

# Professor Probodh Kumar Bhowmick: A Relentless Activist for the Uplift of the Lodhas of West Bengal



(6<sup>th</sup> September, 1926 to 5<sup>th</sup> February, 2003)

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## INTRODUCTION

When one talks about Professor Probodh Kumar Bhowmick, one is constantly reminded on two issues:

- (i) The ex-criminal scheduled tribe called 'Lodha' in Medinipur
- (ii) The establishment of an experimental research centre 'Bidisa' for the development of the Lodha community.

Professor Bhowmick's inspirations were his teachers Professor Tarak Chandra Das and Professor Mrinendra Nath Basu of Calcutta University who encouraged him to concentrate on the Lodhas for his doctoral work. During that period, the Lodha people were hated and neglected by the neighbouring people for their criminal backgrounds. Professor Bhowmick received his training in ethnographic fieldwork from Professor Tarak Chandra Das and was always of the conviction that fieldwork is an inseparable part of

social anthropology. By using the technique of fieldwork, a researcher can penetrate deep into one's society. Social anthropology is a dynamic discipline, and its practitioners are not like armchair anthropologists. It remains holistic and continues to seek its raw materials from fieldworks done in different communities. Professor Bhowmick firmly believed in the guru *shisya parampara* and always tried to impart his knowledge he gained from his teachers and his innumerable number of fieldworks to his students. When Professor Bhowmick expired on 5<sup>th</sup> February, 2003, not many anthropologists realized that India had lost one of the most devoted specialized ethnographer and applied anthropologist and a great teacher who was ever experimenting in a research centre on an ex-criminal tribe Lodha during his life time. In this context his Ph.D. supervisor, the widely acclaimed Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose once mentioned him in the foreword of a book as '*not only as an anthropologist looking for scientific*

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information, but also as a social worker intensely interested in the uplifting of the tribe through education and economic rehabilitation'. Apart from the Lodha, Professor Bhowmick undertook research work among a number of tribal groups in West Bengal and other States and Union Territories of India like Jharkhand, Assam, Manipur, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Andaman Nicobar Islands. His publications especially those dealing with the empirical results of fieldwork have dealt with wide range subject matters of tribal and folk cultures as well as regional and local history of Bengal. Often Professor Bhowmick used to introduce himself as *Chasa* or *Chaser Beta* i.e. son of a cultivator. He always tried to give the message that he was from a village background and had a soft corner for the village peoples particularly those from Medinipur.

#### BIRTH AND EDUCATION

Professor P.K. Bhowmick was born on 6<sup>th</sup> September, 1926 in an economically well to do Mahishya family of Amdabad village located under Nandigram Police Station in undivided Medinipur district (now in Purba Medinipur district) of West Bengal. He was the third child among five sons and three daughters namely Amulyaratan, Menoka (Maity), Prabodh Kumar, Renuka (Jana), Subodh Kumar, Aloka (Das), Suhrid Kumar and Aninda Kishor, of Shri Jogendranath and Srimati Swaryamoyee Devi. He completed his school education in a neighboring village. He passed the matriculation examination from Kalagachia High School in Khejuri police station in Purba Medinipur. Now the school has been renamed as Kalagachia Jagadish Vidyapith. The school was the first National School in undivided Bengal, established in 1<sup>st</sup> March, 1921. Professor Bhowmick used to stay in the school hostel and came under the influence of some great teachers like Girish Chandra Maity, Santosh Kumar Bera and Sedheswar Sahu. He then joined the Belur Ramkrishna Math and was called Swami Amalananda.

He always took initiatives in the school and was instrumental in formulating the school wall magazine *Dipti*, which was first published on 22<sup>nd</sup> Shrabon 1941. This day has been routinely celebrated as the death anniversary of Kavi Guru Rabindranath Tagore. He used to organize Bengali dramas and plays with the

boys from his village. One such drama organized by him was *Ramer Sumuti*. When Professor Bhowmick was student of class nine, he participated in the 1942 August movement (*Karengey Ya Morangey* meaning *Do or Die*) called by Mahatma Gandhi at Contai sub-divisional town. He was arrested on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1942 by the British police along with 27 other students and was imprisoned in Medinipur Central Jail during March/April, 1944.

