

Shyamal Sengupta

Shyamal Sengupta, an eminent physicist and teacher, drew an abrupt end to his illustrious life on 21 October 2003. The shocking news stunned his numerous admiring students across the globe and the community of physicists.

Born to a middle-class family in Rajbari, Faridpur district (presently in Bangladesh) Sengupta lost his father Bharatbandhu Sengupta at an early age of five. During this turbulent period of personal grief and India's freedom movement, his mother Charuprova Sengupta plunged into the movement as a disciple of Gandhiji. In his childhood, Sengupta lived an austere ashramite's life. He obtained his school education from Panihati Taranath H.E. School and Calcutta Metropolitan Institution (Main). Sengupta was detained with his entire family in connection with the 'Quit India' movement of 1942, and prepared for his I Sc examination from jail. But just before the commencement of the examination, he was released. He received his undergraduate and postgraduate education from the Presidency College, Kolkata and the University of Calcutta respectively. After a brief period of working as a research scholar he joined the education department, Government of West Bengal in 1950 and taught in different Government colleges of West Bengal and in the Department of Physics, University of Calcutta over a period of thirty-five years. He worked independently for his doctoral thesis and obtained a Ph D degree from the University of Calcutta in 1962. He became a professor of physics in 1965.

Sengupta, a self-taught physicist, made significant contributions in the field of theoretical nuclear physics and condensed matter physics. At the Presidency College, he established the Solid State Physics Research Centre in 1974, which

was acclaimed for its activities all over the country. His recent research interest ranged in the foundational problems of quantum mechanics in which he pioneered research work in the country. He has about one hundred and twenty five research publications to his credit. An *academicien extraordinaire*, he inspired generations of physicists in particular and scientists in general. About fifteen students have obtained their doctorate



degree under his direct supervision and he actively helped a number of students at the research centre. During his stay at the Presidency College, he initiated the undergraduate student research programme, where a good number of students published significant work under his guidance. He constantly encouraged his students to ask questions and to learn to formulate a problem precisely. His amazing inspirational ability could ignite the imagination of even an average student and this made him a legend among the student community.

After his retirement (1986) from the Presidency College, he was conferred the Emeritus Professorship in 1987 and was invited by the Jadavpur University to organize the Condensed Matter Physics Research Centre in the Department of Physics as a visiting professor in 1990. In recognition as an outstanding preceptor of physics, he received the Teacher of Eminence award in 1994 from the University of Calcutta.

He authored several important books. His writings consist of pedagogical articles, critical essays on science and culture and on personalities, literary works and book reviews. He was also interested in popularizing science and with untiring zeal inculcated scientific spirit and temper among young students. He organized scientific workshops/seminars for school students in the village under the auspices of a voluntary organization Charuprova Devi Siksha Samsad (named after his distinguished freedom-fighter mother), with which he was actively associated until his death.

A warm-hearted, generous human being, he lived a simple life. An epitome of rationality and Western enlightenment, Sengupta was a convinced man. In true sense, he lived a magnificent life. The self-inflicted, in a sense a Socratic end to his life raises a question that even our modern civilized society is incapable of nurturing the perceptions of a modern man, far ahead of his time.

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