



Remembering

Sankar Sengupta (1944-2023)

Who

Made Adivasis his Soulmate

My Sankar Kaku (uncle)

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One day, towards the beginning of the 1990s, I heard someone calling me from downstairs and it was none other than HIM, Sankar Sengupta, wearing the traditional white Bengali dress '*dhuti-punjabi*'. I knew him as my sister Tuhina's friend Mandar's father. I took a few seconds to get down from our second floor and face him downstairs. We started talking, and it lasted till a few days back when he chose to leave us forever.

My beloved Sankar Kaku (uncle)- his voice, his use of words, and the way of delivering his speech mesmerized and captivated anyone to whom it was spoken. He used to wrap me up in his enchanting speech and I found myself in a different world. Yet, a few days back when he was trying to say something I could not figure it out no matter how much I tried and it put me into a hard reality of drifting apart from each other perhaps into two different worlds.



Sankar Kaku lived his life on his own terms. It is difficult to describe his versatile activities, humungous thoughts, and different life phases in a few words. I can recall but a few among them.

'ALIF' was the brainchild of Sankar Kaku and Kalpana Joshi (Datta), the famous Indian revolutionary and politician (1913-95), where they wanted to establish a bond among people through languages. Kaku thought that 'unity in diversity' was not practiced in a true sense within India as each community residing here maintained its

identity with a specific language and culture, keeping each other at bay. So, to understand them

closely we need to know their languages first. Thus, understanding and learning languages like Hindi, Santhali, Oriya, Russian, etc., started at A.D. School, Salt Lake, Kolkata.

In 1995, after the demise of Kalpana Joshi, Kaku established 'Kalpana Smaran Mancha' in memory of her. More deep-rooted work started hereafter as we reached remote villages and started our work from the grass root level. Our aim was to understand the village first and then bridge it up with the cities. Specific areas were selected like – Jhargram, Belpahari, Odalchua, Medinipur, and Bankura (the tribal-dominated region of West Bengal), keeping in mind the geographical position where it would be easier to intervene the states of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar and Odisha. Mandal Hembrom came forward to guide us through this new venture along the course of Sukhisal, Kusmasuli and Valuka.

While standing in the shaded jungle of Malabati, Sankar Kaku saw someone beckoning him. He was none other than 80 years old Fakir Tudu of Tura village. Phulmani Kisku welcomed him in her courtyard and laid a *parkom* (indigenous cot) for him to sit. Kaku selected an unused hut near the *bandh* (natural water reservoir) of Tura village for his future endeavour. Next destination was Baropaya Ashram. From Silda, he went to



Phulkushma crossing the river Tarafeni to reach the Ashram. He came face to face with the dilapidated condition of the Ashram founded by Manohar Murmu. He told the story of their struggle to his friend Dr. Ranjit Sen, Professor of Islamic history. The geographer couple Sumit and Amiya Mukherjee were also listening to his narration. In the full moon night of *Kojagari Lakshmi Puja*, Kaku enchanted us with his mammoth experiences of life and I for the first time realised the enriched history of thousand years of our land.

About 400 pieces of earthen 'Lakshmi-r ghot' were bought from the potter's locality of Rajabazar, and on each of them the name of Kalpana Smaran Mancha was written. They were distributed among different families in Kolkata and Jhargram. Its main aim was not to give monetary support only to Kalpana Smaran Mancha but Kaku wanted the name to remain in the memory of people everyday and think about its main activities. To spread the ideologies of Kalpana Smaran Mancha more widely, Sankar Kaku chose to sit on the open ground of Kolkata Book Fair-2002 with handmade cards and pamphlets.

Prof. Ashin Das Gupta inspired Sankar, one of his favourite students, to probe further into this work and gave him the book *An Anthropologist Among Historians and Other Essays* by Bernard Cohn which helped Kaku to understand villages from anthropological perspective. A new vistas opened up. Indian Institute of Tribal History was introduced and people like Theodore Kisku Rapaz, Prof. Binay Bhusan Chaudhuri, Dhiren Baskey came forward to hold the hand of Sankar

Sengupta. They started collecting the rich oral history of our land. Kaku visited the fair of Patabida and came to understand the tune and rhythm of Santal community.

Prof. Dilip Biswas, an eminent historian, gave a speech on the elements of Indigenous knowledge of India in the Baker Hall of Presidency College and here from the 'Unknown Coastlines' was published.