On his release from jail, Professor Bhowmick got himself readmitted to the same school and was staying in the school hostel. However, he soon contracted typhoid and he returned home in a palanquin accompanied by two of his best friends Haripada Mandal (who later in became the Head Master of Collegiate School, Midnapur) and Chittaranjan Maity (a famous novelist). He passed the *Prabeshika* examination in 1945 and got himself admitted in the I.Sc. course in Bangabasi College, Kolkata. He put up in a mess in Keshob Sen Street, Calcutta. He passed this examination with Anthropology as one of the subjects. One of his favorite teachers' was none other than Satkari Mitra (Swami Vivekananda's sister's son). In 1945 Professor Bhowmick attended a meeting of addressed by Gandhiji at Mahisadal in Purba Medinipur. He was attired in *Gandhi topi* with a volunteer batch on his chest and was actively engaged in the management and crowd control. He completed his B.Sc. Honours and M.Sc. in Anthropology from Ballygunge Science College, University of Calcutta. His M.Sc. was completed in the year 1951. His mentors and teachers were Professors M. N. Basu, T. C. Roy Chaudhuri, T. C. Das, Dharani Sen, Goutam Sankar Roy and S. S. Sarkar. His classmates were Professor Bikram Kesari Roy Burman (a veteran anthropologist), Dr. Hirendranath Rakshit (ex-Director, An.S.I.), Professor Debiprasad Mukherjee (Department of Anthropology, University of Calcutta), Professor Pranab Ganguli (Founder Head, Anthropology Department, Vidyasagar University), Dr. Manish Chakravorty (ex-Superintending Anthropologist, An.S.I.), Dr. Kamallesh Guha (ex-Museum Keeper, Department of Anthropology, Delhi University) amongst others.

#### MARRIAGE AND PERSONAL LIFE

Professor Bhowmick rented a house in Khelat

Babu Lane in north Calcutta. He married Srimati Latika Devi, daughter of Shri Haripada Pahari of Tamluk in Purba Medinipur. They have two sons and two daughters and their names are Pradip (Dipu), Partha Pratim (Sibu) Samita (Mithu) and Sarita (Ronu). Sarita was a bright student in Anthropology of Ranchi University. Unfortunately she died in a tragic car accident on 12<sup>th</sup> June, 1982 near Panskura, West Bengal. She was going to Bidisa accompanied by Professor J. K. Bose (teacher of Professor Bhowmick) along with others for attending the annual seminar in Bidisa. Professor Bose also died in same tragic accident.

Professor Bhowmick was always formally dressed in white *khaddar dhuti*, *panjabi* (cotton or silk), and black shoes. Sometimes he wore a red bordered white *dhuti* and *uttariyoas* in a South Indian style. During winters, he used to wear a *jawhar* coat/jacket and a colorful designed shawl of tribals belonging to North East India. His informal dress consisted of a white *lungi*, *baniyan/phantua* and *gamcha*. During summers, he wore a bamboo cap (from Tripura) and in evenings he used a decorative stick during his evening walks in Bidisa. He was fond of typical Bengali traditional simple food, green vegetables, and seasonal fruits. He used to read Bengali classical poems of Rabindranath, Nazrul and Jibanananda. He had an uncanny habit of writing letters.

