recounting, about every phase of his life, especially about the three years that he had spent as a student at Cambridge. A joke that often did the rounds was that if you put all his stories end to end, they would perhaps exceed the years of his life, and certainly his Cambridge stories would far outstrip the three years that he spent there!

Some years later, when I visited Cambridge for the first time, many of his stories came back to me. For example, he illustrated to me the power of relativity by recalling how, when he left for Cambridge for the first time to join Magdalene College (1927, I think), he was told in London to take a taxi from the Cambridge railway station and that the college was across a river at the foot of a hill. He kept looking out for the river and the hill, but did not spot any, and suddenly the taxi stopped outside a gate and the taxi driver announced that this was Magdalene College. Bose Sahib protested and said that this could not be, as he was told that the college was across a river and at the bottom of a hill. The taxi driver then proceeded to point out a drain that they had driven over and a mound of earth, no higher than ten feet, beyond the gates, and said: "there is the river and there is the hill". Clearly rivers and hills meant different things to Indians and the British.

During his days as a student at Cambridge, Bose Sahib was a contemporary, and a friend, of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was then a senior member. Bose Sahib had many stories about Wittgenstein, and also many letters from him. I remember his telling me how Wittgenstein was never one for reading philosophical texts and would often reveal his ignorance about other thinkers by admitting in a discussion that he was unaware of what Plato, or Kant, or other equally well known philosophers had said, yet expressing a willingness to consider their views, if they were enunciated.

Bose Sahib, who was more of a classical scholar, felt a little defensive about Wittgenstein's contempt for scholarship. I remember his telling me that often he went for an evening walk with Wittgenstein, who would come and shout for him outside his rooms' window. One day Bose Sahib did not hear his shout and so Wittgenstein climbed up the stairs and knocked on the door. Bose Sahib let him in and was fetching his coat while Wittgenstein looked around the room, amazed at the number of books that were there. "Do you really read all these books?" he asked Bose Sahib, who defensively replied that "You have to read books in order to become aware of the problems of philosophy". "My dear fellow", Wittgenstein reportedly exclaimed, "if you don't already have the problems of philosophy, why do you want to acquire them...?"¹.

Apart from Cambridge, he had many stories about his childhood in Delhi. I remember, while discussing Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* with him, his telling me about his childhood experiences with dreams. Apparently in the first few decades of the twentieth century, a common feature of Delhi's session, which lasted till the early hours of the morning. The stories and Panchtantras were told by professional story tellers.

Bose Sahib told me that he remembered once falling asleep, despite his best efforts, and waking up some hours later, while the stories were still being told. But surprisingly, it was as if he had not missed any part of the story because he had fallen asleep, and he could follow the story perfectly. He said he could never understand how this happened, and came to the conclusion that your senses recorded the voices even when you were asleep, and fed them to your memory.

Many years later, when he was a student at St. Stephen's, he fell asleep one day while reading Hume's *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding*. While asleep, he dreamt that he was continuing to read the book. When he finally woke up an hour later and took up the book again to start reading from where he had left off, to his amazement he discovered that what he was now

¹ This story had a profound influence on me, and changed my approach to philosophy, but I talk about that elsewhere.

reading was almost identical to what he had read in his dream. How could one explain that!

