

Eminent personalities

Acharya Sir !

An ideal student, an ideal teacher and a noble human being*

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"A good teacher teaches and a great teacher inspires," they say. Janardan Acharya was indeed a great teacher, who taught beyond the prescribed curricula of schools and guided the destiny of his students. In return, he got the love and respect of his students; in spite of the high position they held in society. He was a self-made man who by dint of hard work, presence of mind and strong will, made his way through life on his own steam.

A disciplinarian to the core, he approached all tasks with the utmost dedication and sincerity. A true "Karmayogi", he excelled in all the roles that he played in life, be it as a son, brother, father, husband or a social worker. He was well versed in the scriptures and lived his life as told in the "Gita", and went about his various duties without any eye on the outcome.

He was a walking encyclopedia, and his advice was sought by all alike. Besides being a great teacher, Acharya Sir was also an ideal student, who considered education itself to be a very big goal.

In this write-up, various anecdotes of Acharya Sir's life have been related which give an insight into the many facets of his personality.

"Whenever I think of an ideal teacher, the name of Acharya Sir flashes before my mind's eye" -- saying this, Dr Barthakur, Professor of Geography in the Gauhati University, stood up from his chair and folded his hands in pranam - as a mark of respect to the memory of the teacher.

That was in the later part of 1973. Acharya Sir had passed away five years earlier. Later on I came to know that Acharya Sir had guided the destiny of many a students of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sadiya, Diphu, Sootea, Nagaon and Mangaldoi. All of them remembered him with great reverence.

Acharya Sir's popularity and the respect that he commanded can be easily gauged by an incident that took place in 1970 at Gauhati University. Dr Mukunda Madhab Sharma was getting introduced with the students who were admitted in the Previous Year of the Sanskrit Department. One of the girls of this new batch introduced herself as Prativa Acharya from Dibrugarh. When Dr Sharma enquired more about her, he came to know that she was Acharya Sir's daughter. He then related various anecdotes of Sir's life and said that Acharya Sir was an example of a true Karmayogi.

Born at Jhanji in 1904, in a respectable Brahmin family, which had fallen on bad times, Acharya Sir completed his education from the Benaras Hindu University. Besides taking care of his own education, he also took upon himself the responsibility of educating his younger brother. With his own earnings, he started his own family and by dint of his hard labour, he was able to educate his four sons and three daughters, along with substantially helping his elder brother monetarily as long as he lived.

Whatever task Acharya Sir took upon himself, he approached it with total dedication and sincerity, be it in his teaching profession, or family life or social life. Laziness or tiredness did not figure in his scheme of things. He used to rise from bed at the crack of dawn and after his morning chores, he prepared breakfast for his children if need be. Depending upon his convenience, he either got ready to impart tuitions or he went to work in the kitchen garden or practiced astrology. After completion of these tasks, he used to reach school in time. He used to work tirelessly for hours on end, but in spite of this he did not show any sign of fatigue. After school too, he either worked in his garden, or studied people's horoscopes and in the evening, he conducted tuitions. In spite of working round the clock, he was able to keep anger at bay and always maintained a

cheerful disposition. He used to take pride in the fact that every penny that he earned, was earned by fair means. For this he earned the respect and recognition from the young and the old alike. Once on hearing that Acharya Sir had constructed a commodious house, historian Benudhar Sharma who was like an elder brother to him, went all the way to Dibrugarh from Guwahati just to have a look at it. When he saw the house, tears of happiness welled up in his eyes and in joy he exclaimed that the house built with the sweat and blood of Janardan (Acharya Sir) was not just a house but as good as a royal palace.



Janardan Acharya (1904-69)

To supplement his income, Acharya Sir took up private tuitions. But the aim behind these tuitions was not merely to earn money, but also to sincerely guide the students. Sir remained satisfied even with students who paid him something in kind instead of cash. He imparted lessons to all without any discrimination whatsoever.

