

## **BIPAN CHANDRA (1928-2014): A tribute**

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I did not have the privilege of knowing Prof Bipan Chandra, the pre-eminent historian of modern India and a leading public intellectual, who passed away on Saturday, 30<sup>th</sup> August 2014 as a friend, colleague or student. I was however introduced to his work during my years of studentship, beginning in the mid-1980s, at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning of the School of Social Sciences at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. Over the years as a part of my own research agenda became more inter-disciplinary, I have had occasion to read and re-read some of his oeuvre and have, as always, been struck by the depth of his scholarship and the meticulousness of the argument. It did not matter whether one agreed or disagreed with him. One always had to contend with him.

### **The Indian Economy in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: de-industrialisation and stagnation**

In my MA programme in economics at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning we had a compulsory paper in economic history as a part of which we were taught the Indian economy's evolution during the colonial period. As a part of this we were introduced to the debate around the de-industrialisation and economic stagnation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian economy. The debate itself has a long and hoary lineage and is an important part of the narrative of India's struggle for independence. However the more recent incarnation of that debate started with the publication of Morris D Morris's 'Towards a Reinterpretation of Nineteenth Century Indian Economic History' (*Journal of Economic History*, Vol. XXIII, No.4, 1963, pp 606-18). This paper was reprinted (pp1-25) in the March 1968 issue of Vol. 5 of the *Indian Economic and Social History Review* alongside three critiques: Toru Matsui's 'On the Nineteenth-Century Indian Economic History-A Review of A "Reinterpretation"' (pp17-33); Bipan Chandra's 'Reinterpretation of Nineteenth Century Indian Economic History' (pp35-75); and Tapan Raychaudhuri's 'A Re-interpretation of Nineteenth Century Indian Economic History?' (pp77-100). Morris responded (pp319-388) in the December 1968 issue of the same journal with an article 'Trends and Tendencies in Indian Economic History'. [It is a mark both of its importance and quality, that the entire debate was re-published in 1969 by the Indian Economic and Social History Association in a single volume titled '*Indian Economy in the Nineteenth Century: A Symposium*']

Whereas all contributions are intellectually stimulating and the entire debate sparked by Morris's initial contribution is worth reading and re-reading, Bipan Chandra's magisterial, sophisticated and detailed refutation of Morris's argument has remained with me, perhaps because of my own predilections with structure of and change in the Indian economy.

Bipan Chandra began by interrogating the word 'reinterpretation' in the title of Morris's initial paper and argued that "Morris is not presenting a new interpretation of nineteenth century economic history but only rearticulating with a bit more of modern economic terminology ..... the nineteenth century imperialist approach which underlies most of British official and unofficial writing of the time" (p40).<sup>i</sup>

He then went on to argue that Morris's focus on output (national income) growth as a measure of economic performance was much too narrow because "[h]e does not discuss any aspect of economic structure as it developed during the nineteenth century or the relationship of the structural changes to the process of actual economic development." (p42)

Therefore, he argued, Morris is unable to address the issue of why India was so backward in 1947 unlike other contemporary latecomers to development such as USA, France, Germany, Canada, Italy, Russia and Japan. And this despite what Morris himself characterises as initial conditions that were relatively propitious.

Elsewhere in the paper he critiqued Morris's method: "Similarly it may be noted that infant mortality and death rate decreased and average life expectancy went up precisely in this period when every other index of individual prosperity was minus. All this exercise in demography etc. has been necessary to show that 'simple economic tools' are neither as efficient nor is their application as easy as Morris implies". (p47)

He argued that if all available evidence was marshalled and analysed in its entirety rather than the narrow lens used by Morris then facts adduced by the latter would yield alternate interpretations: "In view of the fact that the peasant was losing land and becoming a rack-rented tenant ... one would look for an explanation both for increase in acreage and for increase in productivity, if any, to the second factor [intensification of labour input per acre] which can be explained only by the increasing pressure on land ... But then increase in food supply becomes not the cause of population increase ... but rather ... response of people to meet population increase and the pressure on land. It then becomes an aspect of a stagnant economy" (p53) (square bracketed contents inserted and not part of quotation)

In refuting Morris, in my view, Bipan Chandra made two important points: first that the stagnation itself was structural and it was a structure in which British imperialism was directly implicated. As he (Bipan Chandra) noted: "Moreover ... this increase in agricultural production was a reflection of the British desire to make India an agrarian hinterland of Britain so that India could ... supply its raw materials and food needs as well as act as a market for her industrial products and capital. After all it is no part of imperialist economic interests to produce all round stagnation, though that might be the indirect consequence of their policies". (p53)