In Bidisa, Professor Bhowmick regularly looked after each unit of the Samaj Sevak Sangha (SSS), its progress, tried to ascertain the output and problems and discuss with managerial staffs of the SSS and Institute of Social Research and Applied Anthropology (ISRAA) for future action. During his free time he used to call the Lodha boys from the hostel and gossip with them in the courtyard/veranda/bed room of Rupamati guest house. The students were asked about their regular activities, progress of education and about Bidisa. They were often asked names of the day of a week, names of the English and Bengali months, name of the five organs and role/importance, name of the yellow flowers and season of availability, how many nests of the birds and squirrels in Bidisa campus and which trees, number of honey comb etc. Often Professor Bhowmick used to tell them ghost stories or short stories about tribal freedom

fighters. Then he used to distribute local toffees called *lemonchus* from his baniyan pocket or from under the pillow.

#### PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Professor Bhowmick joined the Department of Anthropology, Bangabasi College, Kolkata as a lecturer in the year 1952. He completed his Doctoral work on the '*Lodhas of West Bengal*' under the supervision of Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose in 1963. He was awarded the D.Sc. degree in 1976 for his work on '*Socio-Cultural Profile of Frontier Bengal*'. Professor Bhowmick joined the Post-Graduate Department of Anthropology, University of Calcutta and later on became the Head of the Department as well as Dean, Faculty of Science of the University. He supervised around 60 Ph.D. students from different parts of India and abroad in Anthropology and allied disciplines in different subject matters. Topics ranged from ethnography to bio-social work to Naxalite movement to sacred complex to ecology to economy and many more both on castes and tribes.

A total of 10 books in different subject matters like socio-economic aspects of Lodha, occupational mobility, caste and socio-cultural profile in fringe Bengal, occultism, applied action development anthropology, Chenchu, primitive tribal groups and rethinking tribal culture. were written by him. He has also written 6 Bengali books in different subjects ranging from prehistory to tribal culture and folk festival to folk society. He published 121 English articles in academic journals, bulletin, edited books, leading magazines, census report, and daily news papers during from 1954 to 1987. He has also published 88 Bengali articles in different academic journals, edited books, magazines and daily Bengali news papers in anthropology, folklore, sociology, and rural development. He was editor of the journal *Man and Life*, editor of few volumes of seminar proceedings titled *Spark* from Bidisa.

Professor Bhowmick was a life member of the Indian Anthropological Society (IAS) and Indian Science Congress Association (ISCA). He served as President of IAS and Sectional Precedence of ISCA. He was attaché with West Bengal Child Welfare, Calcutta and played a role as its Vice President. He was the life member of the Asiatic Society and a

Honorary Fellow of the Society. He was also attached with Jana Siksha Prachar Kendra and Mahisya Samaj, Calcutta. He was also attached with Institute of Social Welfare and Business Management under the University of Calcutta. Professor Bhowmick was as a member of the First Board of Post Graduate Studies in Sociology of the Calcutta University. He documented the cultural heritage of undivided Midnapur. He has taken initiative to establish Nandigram Sitananda College and established the Vidyasagar University with Professor Anil Kumar Gayen of Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur.

Professor Bhowmick was honoured with a medal from the Asiatic Society, Kolkata for his anthropological works. He also received a prize for his book on the Chenchus. He was felicitated by the *Bangiya Sahitya Parisa*, Medinipur Branch and *Ganatantrik Lekhok o Shilpi Sangha*, Medinipur, Medinipur Zila Nazrul Satabarshiki Committee, Paramanandapur Higher Secondary School, Kalagachia Jagadish Vidyapath and Contai Prabhat Kumar College. He received a good wishes letter from Bill Clinton, former President of America with the latter writing that “*Congratulations and best wishes. You have reached an important milestone in your life, and I join with you in that celebration*”.

#### BIDISA: A BRIEF HISTORY

Professor Bhowmick was as an institution and he was the *pranpurush i.e.* founder of Bidisa. The etymologically meaning of Bidisa, is ‘what diffuses light’. The name originated from a village named Baghavera (which literally means the ‘path of tiger’) situated in Narayangarh Police Station in Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal. It is situated about 18 kms from Kharagpur Railway station and the nearest rail head is Narayangarh.

