

Remembering Dipak Banerjee

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are going to be affected by a metropolitan project that costs a few thousand crores of rupees, as stake holders they have a right to be heard and to be part of the decision-making process). Whether it is a controversy over minorities' representation in American universities, or an issue concerning women's political participation at decision-making levels in India, the common thread that runs through the arguments for and against, the claims as well as the backlash, show many similarities. **[EW]**

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Notes

- 1 IAFFE was incorporated in 1992 after some women economists attending an annual meeting of the AEA felt that mainstream economics was not taking into account the gender implications of economic policy discussions and decisions that affect women differently from men. A session titled "Can feminism find a home in economics?" organised by Diana Strassman of Rice University in January 1990 drew a packed house and led to the founding of IAFFE which now has members from over 50 nations. Nobel prize winning economist Amartya Sen is a member and was a keynote speaker at IAFFE's recent annual conference

- at Oxford, UK. It is not necessary to be a woman to be a member, but commitment to gender equity is necessary.
- 2 The latest report of the Committee on the Status of Women in Economics points out that women earned just 27.9 per cent of PhDs granted in the discipline (a figure that has remained almost unchanged over the last decade) while another study found that only 44 out of 2,785 faculty members in PhD granting American economics departments were African-American (which amounts to gross under-representation, considering the proportion of the population that is of African-American origin).
- 3 Stephanie Seguino, Associate professor at the University of Vermont, on e-mail listserv debating this issue, December 19, 2006. (IAFFE-L) www.iaffe.org
- 4 Maroon is the official colour for economics in academic ceremonial regalia.
- 5 The Indian winner of the Right Livelihood (alternate Nobel) international award for 2006, Ruth Manorama, observed at a national conference of women in the media held at Bangalore in February 2007, that there are "no dalits" among the top editorial places in any leading national daily in India. www.nwmindia.org. While examining India's report presented to the UN Committee Against Racial Discrimination, the committee has recommended in March 2007 that job reservations for disadvantaged communities like scheduled castes be in fact extended from the government sector to the private sector too. http://www.dalits.nl/india_and_un.html

human being. He joined the department of economics in the late 1950s when he had just returned from the London School of Economics with a glorious performance record and was one of the many stalwarts who adorned the college during those days. The leading personality at the time was Bhabatosh Datta, a remarkable teacher endowed with a prophetic vision. It was mainly he who had assembled the glittering collection of young academics around him, Dipak babu was one of them, but Tapas Majumdar, Nabendu Sen, Sukhamoy Chakravarty, Mihir Rakshit, Amiya Bagchi and many others stood out as well.

A Dedicated Teacher

There is little doubt though that Dipak babu was the most charismatic of them all. Like the rest of his colleagues, he was a dedicated and a demanding teacher. In this connection, what distinguished him most from the others was his immaculate British accent. I am not competent enough to judge which part of the United Kingdom his accent owed its origin but there is little doubt in my mind that it was as authentic as one could get. Unfortunately though, for the average student, freshly out of Bengali medium schools, it was somewhat challenging to follow his speech. Thus, quite invariably, he inspired fear in the hearts of many to begin with. Sooner or later, the soft student loving person emerged in full view, and except for the few students who remained completely stubborn, he invariably ended up winning them over.

Banerjee taught theory all his life and made his students appreciate the beauty of pure logical reasoning with examples from economics. It was not easy though to fall in line with his unflinching attachment to this method of argumentation. But once a student saw the point he had made, it was impossible to forget what he implied. The reason was that despite his strict adherence to rigour, he tried to lay bare the basic structure of arguments in terms so simple that even schoolchildren could grasp it easily. I recall how he explained to me the difference between necessary and sufficient conditions. "When it rains", he said, "the leaves begin to shake in the trees". And then added, "The leaves could shake for other reasons too, so it is not necessary for them to shake only when it rains". Perhaps others, with more logical minds, would not need matters to be explained in such an elementary manner. But I can

Remembering Dipak Banerjee

A dedicated teacher, not just well versed with economic theory but also with modern English literature, mathematics and classical music, Dipak Banerjee will be remembered as one of the most erudite professors of Presidency College, Kolkata.

DIPANKAR DASGUPTA

Words, however beautifully strung together, are ultimately a weak device for capturing an object as complicated as a human being. Sizes of vocabularies notwithstanding, words are arithmomorphic or discrete by nature, while life is a continuum. A piano recital, irrespective of the quality of the performance, cannot capture the sheen of a bow drawn smoothly across violin strings or for that matter, a deft 'sarodist's' nimble fingers. Therefore, it is well to admit at the very outset that it is more than a daunting task to sum up any person by means of words alone, leave alone a person as colourful as professor Dipak Banerjee.