The second was that it is under British colonialism that the land-human (or what some might call the land-man) ratio significantly worsened. And that the de-industrialisation that the Indian economy witnessed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century had an important role to play in that worsening. As he noted there was sufficient evidence to establish the following: "Increasing ruin of urban handicrafts .... A major blow given to spinning as an economic activity. This had an important effect on domestic economy of the peasant with many-sided consequences ... [r]ural artisans were gradually affected ... This forced an increasing number to leave their crafts ... to bid for land as tenants-at-will or share-croppers." (p59)

One consequence of the worsening land-human ratio was that in 1947 at the time of independence the Indian economy was structurally distorted, with agriculture accounting for 50% of GDP but almost 80% of the employed labour force. And it is not a handicap that the economy has been able to shake off. Of course the fact that economic growth in post-

independence India has not been labour-absorbing is not the fault of British colonialism. It has to do with the nature of our bourgeoisie and, barring a few conjunctures, its hold on the state apparatus. It is the same bourgeoisie whose role in the anti-imperialist freedom struggle Bipan Chandra's work has celebrated but which today stands firmly on the side of reaction and has ensured that the fruits of economic growth have been unequally shared, economically marginalising the Dalit, the Adivasi, the Muslim. Politically however it has been another matter and that still might be our salvation. But that is another matter for another day.

Returning to Bipan Chandra's response, he therefore argued that despite the shattering of medieval India's feudal structure by British colonisation and the introduction of technological and organizational innovations, India experienced an "aborted modernization" (p62) because "[B]ritish rule was imperialistic. Its basic character – its *raison d'être* – was to subserve Indian interests to British interests". (p67)

That "British rule ... having helped initiate economic change ... rapidly became a fetter on industrial and agricultural growth because it created a colonial economy and a "semi-feudal" agriculture; that economic policies of the British raj in all fields ... were geared to the preservation of the colonial economy". (p71)

In closing his arguments against Morris he therefore argued that "The traditional anti-imperialist position will be modified – as it deserves to be ... But ... basic view that British rule, by making India's a colonial economy, was responsible for India's economic backwardness is not likely to be modified at all". (p73) And he was right. At least as far as the current state of play goes. Much water has flown under that bridge since and our understanding of the impact of colonisation on the Indian economy is considerably more nuanced than when Bipan Chandra wrote those lines, but that "basic view of British rule" has withstood the tests of both revision and time.

This article of Bipan Chandra in particular and the debate with Morris in general was very influential and sparked off a huge amount of scholarship that has shaped and continues to shape our understanding of the Indian economy during the colonial period. As Irfan Habib, himself an important contributor to the subsequent debate, said in an [obituary](#) he wrote "This was a very influential piece, and, speaking for myself, I can say that for all my modest studies of nineteenth-century Indian economic history, this was the original source of inspiration."

### **Retrogressive Structural Change: colonialism and imperialism**

The central proposition of the 1968 paper -that British imperialism and its colonisation of India structurally transformed India's economy and society in ways that were harmful to its (India's) long-term growth potential - was fleshed out more fully, both theoretically and empirically, in his presidential address – titled 'Colonialism and Modernisation' – to the 32<sup>nd</sup> session of the Modern Indian History Section of the Indian History Congress held in December 1970.

In that address<sup>ii</sup> he argued that "India of 1947 was not pre-capitalist or traditional or dualistic. It is a historical fallacy to assume that India under British rule did not undergo a fundamental transformation, or that it remained basically traditional." (pp2-3). Quite the contrary, "[i]t diverts attention from , the structural changes that imperialism brought about, the new network of institutions and factors that emerged, the obstacles to growth that were essentially

the products of India's integration with world capitalism and not of government policy, which were brought through policy but which could stand without it" (pp22-23).