Acharya Sir was good in all subjects -- right from English to Sanskrit. But he used to abhor Maths. This abhorrence was to such an extent, that after completing the Maths paper during his Matriculation, the first thing he did was to throw away all the books relating to Maths and the question paper, into the Bhogdoi river.

Students, who were fortunate enough to be guided in their academic pursuit by Acharya Sir, always remembered him with love and gratitude in later life, irrespective of the position they held. If Sir's daughters were late in returning home at any time, they used to be escorted home, when any of these students chanced upon them. When Acharya Sir was constructing his house at Chiring Chapori in Dibrugarh, he once needed more cement bags. Upon being approached for the same, the Supply Inspector politely informed Acharya Sir that his quota was over and only the Deputy Commissioner could permit more bags of cement to be issued to him. Accordingly Acharya Sir went to the Deputy Commissioner. The Deputy Commissioner was at a meeting. The clerk politely ventured to request Acharya Sir not to go in. But Acharya Sir said that he wanted to

see the face of the Deputy Commissioner just to know who he was, and he peeped in at the door. The Deputy Commissioner chanced to see him. He immediately stopped the meeting exclaiming, "Acharya Sir has come," got up from his seat, went outside and welcoming Acharya Sir enquired what brought him there. Upon coming to know of his problem, he immediately picked up the phone, called the Supply Inspector and instructed him to issue as many bags of cement as Acharya Sir wanted and to himself come to him to get the permit issued.

Acharya Sir had the habit of tearing his cheque at the wrong place. So when he gave his cheque, the receiving clerk used to take it to the Agent and show that it was improperly torn. Each time that it happened, the Agent used to sign it and forward the cheque for payment. After many such occasions, when Acharya Sir once came, the Agent with folded hands requested him to step in to his chamber for a minute or two and very humbly told him, "Sir, could you kindly tear your cheque a little to the left. Otherwise each time I have to sign it before forwarding for payment."

The former Director of Health Services, Assam, Dr. Jiten Gohain, who happened to be Acharya Sir's student regarded him with great respect. He was the first to detect Cancer in Acharya Sir. Scores of years after Acharya Sir had passed on, Jiten Gohain was delighted to know that Acharya Sir's eldest son Dr. Probin Chandra Acharya had become his neighbour near his house at Guwahati. Soon after, Dr. Jiten Gohain, who was himself suffering from Cancer, passed away. At his deathbed, one of his last instructions to his good wife was to always remain in good terms with Probin Acharya's family as he happened to be Acharya Sir's son.

A few students of Acharya Sir in spite of their becoming petty thieves had their respect for Sir intact. Such a group accosted once a family, which had arrived from Mariani around midnight. The group took away whatever they could from the family. Then in order to fix the fare of the rickshawalla, they asked them their destination. When the group came to know that the family was heading for Acharya Sir's place, they not only returned whatever they had taken, but also safely escorted them to Sir's house.

Acharya Sir had to struggle hard with acute poverty during his childhood. But even then he did not let poverty thwart his personal aspirations. He was able to manage the affairs of his family smoothly and give proper education to all his children, for he was able to prioritize needs and catered for them accordingly. He bought a "banjo" for his second son having interest in music, and sitars for his daughters. He also got his eldest and third son educated in Agra and Delhi respectively. He never took any debts during his lifetime and left no debts on his death. Instead, he established the family fortunes on firm and strong foundations during his lifetime itself. Only once when he was severely ill and was bed-ridden for some months, his wife's immediate elder brother Captain (Dr.) Atul Chandra Baruah sent him some money for those months to meet the expenses of the special rich diet Acharya Sir was instructed to be on by his doctor. It was difficult to gauge the number of sets of clothes that he had. Most probably not many. But everyday he was neatly turned out. Acharya Sir never used torn clothes or shoes and never gave his shoes to anybody else to wear.

