

OBITUARY

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (1938–2019)

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya – affectionately called Bappa “(little) father” by his parents and, later, also by his friends and many colleagues, and even students – passed away on 7 January 2019. He was an inspiring teacher, an eminent scholar of modern Indian history, and a much solicited and courageous organizer.¹

How beloved he was among his many students, especially at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), became clear from a number of obituaries in Indian newspapers, from many speeches at two memorial services in Delhi, as well as from the foreword to the 2004 Festschrift in his honour (*Repressed Discourses*, edited by Brahma Nand and Inukonda Thirumali):

He nurtured his students with a kindness and affection which is unusual and inconceivable in the present-day academic world. He took great pains in going through the research materials and drafts several times. [...] He never showed any impatience or annoyance. He never lost hope, helping us gradually in overcoming the weaknesses. He never imposed his own ideas or any schema or framework, leaving it always to the individual students to formulate their own hypothesis and reach their own conclusions. The amount of academic freedom he allowed was almost unlimited except that the hypothesis had to be backed by sufficient empirical evidence from historical sources.²

Tellingly, according to V. Krishna Ananth’s obituary quoting Malabika, Bappa’s wife, he maintained a notebook in which he wrote details of where his students came from and their social and economic backgrounds. He would consult it every time he had a supervision with them. This vignette of Sabyasachi Bhattacharya the teacher brings us also to the man as researcher, who applied exactly the same rules to himself.

Professor Bhattacharya has left an impressive oeuvre.³ This obituary does not intend to give a balanced assessment of his significance for the

1. I would like to thank in particular his wife Malabika, as well as his friend Sumit Sarkar and his student Chitra Joshi for the information I received from them.

2. Brahma Nand and Inukonda Thirumali (eds), *Repressed Discourses: Essays in Honour of Prof. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya* (New Delhi, 2004).

3. A provisional bibliography of his writings 1961–2009 is to be found in Marcel van der Linden and Prabhu Mohapatra (eds), *Labour Matters: Towards Global Histories: Studies in Honour of Sabyasachi Bhattacharya* (New Delhi, 2009), pp. 336–338. Although already over the age of seventy by the time of this publication, and wanting to retire as an “old sage”, as he told me several

historiography of India;⁴ instead, I will give a few personal impressions of what I consider to be remarkable. I will focus, too, on his contributions to global history and, in particular, to global labour history.

Initially, Bhattacharya's concern was quantitative economic history, and this is seen to good effect in his *Financial Foundations of the British Raj* (based on his Ph.D., supervised by the rather moderate conservative Amales Tripathi) and his chapter on "Eastern India" in the *Cambridge Economic History of India*.⁵ However well received these were, this branch of history did not satisfy him. In his "Presidential Address" to the Modern Indian History section of the 1982 Indian History Congress he spoke openly of his "disenchantment with economic history of the kind that developed under the banner 'New Economic History'. All the technical sophistication of the Cliometricians – which was, of course, useful in the quantification of long-term trends and in the organisation and reconstruction of voluminous data – did not yield any new approach to history"⁶ Instead, on that occasion, Bhattacharya propagated "people's history", which should include "the history of 'mentalities'".

Maybe this was, at the same time, a farewell to a narrow Marxist approach to history that had gained considerable influence in those years. He describes, for example, one of his teachers at Calcutta University, Professor Susobhan Chandra Sarkar, as a well-known "interpreter of Marxism to a wider audience" and a staunch communist stalwart. As a young student, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, together with his friend Sumit Sarkar, became aspiring members of a communist student organization, but both were weighed and found to be too light and neither of them ever became a member of any political party afterwards. Nevertheless, and this is crucial, Susobhan Chandra Sarkar made an everlasting impression on him: "Yet the essential Sarkar is not to be found in what he left behind in his writings.

times, many more publications by him have appeared since. The following are just five monographs that have appeared during the past decade: *Rabindranath Tagore: An Interpretation* (Gurgaon, 2011); *Talking Back: The Idea of Civilization in the Indian Nationalist Discourse* (New Delhi, 2011); *The Defining Moments in Bengal, 1920–1947* (Oxford, 2014); *The Colonial State: Theory and Practice* (New Delhi, 2016); *Archiving the British Raj: History of the Archival Policy of the Government of India, with Selected Documents, 1858–1947* (New Delhi, 2019). Despite his severely weakened health, just before his death he was able to finish his editorial work on the three-volume *Comprehensive History of Modern Bengal: 1700–1950* (forthcoming).

