

Nirmal Kumar Chandra

Prabhat Patnaik

There was something unreal about Nirmal Kumar Chandra the renowned economist who passed away on March 19. Totally free of any malice, totally devoid of any pettiness, and totally free of any desire to get into the limelight, indeed of any parvenu quality whatsoever, he was the sort of person one often reads about in fiction but scarcely meets in real life.

This unreality also extended to the remarkable contrasts in his personality. An intensely private person, he was nonetheless extremely generous and sociable, and loved an adda; extraordinarily helpful to students he was nonetheless meticulous and exacting in the standards he demanded in their work; utterly gentle and likeable in his manners, he was nonetheless a strict, unwavering and life-long adherent of the Left ideology; a staunch Marxist, he nonetheless spent all his life teaching at the Indian Institute of Management at Kolkata and even nurtured an institutional loyalty towards it.

This unreality is probably explained by the fact that he came from a remarkably affluent family of gold merchants, rumored to have been one of the four richest families of Kolkata a century ago, and rebelled against his inherited weltanschauung. This is something which was not unusual in the pre-independence period in eastern India: many scions of zamindar families for instance had repudiated their inherited attitudes and wealth to become life-long followers of the Communist movement. Among them the name of Snehanu Kanta Acharya, scion of the Raja of Mymensingh, reputed to be the richest zamindar in undivided Bengal, who became a life-long Communist, and later the Advocate General of West Bengal under the Left Front government, comes readily to mind. Nirmal Kumar Chandra belonged to that list and would probably be among the last names on it.

His resistance began early. When he entered college, he took the decision that he would no longer subject himself to the rigid discipline and formalities of his home life to which he had been bound until then. Accordingly he returned home one night around 2 a.m., found his father waiting for him, and was directed to come home in future in time for dinner. The next night, he told me, he returned home at 4 a.m. The rebellion succeeded and from then on he was left free to do as he liked without being admonished.

He had his initial education at the Presidency College, Kolkata, where his exact contemporaries in the economics class were Amiya Bagchi and Sunanda Sen. He then went to the London School of Economics to pursue higher studies, and joined the Communist Party of Great Britain. Later when he relocated himself to Paris for his research work, he became a member of the Communist Party of France. But in the debate that arose within the Communist movement on the question of "Soviet revisionism" he was clearly on the Left, and remained so till the end, dissociating himself from all pro-Moscow Communist Parties.

I first met Nirmal Chandra in 1965, when he passed through Delhi while returning permanently to India from Europe, in the company of my teacher Sukhamoy Ganguly who was his friend from their days together in Poland. But our meetings were infrequent since I moved abroad in 1966. I recollect however being a participant at the seminar in London where he gave his magisterial paper "Western Imperialism and India Today"; and Utsa recollects one afternoon when he dropped into our house in Cambridge having had no lunch, and was served an omelette with toasts by her.

When we came back to India in 1973 our meetings with Nirmal Chandra were frequent. He was a close friend of Krishna Bharadwaj, had an interest in the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning since its inception, and would invariably spend time on the campus whenever he visited Delhi. It was during one such visit that we discovered his zest for life, which was immense, as was his love for adda. A group of us, consisting of four families, the Bagchis, the Bharadwajs, the (Sunanda) Sens, and the Patnaiks, along with Nirmal Chandra and my then JNU colleague S.K.Rao, were on our way by bus on a visit to Haridwar and Rishikesh. Even though it was night time, he would insist on getting down with S.K.Rao at every stop that the bus made, in order to taste whatever sweets were available in the shops located at the bus-stand. And it was not just sweets that he enjoyed; he was fond of partying late into the night, even during academic seminars, though this never diminished the liveliness of his participation the next day.

For him an adda was not an indulgence, something separate from the serious business of life; it was an act intimately linked to his intellectual praxis. Arguments and discussions for him did not just happen in seminars or other academic events; they happened above all in an adda where even research agendas, what needed to be “looked into”, were decided. And having made the decision that he must “look into” something, Nirmal Chandra would retreat into his study for days on end, emerging from it with a paper that was as detailed and erudite as it was definitive.

He did not write much in terms of the number of publications. But almost every paper he wrote was a very substantial contribution, the last word on the subject until that time. They were meticulously researched, extraordinarily erudite, very careful in assessing the statistics they used, and of course articulated a clear position. His paper “Western Imperialism and India Today” which I mentioned earlier was a milestone. His calculations about the control exercised by foreign capital over the Indian economy were path-breaking and generated a large literature. Whatever he wrote became a standard reference, as is evident from the set of papers of his on the long term growth of the Indian economy brought together in a volume published by the Sameeksha Trust. It is a volume of extraordinary richness and eminently worth possessing.

But Nirmal Chandra was by no means a prolific writer. Had he been so, the quality of his work would not have been of the same order. He not only took great pains over what he wrote, but also devoted much time to discussing and commenting on the work of his students, friends and associates. Ashok Mitra has called him “an economists’ economist”. His time was generously available to all. He spent long hours reading and thinking, chasing up obscure references and visiting libraries to look up specific things.

He was also a remarkably proficient linguist, a rare trait among Bengali intellectuals. He not only knew several languages, notably English, French, Polish, and Russian, apart from his native Bengali, but had actually a facility with languages. I remember when all of us were attending a World Congress of the Association of Third World Economists (an organisation with a short span of life alas) at Havana, on the very second day of our being there Nirmal Chandra was speaking to the waiters in the hotel in Spanish, a language he had been completely unfamiliar with earlier.

One did not always agree with Nirmal Chandra. I certainly found his insistence that burgeoning subsidies were the cause of the economic crisis of the East European socialist countries somewhat unconvincing. But he was somebody one could always turn to for intellectual guidance, for discussions, for testing one’s ideas. He was literally a dada to so many of us and we shall sorely miss him.