Again and again he insisted that colonialism was not a matter of merely of policy even though it was an important constituent of that phenomena. Colonialism above all was a structural phenomenon resulting in "[t]he complete but complex integration and enmeshing of India's economy and society with world capitalism ... The essence of India's underdevelopment ... lay ... in the nature of its 'contacts' with the world capitalist economy through trade and capital ... Colonial policy was responsible ... for making it a full though unequal member of the 'international economy'" (p25). And because this integration was structured to serve British interests rather than Indian well-being, he argued finally that "We have therefore to view the same system of imperial-colonialism in the form of two separate entities, one in the colony and the other in the metropolis". Therefore because change propagated by colonialism was institutional and meant to sub-serve British imperialism changes were also structural affecting long-run economic potential and offered a critique very different from the liberal understanding of the phenomenon. Little wonder then that Prabhat Patnaik in his [tribute](#) to Bipan Chandra describes him as "an outstanding historian ... and an indomitable fighter in the cause of secular anti-imperialism."

As an academic Bipan Chandra was not shy of revisiting his positions and revising them. Indeed in the December 1970 sectional presidential address he had argued that given the structural characteristics of colonialism and its links with imperialism it might not be possible for India to chart an independent path unless it broke with world capitalism ("the way out does not lie in integration with the same world capitalism" (p28)). But as Sabyasachi Bhattacharya notes in his [obituary](#) by 1989 Bipan Chandra had re-assessed his position largely as a result of moving away from an explicitly Marxist framework of analysis. In his 1989 paper '*Colonial Rule, Transformation from a Colonial to an Independent Economy: A Case Study of India*', Bipan Chandra argued that despite being a former colony, it was possible for India to achieve a capitalist and independent trajectory of growth.

Similarly, as another example of revising a position, his assessment of Nehru changes substantially between 1975 ('[Jawaharlal Nehru and the Capitalist Class, 1936](#)' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol X, Nos 33-35, August 6, 1975, pp1307-1324) and 1990 ('*Jawaharlal Nehru in Historical Perspective*', DD Kosambi Memorial Lectures, Department of History, University of Bombay, Bombay, 1990). In the former he held that Nehru became effectively a tool of the nationalist bourgeoisie. As Sabyasachi Bhattacharya notes in his obituary, in the latter Bipan Chandra explicitly states that in hindsight he (Chandra) was unfairly harsh in his criticism of Nehru who was following, given an overarching vision of an independent India, a Gandhian strategy of choosing a feasible path given constraints. I guess the nub lies in the *ex-ante* identification of binding constraints and what might have been done to loosen if not overcome them. Be that as it may, Bipan Chandra's revision of his own work suggests a non-dogmatic approach to history and historiography. It is therefore all the more important to note that he did not feel the need to re-visit his characterisation of India's colonial experience.

### **Agrarian differentiation and the question of the peasantry**

The last paper of Bipan Chandra that I would like draw attention to is 'Peasantry and National Integration'<sup>iii</sup> (*Social Scientist*, Vol. 5. No. 50, September 1976, pp. 3-29). I actually

read this paper relatively recently because as a part of my research on structure and change of the Indian economy has been a preoccupation with the return of the land question and the associated debate around the peasantry. The paper deals with the impact of colonialism on agrarian class structures, peasant differentiation and associated patterns of accumulation before and after independence. It also discusses how this differentiation influenced political choices in pre- and post-independence India. Again what impressed me was how closely argued, empirically rich and insightful his analysis was.

He argued that in colonial India, as a combined result of de-industrialisation and agrarian stagnation, “The ranks of landless agricultural labourers was swelled by disinherited peasants, ruined artisans and growth of population not absorbed by modern ... sectors ... [a]gricultural labourers constituted a new social class of rural proletarians which was increasingly becoming distinct from the land holding peasantry ... The dwarf holder and the landless labourer ... were not only the poorest and the most exploited but objectively there problems could not be solved by any reform of the agrarian system” (p8). He went on to observe that the need to foster capitalist agriculture in a manner that was not politically destabilising (and infeasible) meant post-independence the Congress Party and the Government of India adopted the policy of “replacing landlordism by rich and middle peasants while keeping the small, subsistence farmer ... intact so that there was no proletarianization and disintegration of the peasantry” (p10).

As a result, even though very little land was redistributed as a part of this bargain, “capitalism in agriculture has been strengthened without dispossession of the small cultivator and without further concentration of land ... [a]fter the initial process of eviction of the 1950s, no significant dispossession of the small peasant seems to be occurring” (p12). And he is broadly right though some tenancy went underground and the existence of reverse tenancy<sup>iv</sup> suggests that one has to distinguish *de jure* and *de facto* outcomes. But the decision of the Congress Party to foster agrarian capitalism while maintaining the small farmer has had unanticipated outcomes that he (Bipan Chandra) did not foresee: his celebrated bourgeoisie in its hurry to become global players visited an agrarian crisis of unprecedented proportions on Indian agriculture the brunt of which has been borne by middle and small farmers, swelling the ranks of the small and marginal peasantry; and who despite their pauperisation are unwilling to sell land when the urban bourgeoisie wants it the most, largely because of the other problem the same bourgeoisie has created - non-labour absorbing growth.