4. See instead Irfan Habib, "A Man of Courage & Conviction", *Frontline. The Hindu*, 1 February 2019.

5. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Financial Foundations of the British Raj: Ideas and Interests in the Reconstruction of Indian Public Finance, 1858–1872* (New Delhi, 1971); *idem*, "Eastern India", in Dharma Kumar and Meghnad Desai (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Volume 2: c.1757–c.1970* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 270–332.

6. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "Presidential Address: Modern Indian History", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 43 (1982), pp. 397–417.



Sabyasachi Bhattacharya.
 Photo courtesy of his family.

It was to be found in the life he led, like some others of his generation, dedicated to a vocation and an ideology. It was the moral integrity in his dedication which left its mark on the minds of his students.”⁷

This 1982 address became, I would say, a framework for his own research in the decades to come. It can be seen in his elaboration of “people’s history”, but also in his moral and epistemological principles. His new interest in “mentalities” seems to have been a prelude to a very broad Braudelien concept of social history, including economic and political history, as well as the history of mentalities. All his attempts in the direction of an integrating and all-encompassing social history seem to find their fulfilment in his impressive *The Defining Moments in Bengal, 1920–1947*. From then on, Bhattacharya’s starting point and framework seem to have been the moral integrity not only of his university teacher, but equally, or perhaps even more, of his father Nirmal Chandra Bhattacharya (1897–1984), whose memoirs, *Bismrita bangla* [Of a Forgotten Bengal], he edited and published.⁸ With much

7. *Ibid.*, p. 397. Apart from the quotations from this Address, see also his *The Defining Moments in Bengal, 1920–1947*, p. 200. I owe the failed membership story to Sumit Sarkar (Susobhan’s son).

8. Nirmal Chandra Bhattacharya, who later became a Visiting Professor at Calcutta University and who authored several books in English on political science and the constitution of India, started writing his memoirs in Bangla when he was well passed eighty. When he died in 1986, he left the manuscript unfinished. His son Sabyasachi wrote the conclusion and had it published in 2007. On these memoirs, see Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal, 1920–1947*. Interestingly, in the 1950s, Nirmal Chandra Bhattacharya was elected by the Graduate

affection he cites significant episodes from the life of his paternal grandfather and father, originally from Faridpur (now Bangladesh), in order to tell the wider story of Bengal. Like Bappa himself later, his father studied at Presidency College in Calcutta, eventually becoming a distinguished Professor of Political Science at Scottish Church College in Calcutta. Bappa was inspired not only by his family history, but also by memories of his own youth, like those of the 1943 famine and, most of all, the communal riots of 16–19 August 1946, when between 3,000 and 5,000 lives were lost.

Sharp are his observations in *The Defining Moments* about the systematic if not systemic discrimination of Muslims (the majority of the population) by Hindus and of low caste Hindus (not to speak of the “untouchables”) by high-caste Hindus, long before the fateful events that end his book. Sadly, he sums up: “In fact, casteism had eaten so deep into people’s minds that even the relatively egalitarian philosophy of Islam was affected in Bengal. Although in its Semitic form Islam was commonly supposed to have been democratic, in Bengal it was far from that due to contamination by the caste system.” These societal cleavages may have been decisive, he suggests: “Perhaps the battle for unity [of Bengal] was lost in the private social sphere, in the quotidian life from childhood onwards, long before it was lost in the public sphere [i.e. the Partition of Bengal in 1947 between India and Pakistan, with East Bengal later becoming Bangladesh].”⁹

This integration of different aspects of history is also visible, this time on a national scale, in *Vande Mataram: The Biography of a Song*.¹⁰ Originally a hymn from the early 1870s, after 1905 it became a political slogan and is nowadays one of the two most popular songs in India. However, this is not a history of poetry nor of musicology; Bappa’s interest is in the contestation of its idolatrous character as seen by the Muslims.

Notwithstanding his importance for Bengali and modern Indian history, for the readership of the *Review* it is important to stress that Bappa had an international and increasingly global outlook. With a solid Bengali background,¹¹ he was educated in the British historical tradition, reinforced by his stay as a fellow of St. Anthony’s, Oxford. There, he must also have been inspired by the classical labour history approach; this is evidenced by his studies of the Bombay textile trade unions and their great strike in 1928–1929. Interestingly, he saw this major clash as a “synergetic interactional process”, and he consequently also devoted much attention to the employers’

Constituency as a Member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly, though he did not belong to any political party.

9. Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal, 1920–1947*, pp. 102–103.

10. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *Vande Mataram: The Biography of a Song* (New Delhi, 2003).

