

# **The Compleat Economist - Nirmal Kumar Chandra (1936-2014)**

**Ashok Mitra**

I have always been bothered, if not baffled, by the expression, 'economist's economist'. Once you claim to be an economist you become a member of the collective profession. Such members confer and share views and ideas among themselves, often spend time whispering salacious gossip about colleagues — such as how this or that colleague has stolen ideas from, or carried stories against, others to build their reputation.

I had, of course, heard of Piero Sraffa, the economist resident at Cambridge, a legend in his lifetime in every sense, who would rarely write but whose incisive mind was always at the disposal of other economists, and who could straightaway draw the attention of the seekers after truth to where the flaw in their approach or argument lay, or which of their data was somewhat wobbly and how the overall presentation could be restructured to turn it into a creative contribution. I had never met Sraffa, but was told he was never intimidating and distributed his favours with a calm, quiet generosity to all callers. But Sraffa sort of forfeited his credentials when *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities* made its appearance in the early 1960s. It became an instant classic and made nonsense of his identity as an economist's economist; he was a first-rank economist by his own right, and that was that.

My scepticism withered away only when I met Nirmal Chandra for the first time in 1965 on his return from Europe after ten long years there. He had proceeded to Europe immediately after graduating from Calcutta's Presidency College, and was immersed in what in his view was an adventure in intellectual pursuits. Or perhaps he wanted to tear himself away from his family moorings.

He was born to money. At one point, in the early decades of the last century, his family was reputed to be one of the richest in Calcutta, as formidable claimants of prize real estates. Nirmal was born with an innate sense of rationality, which could instinctively ferret out the superior from the inferior — and distinguish the exploited and under-privileged from those who terrorized and tormented them. He had felt no scruples in availing himself of the family's wealth to finance his intellectual sojourns in Europe; perhaps he rationalized it as the use of ill-gotten assets for a just cause.

He had stints at universities in London, Warsaw and Paris. With an easy flair for picking up languages, he read essential classics in the original at all the three seats of academia, listened to discourses and participated in substantive polemics with felicity and comfort. It took him hardly a couple of years in England before he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain as a card-carrying member. His political beliefs underwent variations in nuance over the next five decades, but the core of his convictions remained unshakably firm. He broke with the CPGB sometime in the early 1960s; he was peeved beyond measure at the British party's squeamish support of Moscow during the great ideological debate in the vast communist firmament. But Nirmal's ideological convictions did not interfere in any manner with his steady, but most remarkable, maturing into a full-fledged, well-honed, technically impeccable economist. His exposure to different schools of thought at London, Paris and Warsaw certainly helped, but what explains his emergence as one of the sounder of the Indian economists of his generation was his intuitive ability to separate the rational from the irrational and otiose.

Those cities — and the countries they happened to be capitals of — had each its distinct political and literary culture and social mores. They encapsulated the history and evolution of European civilization. The dominant themes in economics at each place had its own history, analytical infrastructure and preferred way of approaching economic phenomenon, or, for the matter, of deciding what should constitute a genuine economic phenomenon. What, and how much of it, Nirmal accepted and assimilated for developing his own edifice of economics would be issues best left to the subjective judgement of any outsider, and perhaps even to himself. But the least that can be said, and that should be enough, was that by the time he said goodbye to Europe, he was the Compleat Economist.

What was intriguing, or perhaps not so at all, was that he never took the subject altogether seriously or was abjectly obsessed by it. This attitude is altogether understandable even if he remained the economist's economist. For he could never drive away from his mind the notion of economics, despite its recent waywardness and entrapment by soulless kidnappers, as a mere mode of learning and the wisdom it beamed was derivative; it is so altogether dependant, at a particular point of time, on the on-going churning of the social and political processes. This awareness must have been at the root of his aversion to sitting down and writing for his contemporaries and posterity much economics stuff. He had plenty of private means, he hated newspaper eminences, therefore he had no need to join the vulgar rat race.