It is hardly a coincidence that it is music that starts one off on the stroll down memory

lane in search of Banerjee. Amongst the many legends that will surround his name in the years to come, music probably will occupy centre stage. No student or friend who had ever come within his periphery could have escaped being treated to the vast treasure house of classical music he built during his life. One recalls countless evenings when he would play recorded private performances of Vilayat Khan or Amir Khan on his music system for his visitors and relate anecdotes about great musicians that involved their amusing angularities as well as awesome genius.

Yet, Dipak babu was primarily an economist who spent his entire career teaching undergraduates at Presidency College, Kolkata. And it is precisely here that mere words fail to construct the links that unify the diversity constituting a given

ascertain that after listening to this explanation, I never made a mistake in distinguishing between a necessary and a sufficient condition.

He was also capable of vitriolic humour when he picked out flaws in logic. An example that readily comes to my mind was a story he was fond of relating about an economist who, in a public lecture, had ascribed with great concern to Abba Lerner the claim that a day might come when interest on loans would be measured in peanuts! Observations such as these and many others could not but fail to influence bright students with impressionable minds and it is hardly a wonder that Dipak babu's innumerable students, spread across the world, never fail to remember him with any feeling other than fondness.

To the best of my understanding, Dipak babu's forte lay in microeconomics, though there were periods when he was teaching macroeconomics too. He taught both subjects with competence and took great care to make sure that the students understood the fundamentals. He enjoyed doing his theory mathematically and took considerable interest in techniques employed for the purpose. I remember vividly that on several occasions he tried to demonstrate to me how one could explain the basic principles underlying the Lagrange technique in a manner that even undergraduates would find easy to grasp.

The subject, however, that he truly helped us read through was linear algebra. The department of economics had received a grant around the mid-1960s to start an advanced centre, which accommodated a handful of research scholars. Something in the nature of a PhD course work was arranged for the scholars and Dipak babu was in charge of mathematical economics. He offered a course on the theory of linear economic models based on David Gale's book bearing the same title. Those who are familiar with the book are of course aware of the originality of Gale's approach. In today's world perhaps, none of this would look too innovative. But during the years Banerjee was introducing us to these techniques, it was considered quite a feat to say the least. Further, he made us work through the problem sets, some of which have defied me all my life.

He did us signal service by introducing us to such analytical methods and though they looked forbidding to most of us so soon after completing our MAs, the fact

remains that they proved to be a boon when some of us went abroad and were asked to sit through courses in abstract mathematics. And while all these events were taking place and some of us were getting closer to the man, we were being introduced to the other facets of the man. As I found out, he was enormously well read in English as well as Bengali literature and often suggested some work of fiction or the other, which I (at least) never failed to lay my hands on. He was also interested in history but I never managed to access his knowledge house here, given that I was too ignorant about the subject and, more importantly, was even arrogant enough to believe that it was not particularly relevant for economic pursuits. By the time I realised my unforgivable error, it was somewhat late in life to start afresh.

It has often been pointed out that Dipak babu did not do much research. This, to say the least, is an unfair criticism of the man. First of all, he never left the confines of an undergraduate college, where teaching is supposed to receive priority. The latter responsibility he carried out with admirable efficiency. Secondly, as a part of the faculty attached to the Centre for Economic Studies, he produced a scholar, Ramprasad Sengupta, who achieved international repute. And finally, Dipak babu himself wrote a reasonably difficult paper on lexicographic ordering and published it in a front ranking journal. To the best of my knowledge, he did this bit of work at the University of California at Berkeley, which he visited before joining Presidency College a second time, now as a full professor. Given the sharpness of his mind and varied interests, one wonders nonetheless why he remained attached to an undergraduate college all his life and did not seek a regular position in a research-oriented institution. It is hard to come up with an explanation that is absolutely satisfactory. However, I do think that there were two distinct reasons why he did not spend too much time on research. First, he was an uncompromising perfectionist. As is often the case with such persons, he was probably dissatisfied with anything that was not top class. Finding entry into this class was certainly not beyond his ability. But what stood in the way I think, and this is the second reason I alluded to above, was his love for the college itself and the students he taught there. Presidency College has had the tradition of attracting some of the best students from West Bengal as well as India. Teaching them was a