So the bourgeoisie is firmly ensconced and in the saddle (and in tow is a raucous upper caste middle-class that feels that its moment in the sun has come) and yet the central question that Bipan Chandra poses in that paper could as well as be posed today: “[a]re these 48% per cent proletarians and semi-proletarians along with 34% small and medium peasants or rural petty bourgeoisie to constitute the nation, or are they in the name of national integration, to wait for decades outside the pale of society till capitalism develops sufficiently to reintegrate them into the ‘nation’?” (p14). And yet again it is politics that might rescue us. It (politics) has panned out in ways that the bourgeoisie had not anticipated and might give resolutions to that question that might surprise us. And if it does then we can trace its lineage back to the long series of peasant contestations that began well before the independence movement but also

shaped it and its outcomes in important ways; a movement of whose emancipatory content as Prabhat Patnaik has noted Bipan Chandra was an ardent believer.

And Bipan Chandra believed that its emancipatory content came from its all-encompassing and inclusive character with Gandhi as its spearhead. As he said in [an interview](#) to mark the completion of the tenth volume of the series on Modern Indian History that he co-edited for Sage Publications, “Overall this series shows that the Indian national movement needs to be studied as a mass movement. The colonial view is that it was a movement of the elites. The subalterns say that the people's movement was different from the national movement. Our understanding is that the national movement accommodated different points of view. Warts and all, it was a broad-based, mass movement with many ideological strands. However, these strands also occasionally clashed with each other”. And as he noted in the same interview on the relevance of Gandhi “I believe that Marx was the greatest thinker of modern times. Because he was able to analyse the weakness of capitalist society ... But the big question is: how to change the society. Gandhi was able to evolve a way of organising and mobilising people for change. He is a theoretician on how to bring about social change. That is why Gandhi is more relevant than Marx today.” Fittingly his last collection of essays was titled ‘The Writings of Bipan Chandra: The Making of Modern India – from Marx to Gandhi’ (Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2012). Other than the national movement and the making of modern India, another important strand in his work was the critique of communalisation in the writing of Indian history.

I am not an historian and therefore cannot comment on much of Bipan Chandra’s work. Let me end therefore with the words of Romila Thapar, fellow historian, friend and long-time colleague. These are taken from [comments](#) she made at the memorial meeting for Bipan Chandra held on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2014 at the Teen Murti Memorial Library, New Delhi.

“[t]wo seminal ideas from many of these discussions that stay in my mind: first of all the need to recognise that there were colonial interpretations of Indian history which had links with colonial policy and that they influence the entire interpretation of history .... the whole approach to Indian history was influenced by this; and the second thing, ... an important aspect of this was communal history which was really geared on these communal interpretations and it was therefore necessary to re-examine these interpretations and where we thought there were weaknesses – and we thought there were lots of weaknesses – to show them up.” (from 6.19mins onwards)

“[m]any of us both inside JNU and .... in some other universities during the 1970s and the 1980s made the study of history into a discipline which had considerable intellectual strength and relevance to the understanding of Indian society .... Now we have today of course ... detractors who are trying their best to convert history once again to meaningless information and mythology. It is now likely that this will not succeed and that history will remain valid, firm and intellectually viable and relevant to Indian society. And if it remains that way as it I am sure it will in the long run possibly after many battles that will have to be fought I think then the credit goes entirely to historians such as Bipan” (from 13.35mins onwards)

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<sup>i</sup> Bipan Chandra's response to Morris was reprinted (pp38-81) in a collection of his essays and journal articles titled '*Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*', 1979, Orient Longman: New Delhi. Page references are to that volume.

<sup>ii</sup> The address was also reprinted (pp1-37) in the collection titled '*Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*', 1979, Orient Longman: New Delhi. Page references are to that volume.

<sup>iii</sup> A more annotated version of this article, titled 'Peasantry and National Integration in Contemporary India' was reprinted (pp328-367) in '*Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*', 1979, Orient Longman: New Delhi.

<sup>iv</sup> A small or marginal peasant leasing out land on a rental contract to a large farmer.