The Lodha was the subject matter of research for his doctoral research work under the inspiring guidance of his *guru* Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose. Professor Bhowmick used to stay in a small mud house just opposite of main entrance of Bidisa across the rail tracks (South Eastern railway) during his doctoral fieldwork. A few Lodha families resided there at that time. This tribal group was treated as a ‘Criminal Tribe’ during the British period. In course of his research Professor Bhowmick advocated that

criminality did not run in the blood of the Lodhas and it was by no means a hereditary trait. Economic and territorial displacement forced them to an anti-social life and stigma of criminality which cut a deep gorge in their life in which they had to roll down helpless. Although, there were several attempts by the government for their rehabilitation, most of them yielded no results. It was then Professor Bhowmick organized an institutional complex where the Lodha children were brought back to the mainstream. Mr. Ranjit Kumar Gupta, the then Superintendent of Police, Midnapur, came forward and associated himself along with other district administrators with this noble cause. One voluntary organization named Samaj Sevak Sangha (SSS) was established in 1955, and when it was realized that academic inquiry should form a part of such an endeavor, another voluntary organization in the name of Institute of Social Research and Applied Anthropology (ISRAA) was established in 1975 with the active involvement of many social scientists, administrators, social workers and tribal people. After that Bidisa became an institutional complex which slowly expanded its activities and moved towards perfection.

A primary school named Daharpur Savar Pally Nimna Buniadi Vidyalaya (for class-I-IV) started at Bidisa in 1965 and Ashram hostel for Lodha boys started in 1964. Then the Daharpur Junior High School opened in 1968 and Daharpur High School in 2000. The ashram hostels named *Kalketu* and *Fullara angan* for boys and girls are now run by SSS. The expanding institutional complex at Bidisa sought to provide vocational training for the Lodha and lower caste boys and girls through agriculture, pisciculture, bee keeping, dairy farming. A big water tank with an island that attracts birds, tribal children and visitors for boating and four ponds are now present in different corners of the campus. A deer park was started with one pair of deer and this place is called *Karnaban*. A hall dedicated to the memory of Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose was built to hold local/national/international level seminars, conference, workshops, lectures and training courses. An artificial cave with archaeological exhibits from different places of Midnapur was also constructed. There is a two storied library cum reading room rich with rare anthropological and sociological literature. A centrally located dome

shape shade called *Gokul*, where guests and visitors take rest has been built. There is one museum named *Rarh Sanskriti Sanghralaya* located upstairs of *Sarita Smriti Mancha*, which display valuable collections ranging from stone age implements to Jain and Buddha stone sculptures, terracotta objects to replica of ancient sculptures donated by Indian Museum, Calcutta. There are few guest houses/cottages named as *Visswasu Complex, Jatugriha, Amrapally and Swapna Sandhya*. Professor Bhowmick used to stay in *Rupamati* which also housed the institute office, staff quarter and a kitchen, There is a commemorate pillar of Sarita Bhowmick called *Aparantye*.

A day which was very important in history of freedom movement of India was 7<sup>th</sup> December 1907. Freedom fighter Barin Kumar Ghosh played a pivotal role in the killing of Choto Lat Sir Andrews by a bomb blast on rail line near Bidisa on this day. To commemorate this day the *Pally Punar Gathan Utsav* and *Nabannya Utsav* are held on 6<sup>th</sup> December every year. The freedom fighter Barin Kumar Ghosh Smriti Kaksha was established in Bidisa in 2002.

#### DEATH AND COMMEMORATE

Professor Bhowmick last came to Bidisa on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2002 from Calcutta for the arrangement and participation in the *Pally Punar Gathan Utsav* celebration of Nabannya Utsav and offer homage to the freedom fighter Barin kumar Ghosh. After successfully completing the programmes, he left Bidisa for Kolkata 7<sup>th</sup> December 2002. A week later he injured himself when a person fell on him from a running bus on 13<sup>th</sup> December, 2002 afternoon at College Street, Calcutta. His hip was operated and he returned home. However, he could not recover from the injury and fell seriously ill. He was admitted in Daffodil Nursing Home, Kolkata and passed away on 5<sup>th</sup> February 2003 at 10.10 pm. His funeral was held in Bidisa on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2003.