Sankar Kaku accompanied by Kakima (aunt), started walking along the rural course to reach the *haat* (weekly marketplace) of Chirakuti. Giridhari Dutta asked his two sons to guide Kaku and Kakima along the road to Odalchua via Belpahari. Sukumar da arranged some food for them. Unstoppable Kaku kept walking until he reached the *haat* of Chirakuti and a little lass called Gumi became their road guide. Thousands of people have walked the rural track on which he was walking for thousands of years. Every side of it was carrying the evidences of enriched history of the land



that could only unfold to the eyes of the beholders who wish to see them. Kaku kept on walking, collecting those historical gems, sometimes crossing a feebly flown spring, sometimes by the side of the Bhumij village Dhobakacha, and sometimes through the *sal-segun* jungle to reach Chirugora finally, the village of Sunil Soren. He understood the flavor of 'dulungdulung' rhythm for the first time. The dream house of Chechet Dera (educational shed) was founded on that remotest place.

Chechet Dera- was situated on the slanting land beside a jungle. The walls were made of red mud from that historical land, and the roof was thatched by the inhabitants of that region. While looking to the western sky, he told and sang the verses elaborating the day to day story of toil and struggle of the people living there. People of Birmadal, Dhangikusum, Chirakuti, astonishingly watched a hyper-energetic aged person visiting their villages too frequently. After the demise of Prof. Ashin Das Gupta in 1998, the name of Indian

Institute of Tribal History was changed to Ashin Das Gupta Institute of Tribal History in memory of Late Prof. Dasgupta. In 1999, the super cyclone devastated the land, and amidst the calamity Kaku stayed there in Odalchua with Prof. Buddhadeb Chaudhuri to arrange for the very next day upcoming event. They toiled night and day to pitch the tents for the first Ashin Das Gupta Memorial Lecture venue. The event was to take place amidst the nature. Next day, Prof. Asoka Kumar Sen, from Chaibasa reached there to speak on 'Generalisations, Confusions and Reconstruction of Ho Historiography' in the



heart of the village among the villagers instead of choosing a venue at metro city as it was not the history of the urban people. Prof. Asoka Sen is renowned for his scholarly work on Ho historiography. On that day, for the first time, the Ashin Das Gupta Memorial Lecture was conducted in front of hundreds of research scholars who had reached the venue to attend the lecture from various parts of Eastern India. The spontaneous involvement of the village people made it possible for the event to be successful. Later on, eminent scholars like Prof. Irfan Habib, Prof. Dilip Chakrabarty, Prof. Ajit Danda, Dr. Sofia Ahmed, Dr. Bodhisattva Kar delivered memorial lectures also.

Sankar Kaku visited Lupungutu and met Father Stan Swamy. They had long discussions and he heard about the unknown history of Ho community while sitting beside the river Roro. He started living there in the east corner room of an organization working there and watched the sunrise every morning with a dream afresh. He made his home in Chaibasa away from the maddening crowd. Beside his room, he made a place for the children where there were lots of books for them to study. People used to gather there and listen to what he said. Thus, he carried forward his intent study on history and spread his knowledge among others.



Sankar Kaku, collaborated with Prof. Asoka Sen, to launch an academic journal named Manwa Katha on Adivasi history and culture, which they edited. Sankar Kaku took responsibility for financing the publication of all the issues till the Journal's journey ended abruptly due to Sankar Kaku's sudden but protracted illness. But before that, it had earned a wide reputation for the diversity of issues it raised and the richness of the essays on Adivasi life.

Kaku also founded Dr. R N Chatterjee Memorial Clinic and extended his hand towards medical side. Renowned doctors from Kolkata regularly visited Belpahari, Tura, Odolchuya and gave medical advice to the people residing there. Tuhin Talukdar and others supplied medicines for these camps. Dr. Subhabrata Mitra visited those places often and extended his hand in case of any medical need.

Regular camps on Malaria started in Odolchuya, Kankrajhor region. Blood samples of the patients were collected and tested in Kolkata. Specialised doctors gave medicines to the malignant Malaria affected people and those medicines were carried to those remote places and distributed. Doctor Tamonash Bhattacharjee came forward also and not only him many ardent fans of Sankar Sengupta from Bagbazar came forward to help him in his mission.

2nd October 2001- a one day special medical camp was conducted in Belpahari. 15 doctors from Kolkata attended the camp and treated 350 people there. Patients with severe diseases detected or suspected in the camp were brought to Kolkata for further tests and treatments. In the same year, with monetary help from many people Kalpana Smaran Mancha purchased a house, named Paribartan, at Dhobakacha in Jhargram to keep contact and work properly in the remote belt. Paribartan eventually became his workstation where from he could plan and execute it properly. People from different fields went and stayed in Paribartan to be with Kaku. Professor Ashok

Thakur was one among them. In the shaded courtyard of the house surrounded by trees, Prof Thakur sat and sang and his mother, our beloved Parul di, also accompanied him.

Paribartan was Kaku's nook where under the canopy of foliage he could find his true self, he could breathe and read to his heart's content.

Sankar Kaku sowed the seeds of dreams in many people's mind and was successful in inspiring them. He wove a silver net of various thoughts and many of us got entwined in it. We need to hold that silver net tightly in this crisis period and protect it as much as we can.