Apart from his school job, Acharya Sir also used to impart tuitions, planted vegetables in his kitchen garden, and at times even prepared breakfast and lunch for his family. But in spite of this busy schedule, he found time to author a textbook in Sanskrit, titled "Naba Siksha Patham." He also translated from Sanskrit into Assamese the "Murkha-Shatak" and wrote a book - "Bharotor Shresta Nari" or Great Women of India, which was, however, not published due to lack of funds. Regarding his social obligations, he was always in the forefront. At public meetings whether in Dibrugarh, or in Mangaldoi, he could enthral the audience with his speeches, which he laced with Sanskrit slokas and anecdotes. Whether the meeting was of a group of teachers or a group of scholars, whatever the subject on which he was expected to speak, he spoke with equal ease. Acharya Sir was one of those few Assamese pundits who could deliver speeches in Sanskrit.

Posted for many years outside Dibrugarh, the town in which he had settled along with his family, whenever Acharya Sir used to come to visit his chosen place of residence at Chiring Chapori, Dibrugarh, there used to be a veritable mela or fair at his house. The walking encyclopedia of knowledge that he was, a visit to the not too far off market used to take him thrice the time it should ordinarily take, for people hailed him from all nooks and corners and he had to stop to exchange greetings and at least a few words with them.

So deep was his attachment to learning that he built up a personal library of books, the Acharya Puthi Bharal, which included several rare and old volumes along with the modern classics. After obtaining his B.A. degree in Philosophy and Sanskrit from Benaras Hindu University, Varanasi, and Vyakaran Tirtha, Sastri and Sahitya Bhusan degrees from traditional Sanskrit institutions of learning in the early 1930s, Janardan got his B.T. degree from Shillong in 1950. Once his shoes having got worn out, he went to the market to purchase a new pair. But he chanced to come across a good book he did not possess, so he bought that book instead of a pair of shoes with the money he had!

As Janardan Acharya was well versed in the scriptures and also perhaps because the Deka or Junior Satradhikar of Garmur Satra, (one of the four big principal Satras of Majuli, the seat of Neo-Vaishnavite culture) had been taken by him to Benaras and afterwards became the Satradhikar, he was sometimes invited to adjudicate disputes among the Satras. Once one of the Satradhikars was camping on the banks of the Brahmaputra at Dibrugarh. It was the tradition then to present *poka mithoi* (a traditional sweetmeat ball) to honoured guests as a mark of respect. When Acharya Sir visited the camp, he was presented with an especially large *poka mithoi* as a mark of honour and respect, and he was then escorted to the Satradhikar, while his children were given small balls of *mithoi* to eat.

The one most important trait in Sir's character that we all should try to emulate is his strong will power as also his great presence of mind. He was also a very insistent and disciplined person. Though having a fiery temper, he kept it well under control.

Born into a poor family of Jhanji's Bamungaon, which at times could not even afford two square meals a day, Acharya Sir, after matriculation, left for Benaras to pursue his higher education, with a tin box of 20 inches and a bag on his shoulder as his only belonging. In his bag, he carried some rice, a small pan, a water pot and a matchbox. Whenever he used to feel hungry, he got down at stations, took out his rice and pan and began to cook. Sometimes the train left, even before he could finish cooking. But he waited patiently for the next train. That was because he used to take rice cooked with his own hands only. In order to buy train tickets to Benaras, he after reaching Kolkata, got down there and found employment with a Vaid or Ayurvedic physician. After having trained in the basics of Ayurveda and having earned the required sum of money, he got up on a train for Benaras framing one sentence in Hindi, "Kashi Kitni Dur."