The news of his death was broadcast over All India Radio, Calcutta and the print media both from West Bengal and outside West Bengal. During that time the author was in official fieldwork in Sosai village in Mandar Block, Ranchi district of Jharkhand. He came to know of the death of Professor Bhowmick from news published in a Hindi daily (*Prabhat*

*Khabor*) published from Ranchi. Condolence meetings were held in different institutions and organizations. The SSS and ISRAA organized a condolence meeting at Bidisa on 7<sup>th</sup> June, 2003 and it was attended by a host of anthropologists such as Dr. M. K. Raha, and Professor A. K. Danda.

Obituaries were published in many anthropological journals and bulletins with the family receiving condolence messages from Departments of Anthropology and Sociology of different universities in India and abroad, and Government offices. Condolences were received from Calcutta University, Ranchi University, Hyderabad University, University of Allahabad, Sri Venkateswara University College of Arts and Science, North Bengal University, Utkal University, Guru Ghasidas University, Hari Sigh Gour University, Dibrugarh University, Guwahat University, Dhaka University, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Bangladesh, all regional centres of the Anthropological Survey of India, Indian Anthropological Society, West Bengal Council for Child Welfare, Peoples Union For Development and Recostruction, Belda Gangadhar Academy, Lions Club, Kharagpur; Jana Siksha Prachar Kendra, Research Institute of Folk-Culture, Medinipu Sanskriti Parisad and Lake Town Association.

Two commemorate volumes were published in English and Bengali and they contained contributed articles on the life, philosophy, contributions of Professor Bhowmick along with the experiences of the writers with him. One life size statue of Professor Bhowmick has been established in Bidisa in 2005. The name of the High School was changed to Daharpur Adyapak Prabodh Kumark Bhowmick Vidya Bhawan in 2003. One of the entrances to Bidisa has been renamed as *Probodh Taron Dwar*.

#### SOME PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF THE AUTHOR WITH PROFESSOR BHOWMICK

The author accompanied Professor Bhowmick twice when the latter visited Satkori Mitra at his residence in Penidi, Calcutta. Each time professor Bhowmick gifted Satkari Mitra a *khadi chadar, kurta* and *dhoti*. Once the author was in Bidisa for fieldwork and participated in the 67<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations of Professor Bhowmick. On that occasion a small booklet was published from Bidisa press, where a number of

poems written by Professor Bhowmick was released. In the same evening, he recited poems of Jibanananda and shared his childhood experience with all present before dinner at Rupamati. One morning the authors asked Professor Bhowmick about the necessary of the deer park in Bidisa. Professor Bhowmick instantly replied that "*Look, the Lodhas are hunter-gatherer and here I am trying to create a bridge of love with animals like deer, cow and duck through regular care and offering fodder, which the children collect from agricultural fields*". Another incident in Bidisa was also worth mentioning. Professor Bhowmick along with the author went to the hostels and silently observed the sweet and innocent faces of Lodha boys and girls in front of mirrors. Professor remarked that

they never saw own faces and now they were happy and enjoying it.

#### CONCLUSION

Professor Bhowmick was not only a senior Professor in Anthropology but also a great humanist and social activist. He was very well known for his jovial nature, outspokenness and simplicity. His work among the Lodhas of West Bengal remains a milestone in the field of Applied and Action Anthropology. He devoted his whole life for the Lodhas and their upliftment. His greatest contribution was Bidisa, a sweet and scholarly brainchild with a noble objective of uplifting the Lodha tribals. Indian Anthropology will always fondly remember Professor Bhowmick for his great contributions in Anthropology in general and applied anthropology in particular.





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