

The Indelible Bipan Chandra (1928-2014)

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Professor Bipan Chandra, a distinguished historian, legendary teacher and one of the leading intellectuals of recent times passed away at the age of 86 on 30 August 2014 after a prolonged illness. His death is deeply mourned by a large number of his students, admirers and friends both in India and abroad. He was born in 1928 at Kangra of the undivided Punjab, which is now a part of Himachal Pradesh. Bipan, as he was popularly known among his friends and admirers, completed school education at his hometown and later graduated from the famous Forman Christian College, Lahore. Afterwards, he went to Stanford University in the US and did Masters in History. Bipan worked for his Ph. D. at Delhi University under the supervision of Professor Bishashwar Prasad and was awarded a degree in 1959. Bipan began his teaching career by joining as lecturer at Hindu College, Delhi in early 1950s and after some years shifted as Reader to the Department of History at Delhi University. From there, he moved to the newly established Jawaharlal Nehru University as Professor in the early 1970s. It would not be wrong to say that Bipan and some of his other eminent colleagues such as S. Gopal, Romila Thapar and Satish Chandra were largely instrumental in making the Centre for Historical Studies of JNU a premier department for the teaching and research in history in the country. After his retirement, JNU honoured Bipan by appointing him as Professor Emeritus, which was clearly in recognition of his scholarship and also the distinct contributions made by him in the field of modern Indian history. Bipan was the General President of the Indian History Congress held at Amritsar in 1985. The UGC appointed him National Professor in 2007. He was also chairman of the prestigious National Book Trust from 2004 to 2012. In 2010, the Government of India conferred on Bipan the prestigious Padma Bhushan award for his contributions

in the field of literature and education. During his last days, Bipan, despite his failing health, remained engaged in historical research and tried his best to complete some of his unfinished projects.

Bipan taught history to several generations of students in his long teaching career of about 43 years. As a passionate and dedicated teacher, he was very popular among his students from the very beginning. In late 1960s, at Delhi University, the classes of two teachers, i.e., Bipan and his friend, Randhir Singh were always fully packed with students with some students from other departments invariably found standing in the corridors listening to their lectures. Bipan's former students at JNU also fondly recall how his lectures, which were always intellectually stimulating and rich in content, would often generate long and serious debates with him for hours. At times, he was found deeply engaged in discussions with his students at the cafeteria, and sometimes even at his residence till the late hours of night. Bipan's primary concern as a teacher was to always shape the thinking process of his students, which could help them to reflect upon and understand historical reality in a correct and scientific manner. However, he never imposed his own opinions upon his students and always gave them the freedom to maintain their own viewpoint on issues of historical debates. Indeed, Bipan was truly a legendary teacher.

Bipan spent about fifty years or so of his life doing research in historical studies. During this period, he wrote 15 books and a large number of articles on a wide range of themes broadly related to modern Indian history. But before going to Bipan's contributions as a historian, it is worth recalling how he grew to be one of the leading Marxist historians of the country. To begin with, it seems that some of Bipan's ideas during the formative stages were evolved as an undergraduate student at Lahore, which needless to say, was intellectually a very vibrant centre in the whole of north India in pre-Independence times. Later, at Stanford, he became seriously engaged in

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the study of Marxist philosophy and pursued it with all seriousness for the rest of his life. Bipan, in a conversation with me, shared that after his return from the USA, he used to travel frequently from his hometown to Shimla in search of Marxist literature at the Dwarka Das Library which, after the Partition had shifted there from Lahore. Later in Delhi, he developed a strong bond with some contemporary Marxists and also organised a Marxist Study circle which was attended by some likeminded intellectuals and activists of Delhi University. Bipan was also a member of the undivided Communist Party of India for a short period of time. During those days, Bipan started a journal called *Enquiry* which carried serious debates on a variety of issues broadly relevant from a left perspective. In particular, the essays published in *Enquiry* by some of the leading historians such as Irfan Habib and others made a major contribution to the growth of Marxist historiography in the country. It is important to note that Bipan did not approach Marx or Marxism as a dogmatic believer. This was quite evident from one of his seminal essays in which he forcefully argued that Marx's analysis of colonialism was not sufficiently adequate for comprehending the complexities of British Imperialism in India. Moreover, Bipan in his later writings also expressed his disagreement with traditional Marxist historian R.P. Dutt, who believed that the struggle against British rule in India was essentially a movement of nationalist bourgeoisie. However, what was important, was the fact, that Bipan remained essentially a firm believer of Marxism as a tool for interpreting history.

It is well known that Bipan wrote extensively on different aspects of the Indian national movement with authority and passion. The foremost among them was his doctoral work entitled 'Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India', which was published in 1966. Based on massive empirical data, this path breaking study of the economic ideas of early Indian nationalists from 1880 to 1905 was superbly rich in content as well as theoretical perspective. Bipan convincingly argued that the early nationalists were serious minded intellectuals having deep concern for the Indian nation and were not mendicants or petitioners, as they were described by some contemporaries as well as later writers. His study established in a comprehensive manner that these nationalists, largely through their writings and speeches, made a powerful critique of the economic policies followed by the British as a colonial power, which resulted in long term poverty of India as a subordinate country. In other words, Bipan's study, written with a broad Marxian approach, underlined that the early nationalists not only deciphered the exploitative character of colonial rule, but also clearly underscored the contradictions that existed

between the British metropolis and the Indian people, irrespective of class, caste and regional differentiations. Therefore, according to Bipan, nationalism in India was not a cultural phenomenon or just an "imagination", but "basically a product of central or primary contradiction of colonial India, the contradiction between colonialism and the interest of the Indian people."