pleasure that he could not deny himself. Therefore, there was a time allocation question and he opted for teaching in favour of research. However, while he clung on to teaching all his life, his was a familiar face at all major conferences in Kolkata. He sat patiently through each and every paper, however abstruse, right till the time the serious nature of his illness restricted his mobility. The result, of course, was that he produced a continuous stream of internationally well known students. The fact that he was held in high esteem by them requires no better proof than the publication of the book *Economic Theory and Policy: Essays in Honour of Dipak Banerjee* (Oxford University Press). Four stalwarts whom Dipak babu taught in the undergraduate class – Bhaskar Dutta, Shubhashis Gangopadhyay, Dilip Mookherjee and Debraj Ray – edited the book. A large number of eminent scholars contributed to this collection including Amitava Bose, Mukul Majumdar, Sugata Marjit, Tapan Mitra, Anjan Mukherji, Abhirup Sarkar and Dipak babu's son Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee. The fact that these established researchers found it worth their while to create a volume exclusively in honour of Banerjee goes to show only too clearly the opinion his students had of him, that these students, who have themselves risen so high in research, did not consider Banerjee to be lacking in any way as far as original thinking was concerned.

Beyond Teaching

Reminiscing about Dipak babu invariably brings back to one's mind yet another aspect of his interests – gastronomy. He loved good food and was extremely well informed about the right places to visit for a particular item one may be looking for. When I was a young research scholar in Presidency College, he took pleasure in educating me about the places to visit for a wide range of victuals, varying from soft Bengali 'sandesh' adorned with rose petals to exotic Lucknow style kebabs. I was never as adventurous as he was but nonetheless managed to visit a few of the restaurants and food shops he recommended. Needless to say, the experiences I had each time remain firmly etched in my memory.

I recall an interesting comment he made to me quite recently. On my way back from trips outside India, I often made it a point to buy a bottle of scotch for Dipak babu, who, I was sure, enjoyed his drink. During

one of my recent trips, I was somewhat more ambitious compared to my previous trips and picked up a bottle of Johnny Walker – Blue Label from a shelf in a duty free shop. When I did so, Dipak babu loomed large in my mind and soon after I was back home, I made a beeline for his home with the bottle. I hoped he would like the present I had brought him but never expected to hear what he said about the way he thought a Blue Label was supposed to be consumed. “You don’t drink this”, he advised with a wink in his eye, “you lick it”. He wanted me to join him in the licking exercise right away but not being a connoisseur, I had to decline the offer. Even if I had accepted his invitation, I doubt that I would have been able to live up to his standards concerning the modalities of scotch drinking. And that, amongst others, was one important reason why I decided to beat a hasty retreat. I have little doubt that I had disappointed him as a student of economics, and I did not want my failures to extend to broader domains of life.

Let me end with anecdotes I have heard from my seniors about the way Dipak babu survived during his initial years in England. He was exposed, we are told, to harsh realities of life as he worked in a variety of menial capacities in London and probably elsewhere in the country. Some say he had carried heavy bags of coal on his shoulders in coalmines for meagre wages to keep his body and soul together. I have no idea about the veracity of many of these stories. But there was one that I had straight from the horse’s mouth. He told me that he had once been working in the kitchen of a well known London restaurant, mainly washing dishes. While he was labouring at his job, an excited waitress came rushing in to announce that none other than Charles Chaplin was visiting the restaurant in the company of his wife (Oona Chaplin probably). This was a chance of a lifetime and Dipak babu left his dishes in the sink and rushed to the kitchen door to have a close glimpse of the master.

What he did not know at the time, I felt, was that a time would soon arrive when

students from all across the city of Kolkata and elsewhere would be flocking around his office to catch a glimpse of Dipak babu himself. Those who have not had the good fortune of knowing him in his younger days would probably not appreciate the importance of this observation. I do not have the slightest hesitation in saying that he was the handsomest professor that Presidency College ever had. It was a treat to watch him walk into the college with his confident swagger, wearing his tweeds in winter. The swagger never left him. This was all too evident when he was mortally sick but refrained from complaining about his sufferings to his visitors. To the last day of his life, I believe that he retained his ability to enjoy a well-rendered ‘alap’ in Hindustani classical music or an abstract argument in economics, while sipping leisurely his premium scotch, with professor Nirmala Banerjee, Mini-di to us, a wonderfully loving wife and a solid, life-long companion at his side. **EDW**

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