After reaching Benaras, Janardan took shelter at the house of an aristocratic Bengali family. He struck a deal with the family that he would gather flowers and tulsii, needed for puja, for them and in return he will have two meals at their home. Gradually he picked up the Hindi language and began to conduct tuitions. With the help of the Bengali gentleman, he even secured admission in a college of Benaras Hindu University. Though he secured admission, there was another hindrance in his path, that of paying his college fees. But here too, he found a way out. Janardan found employment in a newspaper and through this and other such means was able to pay his college fees. There was an interesting incident during Janardan's stay in Benaras. There was a Professor in Benaras Hindu University by name Puntam Baker. He was formerly a Barrister but had one drawback, his uncontrollable temper. Once he had even beaten up the Judge with his slippers and had to undergo imprisonment due to that. But Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya brought him as teacher in Benaras Hindu University keeping in view his sterling academic attainments. Now a fellow student of Janardan from Jorhat once gave proxy in Prof. Puntam Baker's class. The Professors those days had great power and Prof. Baker expelled that student for ever and hung up a notice in the notice board. The unfortunate student approached Janardan to find out some solution. Janardan decided to approach Acharya Dhruba, the pro-Vice Chancellor. It was well known that if anyone approached Acharya Dhruba just after he came out of his shrine early in the morning, and asked anything from him, Acharya Dhruba never said no. The problem was how to enter the guarded house of the Acharya. Anyhow, the next day after Acharya Dhruba had come back from his dawn bath in the Ganga and entered his shrine to do homa (ritualistic oblations to the sacred fire), Janardan and his classmate surreptitiously entered his house and hid under the stairs of the shrine. Just as Acharya Dhruba came out after puja, they fell at his feet. Acharya Dhruba never thought of inquiring how they had come inside. He greeted them warm-heartedly. Janardan told that the classmate had done a grievous wrong by putting proxy and had been

expelled for ever by Prof. Puntam Baker. Acharya Dhruva endorsed Prof. Baker's action. Then Janardan beseeched on behalf of his fellow student that his life would go waste, etc., etc. At this Acharya Dhruva said that, "Okay, I am reducing the term to one year." Upon further pleading that the student had come from far away Assam, etc., etc., the Acharya reduced the sentence to one month, then one day, and finally on being told of the bad reputation that the student would earn, he cancelled the expelling warning the student not to repeat his action. Going to the University, Acharya Dhruva tore off the expel notice from the notice board and for one month thence, he was berated by Prof. Puntam Baker! As for the student from Jorhat, his fellow students advised him not to attend Puntam Baker's classes for one month at least, or else he would be beaten up!

Janardan while studying at Benaras, also took his parents there on a pilgrimage. He went on to pass his B.A. exams with Sanskrit and Philosophy and secured admission in the M.A. classes. But before he could sit for his final exams, he had to return home, for his father Jyogeshwar Acharya had taken ill and passed away soon after. After that he could not return to Benaras to appear for his final exams, but many took him to be a Masters degree holder. His mother Tirthada having passed away before, Janardan was forced to settle down by his elders.

Acharya Sir was adept at all kinds of work, be it cooking in the kitchen or performing the duties of a priest in a puja. When he was offered in marriage Padmapriya, the pampered daughter of the Mouzadar of Teok, who happened to be the youngest sister of Dhvani Kavi Binanda Chandra Baruah, he took upon himself the task of teaching her the household works right from cleaning fish to weaving. His relationship with his wife was a mentor-disciple relationship which was at the same time tender and gentle. He used to take his wife out to see films in cinema halls, his favourite film being "Do Aankhe Barah Haat." Guiding his wife in all important matters, he had promised his wife to explain to her the Vedas, Upanishads and other scriptures once he came home after retirement. But cancer prevented him from fulfilling his promise and he died just after retiring as Principal, Normal School (Teacher's Training School), Sootea. Decades later, at her deathbed, his wife's only complaint against her husband was that he had left her so early in life.

When Acharya Sir was at Dibrugarh, he used to after reading the newspapers which was delivered in the evening time only, get his children to come one by one starting from the youngest, and after reading the newspaper report to their mother the latest news. Acharya Sir used to jokingly say, "If you want to get first-class, study for one hour daily, and if you want to get second class, study for two hours daily!" He wanted his children to study with all concentration during the time they devoted to studies. He used to get up very early and wake up his children too by passing by the children's bedroom chanting sacred Sanskrit slokas (incantations), his *kharams* (wooden slippers) making a clattering sound. Generally on evenings, he used to gather his children on the inside verandah and tell them stories from Shakespeare, from the Classics like *Alice in Wonderland*, *Gulliver's Travels*, from Sanskrit texts like the *Hitopadesha* or *Nitishataka Sloka* or recount anecdotes of teachers at Benaras Hindu University like Pt. Madan Mohan Malaviya, Acharya Dhruva and others.

