

Three Deaths*

Prabhat Patnaik

When one reaches a certain age, one has to steel oneself to the idea of hearing periodically the news of one's friends passing away. But when the passing of several friends gets concentrated within a very short span of time, when each of them has been a brilliant person whose loss the country, not just one personally, can ill-afford, and when their deaths, by modern-day standards, are pre-mature, then such news become difficult to bear. Three such outstanding individuals passed away in the course of the last six or seven weeks. I received the news of each passing with a shock; together they were overwhelming.

The first loss was of Arup Mullick, an outstanding economist and a brilliant teacher who had been for long a Professor at Calcutta University, influenced several generations of students, and contributed greatly to upholding the high academic standards of that university. Arup was undoubtedly, in my view, the clearest thinking economist of my generation. Not a person who wrote a great deal, he had a razor-sharp intellect that could dissect and assess the academic work of others with great acuity. I recollect one telling incident on this.

It must have been 1978 or thereabouts. A seminar was being held at the Centre for the Study of Social Sciences, Calcutta, on Indian industry, at which I was presenting a paper with Arup as the discussant. Seminars in Kolkata those days, unlike what I find now, used to draw the entire galaxy of academics of the city belonging not just to the concerned discipline, but even to kindred disciplines. So, the hall was packed with great minds, and I, then a young man, was naturally quite nervous. At the end of my presentation I could clearly see that I had not succeeded in making myself intelligible to anyone in the audience. In fact the overwhelming feeling in the audience was that I had made some elementary logical errors and had generally made a fool of myself.

It was at that point that Arup as the discussant spoke. Before making any critical comments, he presented, as is customary, the gist of my paper. He did it so beautifully that literally everybody came to see what I was trying to argue. Immediately after Arup had spoken we broke for tea, and during the break the pervasive talk was about how great Arup's paper had been. I must confess that my relief and gratitude at having my paper explained to the audience, and being saved from the ignominy of being labeled an utterly confused person, was not unmixed with a certain chagrin that Arup was being applauded for his presentation of what after all had been my paper!

We have a situation in our country where formal, rigorous, and sui generis analysis (as opposed to models borrowed from the IMF and the World Bank), as the basis for economic policy discussions, is fast disappearing. Policy discussions are getting to be analytically uninformed, while whatever rigorous analysis gets undertaken is increasingly in the nature of arid formalism. In this context, Arup's loss to our intellectual life is enormous.

The second loss was of Basudev Chatterji, affectionately called Robi by everyone, who was a brilliant historian, a Professor at Delhi University, an inspiring teacher, and at one time the Chairman of the Indian Council of Historical Research. I had first met Robi when he had come to Cambridge to do his Ph.D. and I was a junior member

of the economics faculty there. He was some years my junior, and even though we had both studied at the same college in Delhi (St. Stephen's), I had no recollection of him from college days. A skilled sitar player, having been trained by Pandit Uma Shankar Mishra, himself a disciple of Pandit Ravi Shankar, Robi was an utterly idiosyncratic character, and absolutely lovable.

He was iconoclastic but without a trace of malice; and had a wry and impish sense of humour that spared no one but was totally innocent. He was wholly committed to academic values and had a deep sense of respect for anyone who did serious academic work. He was a non-conformist who hated pretentiousness and cant, and poked fun at the establishment. While his being appointed Chairman of the ICHR was surprising for this reason (and indicates the respect in which he was held by the few cognoscenti among the decision-makers within the government of that time), his conduct as Chairman, as one would expect, was completely free from any trace of officiousness, self-importance or arrogance. He remained the same old irreverent Robi even as Chairman of ICHR, without, however, in any way being slack in the performance of his duties. To say that Robi was free of any kind of opportunism would be an understatement: indeed, let alone pushing himself forward, he even lacked to a remarkable extent any instinct for self-preservation.

His academic work was formidable. His doctoral dissertation at Cambridge, published as *Trade, Tariffs and Empire: Lancashire and British Policy in India 1919-1939*, was a landmark in the history of colonialism. He was also the editor of one of the volumes of the 10-volume *Towards Freedom* project, which was initiated under the general editorship of Sarvepalli Gopal as an intellectual counter to the *Transfer of Power* volumes brought out from Britain after the documents of the period became public. Robi, if I am not mistaken, was the youngest of the editors, a tribute to the respect he commanded among historians.

It was typical of Robi that after relinquishing his position as the Chairman of ICHR he went and settled down in distant Guwahati, a city with which he had had no earlier ties, and led a rather reclusive life. He quietly passed away there, without even consenting to come to Delhi for treatment despite his family's urgings.

The third friend I have lost recently is Nirupam Sen who passed away on July 2 in Delhi. Nirupam was two years my junior at St. Stephen's, and even as an undergraduate had acquired a formidable reputation for his intellect and erudition. For some unfathomable reason he did not become an academic but went into the foreign service instead. He was, when the world capitalist crisis began in 2008, India's Permanent Representative at the United Nations, and, along with the President of the General Assembly at that time, Father Miguel Brockman from Nicaragua, keen to have the UN play a leading role in fashioning a new world order that they both thought should emerge out of the crisis. As Brockman put it, instead of the G-7, or the G-20, it should be the G-192, that is the entire membership of the UN, which should decide on the new world order. The idea needless to say was scuttled at US initiative and the world was back to having a few dictating terms to all, which Nirupam, an ardent anti-imperialist and champion of the non-aligned movement, had been strongly opposed to.

Nirupam carried forward his formidable knowledge and intellect to the task of diplomacy, and with his anti-imperialist views, was held in very high esteem by

delegates from other third world countries, especially those from Africa and Latin America.

I observed this myself when I was a part of a four-member group which included Joseph Stiglitz and which was invited by Father Brockman to address the General Assembly on what was needed to be done in the wake of the crisis. After we had spoken, the delegates were supposed to respond to our remarks, and Nirupam naturally spoke on behalf of India. He made a characteristically learned and profound speech, invoking even concepts like Keynes' "liquidity trap", though he was not a student of economics. At least half a dozen third world delegates who spoke after him, began their speeches with the remark: "After the Indian delegate has spoken, it is unnecessary for me to say anything more".

After retirement, Nirupam came back to settle down in Delhi and was a regular presence at all gatherings of the Left and progressive intelligentsia, especially at events organized by the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (Sahmat). His intellect, his absolute honesty, his commitment to democracy and the cause of building a humane society, were an enormous source of inspiration to everybody actively engaged in the struggle against communal-fascism at this difficult juncture in our nation's life.

He would occasionally telephone me and we would have long conversations, discussing anything from an Opinion piece in The Telegraph, to the latest issue of Frontline, to major events of the time like the Gaza Blockade, or Brexit, or the election of Donald Trump. These conversations helped me greatly in forming my opinions. I shall alas no longer get those telephone calls.

*** This article was originally published in the Telegraph: July 12, 2017.**