

## A Philosopher Par Excellence

TARA CHATTERJEA

Professor Jitendra Nath Mohanty passed away on 7 March, 2023, (Doljātrā) in Philadelphia. He has been a philosopher renowned all over the world. His own description of himself is ‘...Indian by birth and upbringing, Hindu by faith, philosopher by profession...’. He added that he was thankful to the country of adoption, but never forgot the Indian heritage. (Foreword, *Between Two Worlds East and West*). In spite of living in USA for so many years, he retained his Indian citizenship.

He was equally comfortable in Eastern and Western philosophy. The story goes that in USA, some thinkers held that there were two Mohantys, one expert in Western philosophy and another in Indian philosophy. They were corrected that the two Mohantys were one and the same person. Just as he had deep knowledge of Advaita Vedanta and Nyāya, so also he knew very well the works of Plato, Kant, Hegel and thinkers like Heidegger and Husserl.

His PhD was from Göttingen, Germany. In India he took lessons from Pandit Yogendranath Tarka Sāmkhya Vedanta Tirtha for Advaita Vedanta and Pandit Ananta Kumar Tarka Nyāya Tirtha, for Navya Nyāya and was well versed in both Nyāya and Vedanta.

He was born in Cuttack, his parents were Jagannath Mohanty and Basanta Kumari Devi. Jagannath Mohanty was a lawyer who came from a very rich zamindar family. Yet he wrote laws to abolish

zamindarship, so that the farmers got ownership right. His two maternal uncles—Gopabandhu Choudhury and Nabakrishna Choudhury and their wives, Rama Devi and Malati Devi respectively—influenced him very much. Both were ‘Gāndhivādi’ in the truest sense of the term. His village home was his real home (Even three to four years back, he gave his permanent address as Nilkanthapur, Orissa, India). Their home was around a temple of Krishna and Radha. Some ancestor, long ago, brought the idols of Krishna, made of black stone and Radha made of bronze, from Vrindaban, walking on foot from there to Orissa. He says, ‘I was born into a deeply religious family, where life moved around the family temple.’

He was an exceptionally bright student. He stood first in Matriculation and IA in Orissa. His father felt that he needed competition and sent him to Calcutta. He became a student of Presidency College and was First Class First in both BA and MA. Had his father been alive today, he could have known that his son had been successful in all the competitions in India and the West. He was also a student of law. His father and elder brother were lawyers; although they wanted him to become a lawyer, he did not want it and thus did not complete the course of law. After completing his MA, he had two part-time jobs in two colleges, which took care of his food and lodging. At this time, he got a job in Hooghly Mohsin College as a lecturer, in Bengal Education Service. He was in two

minds. His priority was to stay in Calcutta, as his future wife Sarbani was in Calcutta, he was studying Vedanta, and he could carry on his discussions in Philosophy with Kalidas Bhattacharyya, who lived here. If he had to leave the city, he could go back to Orissa. At this time he met Gopinath Babu, at College Street. The latter asked him what he was doing and he told him about his new job. Gopinath Babu asked him if he was in dire need of money or not. He said no. The latter told him to give up the job, and study Sanskrit philosophy with Ananta Pandit Mahāshaya. He took Mohanty to the Pandit in Sanskrit College and requested him to teach him Nyāya. With this started his studentship, which lasted upto 1967, till the Pandit's death. He continued his studies with occasional breaks, as for example, due to his stay in Germany.

He considered Sri Aurobindo and Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya to be two creative thinkers of modern times. In college, he told his teacher late Professor Nalini Brahma that he did not like Advaita, he liked Aurobindo's position better. But he has studied and discussed Advaita philosophy, and during his last ailment was talking about Shankara. He fondly remembered his teachers—Kalidas Bhattacharyya, Rasvihary Das and Yogendranath Tarka-Sāmkhya-Vedānta-Tirtha.

He stayed in Göttingen in Germany from 1952 to 1954. There he took lessons in Vedic Sanskrit, Mathematics and Philosophy. After completing PhD, he returned to India. But, even in later days he loved to go to Göttingen. He was awarded the prestigious Humboldt Prize. He was elated, for this meant for him that the Germans were acknowledging his work in German philosophy. Half of the huge amount of money that he received was given

to Orissa for social work and half the money he retained for his own expenditure, when he stayed in Germany. He visited Germany almost every summer, and studied German Philosophy, which eventually led to the publication of his works on Phenomenology of Husserl in two volumes. (First Vol: *The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl*; Second Vol: *Edmund Husserl's Freiburg Years*.)

In 1955, after returning to India, he walked with Vinoba Bhave the whole of Orissa, who taught him *Isha*, *Kena* and *Katha Upanishad*, while walking. Every evening Vinoba addressed the public. Although these were called 'bhudāna-jātrā', he said his purpose was not socio-economic but spiritual. He spoke to them about ancient Indian texts and *ātmanāna*, and the present day science and technology and also about political issues. Vinoba held that in ancient times philosopher-teachers educated the public in this way.

Prof. Mohanty returned to Calcutta in 1955, and after some time got a job in Calcutta University. He worked there till 1970. In between, during 1960-62, he worked in Sanskrit College as Associate Professor of Indian Philosophy in the Postgraduate and Research Division. He returned in 1962 to Calcutta University, but taking long leave of absence joined Burdwan University as Vivekananda Professor and Head of the Department of Philosophy. In 1968 he returned to Calcutta University as Acharya Brojendra Nath Seal Professor and Head of the Department. In between he used to go to Visva-Bharati, once a week, to take classes and meet Kalidas Bhattacharyya and discuss philosophy. In 1968, he went to USA as a Fulbright Professor. In 1970, he went to USA taking a leave for two years.

