



Prof. B. K. Sen: The Evergreen Scholar Curiosus

The day I walk this way to bid adieu
Losing my return ticket,
The greeneries lined by the road be amazed and
Think, where is that fellow,
Who always went by here,

Why did the daily wayfarer's way ceased?

Alas! I will be oblivious
To everybody one day,
It's you, who won't forget me, only you,
My beloved Earth, my evergreen mother,
I will remain within your soul,
Your sky, your air and green soil¹.

18-09-1960

These lines were surfaced from a green heart of nineteen years' youngster in 1960. Was the distant signal from the then sixty-two years afar resonated somehow from this canto? Trying to find an answer to this question is perhaps futile today. What the green heart was looking for gazing far with his binoculars? The answer to this question may be found in the said youngster's next sixty-two years' holistic activities.

Bimal Kanti Sen (popularly known as B. K. Sen), fourth son of Benode Bihari and Haima Bala, was born on 16th April 1941, at Charmadhua, P.O. Chandrakona, District Mymensingh, Bengal, India (now in Bangladesh). He was admitted to Charmadhua Government Primary School where he studied up to fourth class and obtained a scholarship through a competitive examination. Thereafter, he joined Chandrakona Rajlakshmi High School and studied up to sixth class. Throughout the schooling, he was the class-topper. While in Class VII, a riot broke out in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), which forced his family to leave their home practically empty handed to settle in a village called Hansdaha near Gulab Bag in the district of Purnea in Bihar, where he was admitted to Purnia Zila School situated four miles away from the village. Everyday he walked

barefooted for eight miles to attend school. The distance of the school, the sudden change in study medium from Bengali to Hindi along with lack of books owing to sheer poverty culminated gradually in his becoming an academically average student. He passed secondary examination in second division. For a short time, he was admitted to Rampurhat College to study Intermediate course at class twelve standard, but was compelled to leave the college due to financial constraints. His education would have found a dead end here had his maternal uncle, Mr. Dharendra Chandra Chanda, not come forward to provide him boarding and lodging in his house at Belgharia in Kolkata. In the City College of Amherst Street, Calcutta, Prof. Manoranjan Dasgupta (the then Vice Principal of the College) was kind enough to give him admission in Intermediate class after the date of admission was long over. After completing Intermediate course, he then completed bachelor's degree in pure Science with Distinction. During his Intermediate classes, every morning he distributed daily newspapers and magazines to the houses of different areas surrounding Belgharia in order to meet regular pocket money. After that, he went to college and continued studies in the evening. The period of intermediate and graduation was really a struggling episode in his life.

After getting Bachelor's Degree, he joined the West Bengal Government Service in 1960 as a Lower Division Assistant. While working here he used to walk everyday along Bowbazar Street (Today's B. B. Ganguly Street) up to Writers Building to do his duty, and encountered the signboard of Bengal Library Association (BLA) located at Huzury Mall Lane, of Bowbazar Street. In his early childhood he has seen a small collection of books in his home belonging to his father. The books were used to primarily answer the various queries of the villagers, such as the auspicious day for a journey, the days of various festivals, full moon and new moon times, times of tides and ebbs in rivers and so on. Once I heard from Sir, that at the late teens he came to know such types of books are called as *Almanac* or *Panjika* in Bengali. This developed in him a love for books. Possibly, his love for books one day landed him in BLA's office wherefrom he completed his Certificate Course in Library Science. He obtained the Bachelor's Degree in library science from the University of Calcutta. He was a Gold Medallist for the Master in Library and Information Science from University of Delhi. His PhD was awarded by Jadavpur University in 1995 for his thesis entitled "Indian Scientific Periodicals: A Study of the Origin and Development up to 1900" under the supervision of Prof. Prabir Roychowdhury. This study added yet another area, i.e., history of science, into his research career².

Prof. Sen started his professional career as a Library Assistant in the Finance Department Library, Government of West Bengal, at 1961. Just two years later, he joined as a Junior Documentation Assistant, at Indian National Scientific Documentation Centre (CSIR-INSDOC), New Delhi in 1963, where he served up to 1995. During his 32 years' journey in INSDOC, he worked in various departments and headed successively the Russian Science Information Centre, National Centre on Bibliometrics, Education and Training Division, and finally National Science Library. The first Express Information Service of India was introduced by him in 1973 when a serial publication on metallurgy providing long digests of articles was brought out. He also introduced the Information Letter Service, a novel current awareness service, for the first time in India.