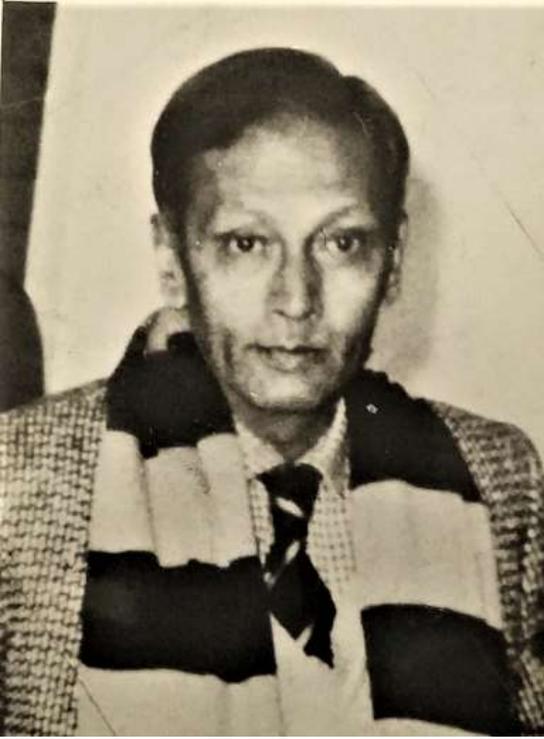
Bose Sahib thought that they were perhaps both examples of the process of logical deduction that went on in the unconscious mind and then emerged as an intuition, an insight, or even as spiritual or divine guidance. His possible explanation, especially for the later Hume episode, was that having read the major logical assumptions to Hume's thesis before he went to sleep, his mind logically deduced what followed from these assumptions, while he slept. And as his deductions were not drastically different from those that Hume had arrived at, there was this uncanny sense of *Déjà vu*.

I left Delhi to join the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, in November 1974. In the five years that I was away, I could only meet him during the winter vacations, but we did write to each other - Bose Sahib almost always on a post card. When I finally returned to Delhi, in October 1979, Bose Sahib's health had deteriorated and he barely managed to move out of the house. I was fortunate to get a standing invitation from him to visit him whenever it was mutually convenient, and spent many an evening talking to him or helping to put his "Random Incursions" together. Dr. Gupta was another regular visitor and we often coordinated our visits so that we could all meet together.

Soon after publishing his "Random Incursions", Bose Sahib finally agreed to write his memoirs, which Dr. Gupta and I, along with many others, had been trying for years to persuade him to do. However, he made it a condition that I personally transcribe his handwritten manuscript into typescript, and then incorporate all the corrections and changes. This was even though I was a one-finger typist, and there were no computers available at that time. We worked at it for over a year, but did not even finish his school years, and then ill health, and finally death, interrupted the process for ever.

Bose Sahib was a dog lover (as was Doc G, and as am I), and ever since I knew him he always had a pet dog, invariably a dalmatian. During the last few visits, he would always joke about the dog (I forget his name) that they were having a competition to see who would go first. Bose Sahib passed away quietly and peacefully, in his own house, and in his own bed, and in the presence of his loving dog.

Given below are some photographs of Bose Sahib, courtesy Dr. Rahul Pandit and family, who kindly searched them out, scanned them, and sent them to me with annotations



Bose Sahib (centre) with Harsh Kumar (Lecturer in Sanskrit, left) and Dr. R.K. Gupta, in Dr. Gupta's sitting room. The *gulab jamuns* on the table suggest that it was a meeting of the philosoc - which was mostly held in Doc G's sitting room.



In college



At a function in his honour at St. Stephen's



At a football match (in those days they allowed us to take our dalmatian, named Adam, into the stadium).



At a reception talking to Mr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed (who was, later, the President of India).

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One very important aspect of Bose Sahib's life and career was his involvement with sports. He was president of games, at St. Stephen's, for many years. Unfortunately, by the time I met him, his sporting days were over. Also, I had little interest in, and no talent for, sports.

I remember being told stories about how in the good old days, during cricket matches, Bose Sahib would invite students to join him at the cricket field for tutorials, and philosophy was discussed between balls and overs. I also remember how, when test matches were on, every once in a while everything would come to a halt while he caught up with the test scores and commentary, those days on the radio.

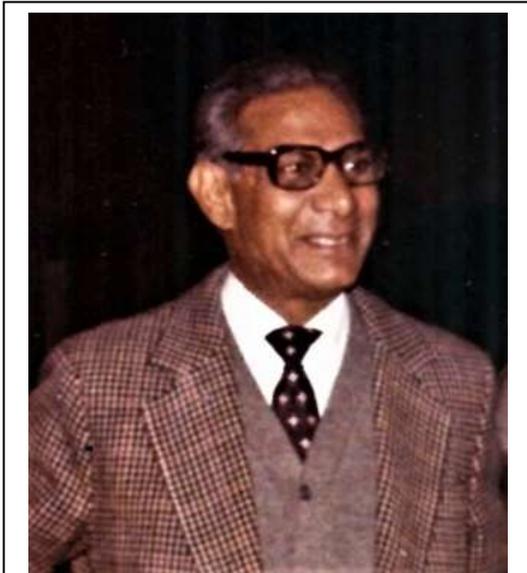
The photographs that follow capture some of his moments in College with his fellow sports-persons.