In 1970, he joined the University of Oklahoma. He went on leave from the

Calcutta University, but we all knew that he was not coming back. His children went to school there. They got opportunity for very good education. After completion of school life, his daughter went to Oxford and his son, to Cornell. But for him this University was not intellectually satisfying. And he said that he was thrilled when Aron Gurwitsch from New School in New York invited him to work in New School, for a year as a Visiting Professor.

So he went to New School as a Visiting Professor and worked there for two years. It is actually a large adult-education centre, which teaches various subjects. He joined the Graduate Faculty of Social and Political Science. Many brilliant thinkers who had fled Europe under Nazi threat worked there. He made many friends, of whom he especially remembered Hans Jonas and Hannah Arendt. The latter, I am told, said, 'Often I feel that we are dolls in the hands of the Almighty who completely controls our lives.' (This reminds us of the last chapter of the *Bhagavadgita*).

Mohanty was already working on Husserl and his phenomenology. He found many like-minded people in New School. In the summer of 1978, he returned to Norman, Oklahoma and in 1982 he went to Oxford as a Visiting Fellow of All Souls College. Among old friends, he renewed his acquaintance with Matilal, Tapan Roy Choudhury and Amartya Sen. He later joined Temple University and settled in Philadelphia.

After settling down, he started visiting India and when in Calcutta, he often stayed with us. I am perhaps his oldest living pupil. All my four children accepted him and Banidi as a family and they are extremely sad to know that he is no more and are writing condolence letters to his daughter. My husband developed a friendship with

him, and we have visited them in USA a couple of times.

Later on Swami Lokeshwaranandaji welcomed him as a guest in the Institute of Culture. He did not have to pay any money for food or lodging, and he gave lectures there. Since that time, he used to stay in the Institute during his India visits, till he bought a flat of his own at Golf Green. In later days, when he came to India, he was a teacher of teachers; his students flocked from different Colleges and Universities, and he was teaching us Advaita Vedanta, and most probably, *Vivarana Prameya Sangraha*.

He wrote many books and numerous articles. The books include *Gangesa's Prāmānyavāda* and his work on Husserl's philosophy. *Reason and Tradition in Indian Thought* and *Self and Its Other* have also been very much appreciated by students and teachers of Philosophy. There are anthologies edited by Bina Gupta, Purushottama Billimoria and Tara Chatterjea, which show that any and every topic in philosophy has been thoroughly analysed and thought out by him.

In 1995, the University of Jadavpur honoured him by conferring a doctorate *honoris causa*. In his autobiography he wonders how this University has come closer to him than his alma mater. He was partially responsible for the constitution of the initial department of Philosophy in this University. He specially mentions the names of D.P. Chattopadhyaya and Pranab Sen, Sukharanjan Saha and Pradyot Mukherji, Krishna Roy and Chhanda Gupta. Utkal University, Burdwan University, University of Calcutta conferred various honours. Prof. Mohanty was also a president of the Indian Philosophical Congress, and the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy. His other honours included a gold medal from the Asiatic Society, Kolkata, and

the Humboldt Prize from the German government in honour of his scholarly work. He received an honorary D.Litt. from the University of Calcutta in 2013 and an honorary doctorate from Ravenshaw University in 2017. ICPR honoured him for his lifetime achievement.

He is known as an atheist, but we know that he had great admiration and 'bhakti' for Sri Chaitanya Mahāprabhu and Sri Ramakrishna. *Kathamrita* stood in his bookshelf and he loved to read it. He visited Kamarpukur and would often go to Puri. His daughter says that he loved to listen to songs of God, and Sanskrit *stavas* of Shankarāchārya. During his last ailment he

very much wanted to come to India, and wanted to visit Shankara Math in Chennai. His daughter says, 'We only knew within the family that he always bowed to Jagannath at the temple in Philadelphia and in Puri, to Kali in Dakshineswar, to Ramakrishna Dev and Sarada Ma.' His daughter, grand-daughter and caretaker were near his death-bed. They all felt that he was trying to express his desire to bow to Chaitanya Dev and to visit Shankara Math. May Shiva Shankara bless him. My pronams to Thakur and Ma, to Shankara and Mahāprabhu.

With pronams to my deceased teacher Professor J.N. Mohanty, I stop today. *Om Shantih.* ■

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\* Dr Tara Chatterjea, the oldest living pupil of the late Professor J.N. Mohanty, has edited his works. She is associated with the Centre of Indological Studies wing of the Institute.

### Requiescat in Pace

Speed forth, O Soul! upon thy star-strewn path;  
Speed, blissful one! where thought is ever free,  
Where time and space no longer mist the view,  
Eternal peace and blessings be with thee!

Thy service true, complete thy sacrifice,  
Thy home the heart of love transcendent find;  
Remembrance sweet, that kills all space and time,  
Like altar roses fill thy place behind!

Thy bonds are broke, thy quest in bliss is found,  
And one with That which comes as Death and Life;  
Thou helpful one! unselfish e'er on earth,  
Ahead! still help with love this world of strife!

—Swami Vivekananda

(Written in memoriam to J.J. Goodwin, August, 1898)