His Magnum Opus, The National Centre of Bibliometrics was established through the financial support of NISSAT (National Information System on Science and Technology), Government of India, which was the first of its kind in Asia. His jobs included starting from the preparation of the project proposal, acquiring of funds, selection of people, planning of the services, up to the running of the Centre. The Centre was operational since 1988 (now ceased). Under the auspices of the centre, the publication called *In Search of Knowledge* was brought in six volumes incorporating significant contributions of CSIR scientists published since 1942. The selection of the contributions was done through the citation analysis done by the employees of the Centre under his supervision. The volume entitled *CSIR Research Output - a Bibliometric Analysis* for the years 1986 to 1991 were also brought by the Centre under his supervision. This publication created a great impact in CSIR since it became a mirror of the achievements of various CSIR laboratories. Another big contribution of the Centre was the evaluation of the contributions of a scientist based on the citations received by their respective papers. The method developed by the Centre has found wide application in India for the purpose of awarding a scientist or electing him a fellow of a prestigious academy of science. Citation analysis has become a commonplace term among the Indian scientists today, whose foundation stone was laid down at this Centre under Sen's guidance. The Centre carried out the bibliometric evaluation of some 20 departments of Indian universities at the behest of the University Grants Commission, India. It is not at all an overestimation, if Prof. Sen is called as the "Father of applied bibliometrics and scientometric in India". Along with the Centre, he shouldered the full responsibility of the Education and Training Division during 1988-1995.

He left INSDOC in 1995 as Scientist E-II to join University of Malaya in Malaysia as visiting professor where he served up to 1999. Here he contributed substantially to the development of the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) programme and initiated the *Malaysian Journal of Library and Information Science*, an international journal. It may be noted that it was the first LIS journal from Asia indexed by Web of Science.

Sen had a teaching tenure spanned over a period of 25 years, mainly in subjects relating to Information Sources, Classification and Information and Society in the Associateship in Information Science (AISC) Course. He organized numerous courses of 4-week duration devoted to Computer Application in Library and Information Activities and also organized four 10-day training courses on Bibliometrics to train librarians and information specialists from all over India, under the auspices of the National Centre on Bibliometrics, a NISSAT project. He organised three courses of one-week duration on CDS/ISIS to train about seventy INSDOC employees in June-July 1988. He prepared around 30 course materials for BLIS, MLIS, M.Phil. and PhD courses since 1989 at the School of Social Sciences, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi. Besides, Sen delivered numerous visiting lectures at around twenty Indian Universities on diverse topics such as reference service, abstracting and indexing services, bibliometrics, MIS, INSDOC, information science in India, information centre management; Universal Decimal Classification; etc. He delivered several lectures on Energy Information Handling in Nepal in 1987 and in Pakistan in 1991 at the National Workshop on Energy Information Handling organised at Kathmandu and Islamabad respectively under the auspices of INNERTAP, UNESCO.

Most of his research activities are confined to bibliometric studies, scientific periodicals, scientific societies, and lexicography. More specifically, the domains of research covered by him may be broadly categorised as follows: (1) History of Indian S&T periodicals; (2) History of Indian scientific societies; (3) Determination of impact factors of journals not covered by *Science Citation Index*; (4) Development of the concept of normalized impact factor of S&T periodicals; (5) Evaluation of recent scientific output of laboratories using bibliometric method; (6) Coverage of Indian S&T literature by international abstracting and indexing services and (7) S&T terminology in Bengali. Using the method of evaluation developed by Sen, the research output of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research is being analysed since 1986 as well as the scientists are being ranked for the award of prestigious prizes and fellowships. The analysis has generated numerous useful indicators for science management and attracted the attention of

many top ranking scientists of India. Dr Eugene Garfield has termed the method of determination of the impact factor of non-SCI journals as an effective method.

Besides, Sen had a substantive experience of forty years for editing both primary and secondary journals, directories, monographs, reports, etc. He extended various consultancy services to different organizations, i.e., he was invited by the State Council of Science and Technology, Government of Assam, India to advise on the establishment of a science and technology information centre for Assam. He provided consultancy services to the Madhya Pradesh Council of Science and Technology in the compilation of directories, etc. Another very important component of INSDOC was SAARC Documentation Centre, where he made substantial contributions during the tenure of its establishment ever since the idea was mooted by India's then Hon'ble Prime Minister Late Mr. Rajiv Gandhi.

He was actively associated with the Delhi Library Association and taught reference service, cataloguing to Diploma students for over 20 years during 1975 to 1995. Apart from attending many conferences and seminars within India and SAARC countries, he attended the following outside the country: UNIDO-UNESCO Inter-regional Training Course for Industrial Information Officers & Documentalists, 4 September to 12 November 1973, Moscow, USSR; International Seminar on Information Networking for Technology Transfer, 2-4 December 1986, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; International Conference on Science Indicators for Developing Countries, 15-19 October 1990, Paris, France; 4th International Conference on Bibliometrics, Informetrics and Scientometrics, 11-15 September 1993, Berlin, Germany; Fifth International Conference of the International Society for Scientometrics and Informetrics, 7-10 June 1995, Chicago, USA; ASAIHL Conference, 11-14 June 1996, Melbourne, Australia. He visited countries like Malaysia, Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, France, UK, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Singapore, United Arab Emirates, and Bangladesh on various academic assignments.