In 1985, Bipan wrote a long essay titled, "The Long Term Dynamics: Gandhiji and Indian National Movement", which he delivered as Presidential Address at the Indian History Congress, that was later incarnated also as a monograph. In this essay, he offered a fresh interpretation of the national movement, which appeared to many, a major shift in his position as a Marxist historian. So far, Bipan, like a number of orthodox Marxists, had maintained that the Congress leadership, despite their anti-imperialist perspective, were not able to come out of bourgeois constraints and therefore failed to give a radical character to the struggle against the British, both in form and content. This perspective, as Bipan believed at that time, was best reflected in P-C-P (pressure-compromise-pressure) strategy followed by the Congress under the leadership of Gandhi. In the early 1980s, Bipan, along with his team of scholars from JNU, carried out intensive research on the subject especially by interviewing about 3000 persons all over the country who were in the past associated with the Gandhian movement in one way or the other. On the basis of this extensive research, and also keeping in mind Antonio Gramsci's theoretical framework that underlined the relevance of the 'war of position' as a strategy in a revolutionary struggle, he revised his earlier position and forcefully argued that Mahatma Gandhi actually led a multi-class revolutionary struggle and thereby gradually eroded the semi-hegemonic/hegemonic position of the colonial state in India and finally succeeded in overthrowing it. He now described the Gandhian movement in a more sympathetic manner as S-T-S (struggle-truce-struggle) strategy, which according to him not only suited a long drawn and non-violent struggle, but also truly reflected in the spirit of resistance that slowly gained strength among the Indian masses under the leadership of Gandhi all over the country. He almost went to the extent of suggesting that Gandhi was as much a revolutionary as were Lenin or Mao Tse Tung. In other words, Bipan distanced himself from the traditional Marxist view that Mahatma Gandhi and other leaders of the Congress were essentially handmaid of the Indian bourgeoisie. Moreover, Bipan's work was a forceful rejection of the position taken by the famous Cambridge school of historians, who in their writings, had consciously denied anti-colonial consciousness that was fast gaining strength among the Indian masses and

described the Indian national movement more in terms of struggle for power between different sections of elite. Some Marxist historians did not agree with Bipan's revised analysis of the Gandhian movement, but at the same time found it difficult to ignore his interpretation altogether.

Bipan was a strong believer in secularism and throughout his life opposed communalism both as an activist and an intellectual. He firmly believed that a correct and scientific interpretation of history was necessary to fight against communal forces in present times. As part of this belief, Bipan, in association with Romila Thapar and Harbans Mukhia, published a small booklet titled, *Communalism and Writing of Indian History*, and succinctly argued that communalism was essentially a product of modern times, and its believers drew ideological strength from communal interpretation of history. Later, Bipan published a major work titled, *Communalism in Modern India*, in which he critically explored this phenomenon as an ideology that developed as a counter polarity to nationalism in the second half of the nineteenth century. According to him, while nationalism was a true reflection of the urges and aspirations of the Indian people belonging to different regions, classes and groups; communalism, based on a false consciousness of historical issues, instead of furthering the real interests and concerns of the groups, which defined themselves as religious communities, merely gave them an illusory sense of fulfillment. Undoubtedly, this characterisation of communalism brought out a basic aspect of the phenomenon in pre-Independence period, particularly its character as an instrument in the hands of colonial rulers to weaken the challenge of the national liberation movement and as a potent weapon used by the socially and economically dominant classes to dupe and exploit the common masses in the pursuit of their own reactionary policies. Bipan, like Jawaharlal Nehru, underlined that communal consciousness being false and illusory had to

be broken and transcended for the growth of India as a secular and composite nation.

Bipan is fondly remembered by a large section of Indians spread all over the country, who read his famous textbook on modern India published by the NCERT in the early 1970s for students of senior secondary classes. This textbook also became extremely popular among college students and general readers, since it offered a comprehensive as well as analytical account of the British rule in India and the anti-colonial struggle. It is important to mention that despite the withdrawal of Bipan's textbook by the NCERT in 2001, its academic relevance as well as popularity has never been undermined. I wish to recall here what Somnath Chatterjee, former speaker of the Lok Sabha, said in 2005 to an audience of Indian diaspora at Port of Spain, Trinidad, while introducing Bipan who was also present there: "A large generation of Indians have grown reading Bipan Chandra's textbook in history and other writings and in this manner he is responsible in shaping the historical consciousness of the Indian nation in the true sense of the term."

It is sad that Bipan could not complete a monograph which he was writing on the life and ideas of Bhagat Singh. However, in one of his long essays and in popular writings, he forcefully contended that Bhagat Singh was not just a romantic revolutionary, but a Marxist thinker in the making. In one of his lectures organised by the ICHR in 2010, Bipan forcefully underlined that "what was more important in the case of Bhagat Singh was not what he actually did but what he was capable of doing." Indeed, Bipan's assessment of Bhagat Singh was profound. As head of the National Book Trust, Bipan made a qualitative improvement in its publication programme, giving special attention to subjects relevant to the social and national perspective.

Indeed, Bipan led a purposeful life and left indelible imprints as a historian, teacher, thinker, activist and above all, a humanist.