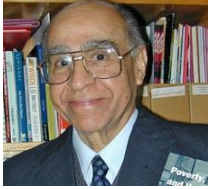


## *Remembering S P Varma and N C Chatterjee*



**A H Somjee**

A.H. Somjee received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the London School of Economics. He is a charter member of the Simon Fraser University, Canada, where he is also an Emeritus Professor of Political Science. He has taught at the University of Baroda, the London School of Economics, University of Durham, and the National University of Singapore. He was also appointed as an Associate Fellow at the Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford University, and was invited to Harvard University, several times, as a Visiting Scholar.

### *Editor's note:*

*This article was written at the request of Prof. P C Mathur, a student and colleague of Prof. S P Varma at the University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, who believes that Prof. Varma brought about a major change in the field of Political Science in India, and wants Prof. Varma to be remembered.*

*S P Varma retired in 1973 as the Head, Department of Political Science, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur. He took his D.Phil. degree from Agra University. He was required to teach civics and politics during the British Rule, and he did a magnificent job of it. He deeply reflected on the nature of Indian democratic politics and produced a number of very useful books on the subject. He was widely regarded as a great teacher who produced a number of good students.*

*N C Chatterjee was a professor of politics at Indore Christian College and, later on, a teacher in an academic institution in Canada. He was well versed in Great European thinkers, and sought to understand India's democratic future with reference to her indigenous strengths and weaknesses. Chatterjee was a very stimulating teacher who taught the complexity of Indian and European politics to a generation of students.*

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After my high school education, I joined Holkar College in Indore, in central India. The year was 1942. The leaders of India, including Mahatma Gandhi were in British Prison. Britain and its allies were continually losing ground. It was difficult to tell which way the ongoing Second World War would end.

Indore, now in Madhya Pradesh, was the capital of the Princely State of Indore, ruled by the Holkars. We were insulated from the day-to-day terrible news about the war. Winston Churchill, the wartime Prime Minister of Britain, did not want to negotiate with Gandhi and Nehru, and just locked them up. The censored newspapers too gave very little account of what was happening in the real world.

Holkar College went about its business in a non-political fashion. Come to think of it, it was the only thing the College could do. More and more political news became available to us as the war came to an end, and negotiations started about the freeing India from the clutches of the British Empire.

In 1942, the year I joined Holkar College, very few professors were willing to discuss the question of India's independence. Varma Saheb, I was surprised to discover, was an exception. He wore khadi, and in his lectures, which were on civics and politics, he would make indirect as well as direct references to the question of India's freedom. Consequently, he became popular with students.

I too liked his approach very much.

But in 1943, the news came that he was going to resign his Holkar College job and join a college in Meerut. Needless to say that we were all very sorry indeed. And he knew about it. There was a farewell party, given by students, which I had organized. Professor Varma was deeply moved. But, then, what could we do? He left us in 1943.

After he left, we went in search of a 'similar' professor but could not find any. Most of our professors were only concerned with the courses that they offered. After I had got my Intermediate degree, I started going to another college, namely, Indore Christian College, to get a course on politics. And I succeeded in getting one, offered by Professor N.C. Chatterjee. After getting my B.A. degree, I joined Indore Christian College, for my Master's degree in Political Science.

Working with Professor Chatterjee was my greatest experience. I used to miss Varma Saheb a lot, but Chatterjee tried his best to overcome that loss. He made me interested in original writings in political science and, in particular, in theory of it. For two years, I attended his lectures and sat with him, almost every evening, to learn from the original writings of Hegel, Marx and other thinkers.

One of our greatest joys was that India attained its independence in 1947, while I was still an M.A. student.

Ours was the first batch of M.A. students in Political Science, and Chatterjee Saheb took a special interest in our batch. We used to argue with him till late in the evening, and continue it on the following day. The bone of contention was why Nehru agreed to appoint Mountbatten as the Governor General of free India. He enjoyed the discussion, inside and outside the class, and always took a contrary view to keep our discussion going.

It all ended, sadly, with our M.A. examination. I was placed in the first division, by Agra University, to which Indore Christian College was then affiliated. Then came one of the worst moments of my life, of having to leave Indore, where I was born and brought up, and took my education.

Luckily for me, Varma Saheb, from Udaipur, where he had moved from Meerut, wrote to Chatterjee Saheb that he would like to interview, and possibly appoint, one of his students, as a lecturer in Political Science at Maharana Bhupal College, Udaipur. Initially, I was not at all interested in going to Udaipur, and I tried very hard to find an appointment in Indore itself, but to no avail.