Shekhar Singh



Doc G (Dr R.K.Gupta - 1930 to 2012)

I first met Dr Gupta when I approached him, sometime in March 1970, to discuss with him my desire to pursue a master's degree in philosophy, after completing my BA Honours in English. Dr Gupta was very warm and friendly and we spent some time discussing what I knew of philosophy and what it really was. He then suggested that I read some philosophical writings so that



Dr. R.K. Gupta
1930-2012

I could determine for myself whether they actually interested me. He suggested (if I recall correctly) that I read A.J. Ayer's *The Problem of Knowledge*, and come back and discuss it with him once I had read at least a part of it.

It was much later that I realised the possible reason why Dr Gupta had suggested that particular book for me to test my interest in reading philosophy. I had actually told him in detail the various ethical dilemmas that I faced which had convinced me that I needed to read philosophy. However, Doc G (as he was popularly called)

perhaps recognised that my worries were not ethical but actually epistemological.

I enrolled for an MA philosophy in July 1970. The department of philosophy at St Stephen's College had a very distinguished faculty. Bose Sahib was the senior most member, as lecturer emeritus, and Dr Gupta was the head of department. Two former students, Dr Ramchandra Gandhi and Dr Mrinal Miri, the former after completing his PhD from Oxford, and the latter from Cambridge, had recently joined as lecturers.

Though technically lectures for MA students were held at the University, mostly students from the philosophy department at St Stephen's college did all their education in college itself. In keeping with this tradition, I only attended one week of lectures at the University, to hear out each of the professors at least once, and then decided to focus on educating myself within the college, through tutorials, discussions in the philosophical Society², and through numerous informal sessions with college faculty members.

² For more details, see <http://www.ststephens.edu/the-philosophical-society/>

As things worked out, Dr Gupta took on a major share of educating our MA class, which comprised three students. We met him formally for tutorials in his room at the end of the corridor on the 1st floor, facing the library, and above the dressing room attached to the college auditorium. In addition, I often met him informally at his house or in the University coffee house. We spent many hours discussing everything but the prescribed syllabus, and sustaining ourselves with tea, coffee, snacks, and even dinner provided hospitably by Mrs. Gupta.

Doc G was an exceptionally demanding teacher who maintained, and expected, the highest possible academic standards. This became obvious to us as we presented to him our first written tutorial. I had just graduated in English literature and prided myself at being rather good at writing English. However, at the end of my first session with him, I came away with a tutorial that hardly had a line left that had not been corrected. I remember his telling me, early in our academic association, that I must ask of every sentence, or word, I wrote: is this what I mean? Do I mean all this? Do I want to say anything more than what this means? Could this be understood to mean something other than what I mean to say? It is a test that I have valued ever since.

Clearly we were not the only students who had come out so poorly in their efforts to write a tutorial for Dr Gupta. Mohan Mathan, an MA philosophy student in college from 1968 to 1970, wrote in his reminiscences of Dr Gupta:

"Once I had actually enrolled in the Masters program, we would meet almost every day. Once a week, the meeting was formal, a tutorial for which my fellow Masters student, Lalit Sharma, and I would have to write something. That something was criticized word by word, to the point where it became our ambition just once to be able to write our two pages without error—an ambition never realized, alas." [Gupta Sahib of St. Stephen's - New APPS: Art, Politics, Philosophy, Science \(newappsblog.com\)](http://newappsblog.com)

Doc G, along with Bose Sahib, were the clearest and sharpest minds that I ever met. Doc G was analytical in a cut-and-dried-way, with no frills, no stories, and no anecdotes, when he set about unravelling a question or analysing an issue. Bose Sahib, on the other hand, would regale you with stories of how people had amusingly misunderstood the question, or hilariously lost their way with the issue before he finally brought you to where you needed to be.