Nirmal chanced upon a job opportunity, which did not exactly match his preference schedule since it took in bright young men and women and trained them in the obscene art of making money and even more money not just for themselves, but for any and everybody in society with an eye for the main chance. It nonetheless offered one advantage: it let Nirmal to be left to himself once the minimum academic chores were done. Nirmal had its own little niche in that sickeningly grisly place breathing opportunism, he had his personal computer, and another one at home, and the wide array of his wisdom and intellectual equipment at his disposal.

It was the circle of his friends and close admirers that was the beneficiary. Once the economist's economist was in an expansive mood, they would be enriched by quite a windfall. It was boon time for those he favoured and allowed entry into his private, very private, circle. They would present as briefly as they could the problem they were grappling with, the preliminary hypothesis they had built, the analytical tools they had applied, the data they had assembled, the statistical technique they had availed themselves of, the tentative conclusions they had reached, and the final hypotheses they proposed to present. On each issue, Nirmal would quickly locate the central point of deficiency in the whole exercise that might relate to the formulation of the hypothesis being tested or even the particular technique of statistical analysis, or to the specific weakness of the economic rationale underlying the overall research venture, or the final set of conclusions that were sought to be established. Nirmal was no destroying demon. On each point of his felt uneasiness, he would be generous with alternative suggestions so that a substantial part of the toil and talent that had been put in already did not go waste.

The economist's economist would know fairly well where his role ended. With the economic stock of knowledge and wisdom and such depth of appreciation of realities unfolding around the world, Nirmal had a whole lot of things to say, for example, about a particular development taking place in China or Latin America or Western Europe or post-Putin Russia that would be a major contribution to economic discussion. As a rule, he would not budge. On the rare occasions when he would, he would follow an extraordinary routine. For ten days or a fortnight, he would shut himself up in his residence and cut himself off from the

world. He would live with the theme, concentrate on the analysis, collate the data, alter the draft of a paragraph a number of times if it had yet to attain perfection and put down his conclusions with care and deliberation, sometimes taking a full day to compose it when it would fully satisfy him. And once the completed text was done and mailed to the Economic and Political Weekly, he would totally forget the episode as if it were a closed chapter or a particular folly, a speck in his obscure past.

For Nirmal loved parties, especially when it has emerged from an emotional or intellectual experience that has taken a lot out of him. But there it was, he was particular, most particular, with the crowd he was participating in at the party. He was exceedingly selective in his choice of friends, and this finicky insistence on whom to pass time with influenced the mix of people at the parties he deigned to attend. At one moment, he was full of mirth and at his wittiest, the very next moment he withdrew into a monosyllabic sulk, for there was an intruder whose relative crudeness he detested from the bottom of his heart. There was always an inner reserve. He was as choosy with his food as he was with friends. His political beliefs, formed in early youth, remained unwaveringly the same through the rest of his life, although they too went through mutations, which, however, left the core of faith unscarred. He would still not shout his beliefs from the rooftop, but he was never to be seen straying even accidentally with the wrong ideological crowd.

Having wasted this much space on how I assess Nirmal, the structure of his mind and his civilization, I suddenly realize that what I have said till now is worth nothing. For the outstanding attribute of his nature was, no question, the quality of affection he chose to bestow on those whom he liked. His affection was not a free gift; it was not available to each and all. As with everything else in his daily perambulations, he was extremely selective on whom he would shower his affection. Those fortunate would be made aware that, however adverse the circumstances they were facing at a particular moment, there was nothing to grieve over or regret about, Nirmal was there, waiting for them with his quiet reservoir of affection, the specificity of that affection was beyond description; it was not loud or voluble, it was not transparently effusive, but it was as deep as it could be, its silent aura would be magically reviving for the most distressed soul. This is my complaint against Nirmal. His affection persuaded me to plod on even when I have no further expectation from society nor anything more to offer to it. I live on, for Nirmal wanted me to. He had no business to desert me so suddenly at this stage.

When Nirmal died on March 19, the country lost one of its very best economists. It did not know it though. I did not know it because the media made no mention of his passing. Nirmal preferred it that way. This piece I am writing, he would have considered a breach of trust on my part. I seek your forgiveness, Nirmal. I had to do this, for my conscience would have given me no peace otherwise.

*\* This was originally published in The Telegraph on 4th April, 2014.*