I was appointed in Udaipur under the chairmanship of Professor Varma. Living and working in Udaipur was quite an experience. Varma Saheb was extraordinarily kind to me. And what was more, thanks to him, I got an access into professorial company, at a young age of twenty-two years. Across town from Udaipur, there was another very well-known institution called Vidya Bhavan, presided over by Professor Kesarilal Bordia, popularly known in Udaipur as Dadabhai. He too was a professor of English in Holkar College, Indore. Then there was the third one, Dave Saheb, who came back to Vidya Bhavan from a princely college in Indore.

These three professors, much older than I was, were the life of a small town like Udaipur. They participated fully in all the discussions that were taking place in the city. Right from what to do with curriculum, which was inherited from the British, to what all we should be ready with.

Since telephones were not for personal use then, most of the time we used to travel to meet other people, with or without an appointment. Once or twice a week, I used to go on my cycle to Varma Saheb's residence in the evening. If I did not find him there, then I would play with his children, Meenaji, Sudhir, and Subodh. And they are my wonderful friends even now. I also used to interact with students of

Udaipur a lot. Practically, every other evening we used to meet, discuss politics, etc., and dream of doing something even if we could not define it.

In Varma Saheb's company, I used to be a partner – junior, of course, but nevertheless a partner. Dadabhai also allowed me a lot of freedom to express my views. In Varma Saheb's and Dadabhai's company, I never felt that since I was junior to them, I should keep quiet. In fact, on every occasion, they used to seek my opinion as representing the younger generation. My mind is full of gratitude for what I learnt from them in Udaipur.

While I was happy to be in the great company in Udaipur, and very much enjoyed talking to my students, Varma Saheb, Dadabhai, and others, I was unhappy at my spending all my creative years in a small place like Udaipur. But, the question was: how to get out of Udaipur and where to go? I tried Indore, and then Jaipur, but nothing worked out. I finally decided to try for the London School of Economics (LSE), and that worked out.

Very soon, Varma Saheb and Dadabhai decided to go to London as well. That was great. We all went to London, and hoped to have a stimulating time there. LSE put me under the supervision of Michael Oakeshott. Harold Laski, under whom I wanted to work, had just died a few months before I entered the School. Nobody at the School knew what Oakeshott was going to be like. Oakeshott was quite charming, and even helpful, but very different from Harold Laski.

Very different indeed. He came from Cambridge, and was initially jeered for his conservative views. He was not at all liked by most of Laski's young scholars. But then English scholars have a way of not agreeing with anyone without let him or her know.

Oakeshott did not like my working on an American thinker, John Dewey, but I insisted on it, and took a very long time to complete my Ph.D. Nearly five years! I could say that those were not very happy years of my life. I had no guidance, no help. I could not trust Oakeshott. Finally, some junior faculty was helpful in reading my chapters. When finally my thesis was ready, to my surprise, Oakeshott tried to be magnanimous and helped me get my degree. The thesis was published by Columbia University Press under the title *The Political Theory of John Dewey*. There were 16 reviews, and practically every one praised it.

I then returned to India and to Udaipur in 1955. Now Varma Saheb was very much worried that I might leave Udaipur. He and Prem Narayan Mathur, the education minister, tried very hard to create a professorship for me at Jaipur, but they could not do it. In the meanwhile, Baroda University appointed me as head of Political Science Department.

I worked in Baroda University for nearly nine years. They were the most pleasant years of my life. Varma Saheb, in the meanwhile had moved to Jaipur. Once or twice a year, he insisted on my presence in Jaipur. My wife Geeta and I enjoyed our many visits to Jaipur. Jaipur brought back the old days.

In Baroda, our Political Science department had moved to doing village studies. At a time, seven to eight M.A. students offered to write their thesis on village politics, and we even published summaries of some of them. My own work, then, was concentrated on village studies. That interested some students from Jaipur, and they too wanted to do similar work on their villages.

In 1965, I left Baroda University to teach at Simon Fraser University, Canada. Our community of interest, and interests in dialogue, continued. A couple of times Varma Saheb came to Vancouver, and practically every year, Geeta and I, used to go to Jaipur. Meeting him was great, and in Jaipur particularly, was out of this world.

That continued till he and I were getting old. We met and discussed practically everything under the sun, agreed and disagreed on a number of issues, respected each other's views. Our discussions continued until we reached the airport or railways station.

I had in fact two great teachers: Varma Saheb, and Professor N.C. Chatterjee. They were very different from each other. While Varma Saheb was sober in his views, with a good command over day-to-day politics, Chatterjee was brilliant, almost incomparable, and ready with an answer no matter what was being discussed. Later on in his life, Chatterjee migrated to Canada, but we could meet only a couple of times. He died in Canada.

I have been one of the lucky ones to have been Varma Saheb's student, colleague, and a friend. He was deeply interested in my work, and always wanted me to tell him more about what I was working on. And it was always great to tell him, get his views, and keep our dialogue going, despite great distances, almost interminably.❖

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