I remember one afternoon tutorial with Doc G, where he explained in meticulous detail the logical thought process by which Aristotle arrived at the definition of man being a rational animal. That same evening I went to see Bose Sahib and mentioned some concerns I had with the Aristotelian definition. Bose Sahib at once launched into the story of how there was a competition between Plato's group and Aristotle's followers on who could come up with a better definition of man. Apparently, Plato's group was first off the mark and came up with the definition that "man was a featherless biped". Aristotle's group retaliated by plucking a chicken of all its feathers and parading it around with the sign "Plato's Man!". Plato then responded by amending his definition to "Man is a featherless biped, with broad nails" (and at this point Bose sahib broke into loud laughter), and finally Aristotle put an end to the debate by coming up with the rational animal definition, which survives, though not unchallenged, till today.

This, and many other such incidents, made me realise how fortunate we were to be exposed to both these distinct styles, the first helping us to understand complicated arguments with a searing clarity, and the second, making the process unforgettable and easily communicable by infusing it with humour³.

Bose Sahib and Doc G had a fascinating relationship: the former was the latter's teacher and mentor, and their association lasted over thirty years, from the time Doc G joined as a student of Philosophy, in the late 1940s, through their being colleagues in St. Stephen's College philosophy department from the late 1950s till Bose Sahib's passing in 1983.

I observed them both for nearly thirteen of those years and saw the deep affection, regard and respect that they had for each other. However, they non-antagonistically retained their individuality and followed their own paths.

Doc G believed that philosophical writings must be read in their original form (god help you if you ever referred to Will Durant, for example). In the early days of my introduction to philosophy I got enthused, perhaps because of Doc G, to read Kant (and Heidegger, and Hegel) in the original, and therefore decided to learn German. However, when I mentioned this to Bose Sahib, he scoffed at the idea. "Master one language well" he said to me, "otherwise you will be like those (read Doc G) who can neither write well in German nor in English". I was eternally grateful for that advice, for I am still struggling to master English.

³ Over the years I have become a great believer in the power of humour to communicate complicated and even unpopular philosophical ideas to an ordinarily disinterested and even antagonistic public. But more about the elsewhere.

Doc G's main interest was philosophy, and he spent most of his time philosophising. Bose Sahib had many interests, and was, among other things, President of Sports for many years at St. Stephen's College. By the time I got to know him, he had retired and was somewhat frail, but nevertheless, if there was a test match going on, philosoc meetings would be interrupted from time to time to check what the latest score was! Some of his former students would tell me that he would often invite them to join him at the college cricket grounds in Kashmiri Gate, where they would discuss their tutorials while watching a cricket game, and in the process learned both about philosophy and about cricket.

Doc G often told me that Philosophy was a demanding taskmaster, for apart from reading Philo I was involved in a lot of other things in college. Bose Sahib would agree with Doc G, but with a twinkle in his eye.

I last saw Dr Gupta in the beginning of 2012. He had rung me up a couple of months earlier and wanted some extra copies of Bose Sahib's *Random Incursions in Philosophy*, and his own translation of Heidegger's *What is Metaphysics?*: both were publications of philosoc, from the 1980s, that I had been involved in producing and had, as such, ferreted away a few copies. I visited him in his trans-Jamuna apartment and delivered two copies each (and a bottle of scotch that I had lying with me). I was off to Goa to participate in the winter festival and promised that as soon I got back I would come over and help him finish the scotch.

When I got back from Goa, I was told that Dr. Gupta had been taken ill and was in hospital. I went to visit him again, once he came out of hospital but was bed-ridden at home. He could not even sit up, but he gallantly shared a cup of coffee with me, he being spoon fed by his wife while he lay flat on the bed. However, apart from this, there was no clue that he was not well: his eyes were bright as ever and his conversation was lucid and sparkling. We parted, promising to meet again once he was up and about, and I was certain that he would be back on his feet soon. Therefore, his passing away some weeks later was a devastating shock.

I will always have many regrets of opportunities missed and time wasted.

Shekhar Singh