11. His mother Bina was an accomplished writer of both prose and poetry in Bangla, though she did not publish much.

side and their relations with politicians at the local, regional, and national levels.¹²

Gradually, he took the opportunity to broaden his scope. Before St. Anthony's, he spent some time in Chicago, and later a year in Mexico, with Malabika who is fluent in Spanish. Whereas his first international experiences showed him the deep cleavages between the Global South and the Global North, Mexico showed him something else too – the many similarities across the South. He had a similar experience during an academic visit to China. There, he told me, he was struck by the frequent visits to temples and shrines by deeply devout commoners under an atheist regime. That made him decide to write his only “children’s book”: *Buddha for the Young*.¹³ Primarily because he wanted his daughter to understand what religion is, but also, of course, because he himself wanted to understand this and to help the wide adult readership it attracted understand it too. Fully in line with the foregoing, he tells his (young) readers: “Finally, there is another reason why Buddha’s teachings are more relevant than ever today. He spoke of compassion and amity”.¹⁴

His open mind, exposed to these global experiences, positioned him as an excellent partner in a number of initiatives for international cooperation. I am most familiar with two of them, both based in Amsterdam, so I would like to dwell briefly upon his significance for the *Global Labour History* programme of the International Institute of Social History (IISH) and for the South–South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development (SEPHIS). In October 1995, he visited Amsterdam for the first time, together with a number of young colleagues and, from then on, he developed his ideas in two ways. He actively took part in the SEPHIS programme, both as a member of its Steering Committee and as participant in several seminars and workshops. One of these was held in El Colegio in Mexico in 2001, resulting in a co-edited volume on *Workers in the Informal Sector*.¹⁵ With the research department of the IISH, he discussed directions that might be fruitful for the development of global labour history and the place of South Asia within that history. This resulted in some important publications in which Bappa preferred to speak about the *labouring poor* (an expression he cherished) and their claims and entitlements. His substantive *Introduction* to the Supplement on Indian Labour History, published in

12. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, “Capital and Labour in Bombay City, 1928–29”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16:42/43 (17–24 October 1981), pp. PE36–PE44. This was preceded by *idem*, “Cotton Mills and Spinning Wheels: Swadeshi and the Indian Capitalist Class, 1920–22”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 11:47 (20 November 1976), pp. 1828–1834.

13. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *Buddha for the Young* (New Delhi, 1996).

14. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

15. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Jan Lucassen (eds), *Workers in the Informal Sector: Studies in Labour History, 1800–2000* (New Delhi, 2004).

the *International Review of Social History* in 2006, was particularly important.¹⁶

But, second, he did more, and this is most typical of the man, as he propagated, and with great success, the systematic participation of colleagues from abroad in the biennial conferences of the Association of Indian Labour Historians, of which he was co-founder and first president in 1996. He closed his *Introduction* in 2006 with the following deeply felt wish: “If, in the coming years, global history is to mean something more than aggregation, we have to apply our minds to the necessity of developing a comparative approach towards pattern congruences and diversities, within an agenda of recovering the history of the oppressed who are ‘historyless’” – his labouring poor. On these and on many other occasions, he was always unflinching and helpful to many non-Indian colleagues, like me, who were new to Indian history.

For the Indian historical community, these organizational talents at a global level will not come as a surprise. He served as the vice-chancellor of Visva-Bharati University at Santiniketan (1991–1995), alongside his teaching at JNU from 1971 to 2003. In 2004, he was elected general president of the Indian Historical Congress; from 2007 to 2011, he was Chairman of the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), in which capacity he became the general editor of the source publication series *Towards Freedom* on the National Movement (1939–1947), and also editor of the *Indian Historical Review* (*IHR*). When the ICHR was subjected to direct political pressure, in particular after the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the moment came to show not only his organizational capacities but also his courage.

In protest at this direct political interference with the intellectual freedom of historians in India, epitomized by a new president appointed primarily because of his political allegiance to the new government, and in defence of academic freedom, in April 2015 he decided to step down as general editor of his beloved *IHR*, the journal edited by the ICHR. Sadly, the later unfortunate history of ICHR and its journal have proven how right he was.

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16. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, “Introduction”, *IRSH*, 51 (2006), Supplement, pp. 7–19; see also his “Paradigms in the Historical Approach to Labour Studies on South Asia”, in Jan Lucassen (ed.), *Global Labour History: A State of the Art* (Bern [etc.], 2008 [2006]), pp. 147–159. Cf. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.), *Towards a New History of Work* (New Delhi, 2014). What are perhaps his earliest programmatic thoughts on labour history can be found in his “The Colonial State, Capital and Labour: Bombay 1919–1931”, in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Romila Thapar (eds), *Situating Indian History* (New Delhi, 1986), pp. 161–193.