According to his students, he was an excellent teacher always empathetic to the students. The renowned director Satyajit Ray once threw a famous comment in his movie *Sakha-Prasakha* through the

mouth of a psychic character Prashanta (cast by the renowned actor Sri Saumitra Chattopadhyay), who was once a promising mineralogist, but rendered mentally ill due to an accident. After becoming mentally ill, he often shouted boldly to announce the crux principle of life as he learnt from his father, i.e., *work is worship and honesty is the best policy*. Prof. Sen's entire life reverberates this speech continuously, which knocked to his students relentlessly. He was most appropriate maestro to say, *my life is my speech*. I observed in several occasions that honesty and sincerity found no boundary in his works and characteristic features. He was very soft-spoken person. His method of teaching was extraordinary. Every lecture delivered by him was well-structured and every concept presented appeared as crystal clear in the students' mind. In his speaking, he was extremely precise with high degree of clarity. He never used to speak any excess word unnecessarily. Apart from teaching, he has been distinctly involved in several other areas such as, editing, compilation of reference sources; writing of course materials; compilation of scientific glossaries; research in bibliometrics and related areas; research in history of science; popular science writing; and writing of poems. His collection of poems entitled *Ekti kabita likho* (in Bengali) was published in 2001. He was a regular contributor to the famous Bengali popular science magazine *Jnan Bichitra* published from Agartala, Tripura. In all he contributed more than 160 research articles in different journals, 5 review articles, 57 technical and popular articles, 9 book reviews, 37 course materials, 5 reports and 10 books. He contributed more than 20 articles on lexicography and terminology control in S&T.

He was a highly optimistic person, who firmly disliked negative comments and remarks. He told that any negative talk would retard your intrinsic energy flow. Don't let your energy scattered but concentrate it, so that you can get some benefit out of it. It is quite interesting to me that such an optimistic mind once penned his own obituary at his twenty (24-05-1961). I do not know at which moment he penned his cenotaph. The poet said that he was inspired by the poems of R. L. Stevenson.

Beneath the star-filled array of heaven
Indite my grave on my motherland's lap,

Afterwards, you all let me sleep there
This is a desire deep down in my heart's wrap;
All my life has been spent happily dear
At the farewell all my agonies are clear.

Inscribe these words on my cenotaph-
He is lying here to embrace the cosmic eternity
Where he desired to be fascinated;
The seafarer returned to his sweet home today,
And rock hunters in their own chalet¹.

Prof. Sen was suffering from colon cancer since last four years. He was undergone through chemotherapy treatment regularly. But during acute sufferings, his mind was always hovering around the knowledge of eternal consciousness. He was an intense believer of God Almighty, but his God was based on utmost level of honesty and sincerity. He was a keen learner always and never let his green prying mind die. He never let the queries of his mind die. That's why sometimes it seems to me that he was an inquisitive scholar rather than a teacher. Actually, I learnt from him that only a true student or true scholar has the eligibility of becoming a good teacher. Besides, his intense meticulousness in the works of writing and editing is a perfect example for the students and research scholars. We frequently experienced his elevated level of perfectionism during correction of any writing, may it be an article or thesis or report or course material. Whatever it may be, he always emphasized on one point that any work should remain as an immaculate model to the future generation.

During several conversations, Sir said to me if the queries of your mind will come to an end, only then you will turn to an old man. Otherwise, nothing else can escalate your age. I just recall an incidence, just few months back when I met him, his final injection course just completed. In spite of utter exhaustion due to acute pain, he discussed with me and my daughter about a new phenomenon of astrophysics. In an article of Nature, he then read that two member stars of Ursa Major (*Saptarshi Mondal*) constellation are gradually turning towards white dwarf stars. He told me to study further this phenomenon and to carry out a scientometric analysis on this topic. Sen Sir also told me to study about the sudden enhance of lightning thunderstorm in West Bengal in recent years that took more than forty lives.

His entire life resembled the lamp lit on the holy altar of evergreen quest for knowledge. With intense grief, we noticed the lamp silently went out at 9.30 AM on 17th October 2022. This has to be accepted, but no way out. But, we just got astonished to see that no pain or suffering can stop the thinking of a truly inquisitive mind, which is an evergreen entity. Prof. Sen will always remain present with us, with his students, with his research scholars and with the academic community at large. He left behind a remarkable legacy. Let the Great Soul rest in peace in his heavenly abode forever.

References

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- 2 Dutta B, Biobibliometric portrait of BK Sen: A librarian, information scientist and scientometrician, *Malaysian Journal of Library & Information Science*, 24 (1) (2019) 1-21.

Bidyarthi Dutta
Department of Library and Information Science
Vidyasagar University
West Bengal, India
Email: bidyarthi.bhaswati@gmail.com