Janardan had a great sense of humour. It was believed in those days that crying "Narada, Narada" when a quarrel was going on increases the quarrel! However, it must be added here that Narada, the Divine bard, sage and mischief-maker always had a good end in mind and his mischief ultimately proves beneficial to all the parties concerned. So, for an ultimate happy outcome, Janardan Acharya used to clap his hands and cry out "Narada, Narada," when his neighbours used to quarrel! Acharya Sir used to often quote Benudhar Sharma's words that weighing the gravity of tasks at hand, one should not hesitate to even wash the feet of a goat!

Acharya Sir never accepted defeat in the struggle of life. In day-to-day affairs, he could accept defeat and victory both with equal ease. He worked tirelessly and did not care for the result. He used to quote from the *Gita* and advised his students that, one should treat happiness and unhappiness, victory and defeat equally. He also warned that we have the right only to work, but we have no right over the outcome.

Janardan Acharya was indeed an Acharya who was an ideal student, an ideal teacher and above all, he was an ideal human being.

An astrologer that he was, Janardan Acharya perhaps had premonition about his death. On 19 January of 1969, at 2 a.m. in the night, Acharya Sir's eventful life came to an end. Though he is no more, his ideals still continue to inspire many.

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The Tiny Lamp

The kind of birth we will have in the next life is determined by the nature of our actions in this one. And it is important never to forget that the effect of our actions depends entirely upon the intention or motivation behind them, and not upon their scale.

At the time of Buddha, there lived an old beggar woman called, "Relying on joy". She used to watch the kings, princes, and people making offerings to Buddha and his disciples, and there was nothing she would have liked more than to be able to do the same. So she went out begging, but at the end of a whole day all she had was one small coin. She took it to the oil-merchant to try to buy some oil. He told her that she could not possibly buy anything with so little. But when he heard that she wanted it to make an offering to Buddha, he took pity on her and gave her the oil she wanted. She took it to the monastery, where she lit a lamp. She placed it before Buddha, and made this wish: "I have nothing to offer but this tiny lamp. But through this offering, in the future may I be blessed with the lamp of wisdom. May I free all beings from their darkness. May I purify all their obscurations, and lead them to enlightenment."

That night the oil in all the other lamps went out. But the beggar woman's lamp was still burning at dawn, when Buddha's disciple Maudgalyayana came to collect all the lamps. When he saw that one was still alight, full of oil and with a new wick, he thought, "There's no reason why this lamp should still be burning in the daytime," and he tried to blow it out. But it kept on burning. He tried to snuff it out with his fingers, but it stayed alight. He tried to smother it with his robe, but still it burned on. The Buddha had been watching all along, and said, "Maudgalyayana, do you want to put out that lamp? You cannot. You could not even move it, let alone put it out. If you were to pour the water from all the oceans over this lamp, it still wouldn't go out. The water in all the rivers and lakes of the world could not extinguish it. Why not? Because this lamp was offered with devotion, and with purity of heart and mind. And that motivation has made it of tremendous benefit." When Buddha had said this, the beggar woman approached him, and he made a prophecy that in the future she would become a perfect buddha, called "Light of the Lamp."

So it is our motivation, good or bad, that determines the fruit of our actions. Shantideva said:

Whatever joy there is in this world
All comes from desiring others to be happy,
And whatever suffering there is in this world
All comes from desiring myself to be happy.

Extract from p.p. 97-98, Chapter VI of the book 'The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying' by Sogyal Rinpoche. 10th Anniversary Edition. Rider. 2002.