

India: Economic historian Amiya Kumar Bagchi passes away

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Professor Amiya Kumar Bagchi, who passed away on Thursday (November 28, 2024) evening, was one of the most outstanding economists, scholars, and public intellectuals of our time. A rebel all his life, he left the college where he had been admitted originally for speaking out against some injustice, and joined Presidency College, Kolkata, which had a freer atmosphere. After his Master's in economics from Presidency, he went to Cambridge University on a West Bengal government scholarship, where he not only finished his doctoral work but also joined the Faculty of Economics and Politics, with a Fellowship at Jesus College.

He had started out as a mathematical economist, in fact a Game Theorist, but changed course while writing his Ph.D. dissertation and, and on the advice of one of his mentors, turned to economic history, a turn for which we must be highly grateful. He was not an economic historian in the narrow sense; rather, he was a macroeconomist working on historical data.

Seeing patterns in data

While digging up new and hitherto unavailable data with a diligence that could match that of the most industrious of the historians, he saw patterns in data which only his macroeconomics could enable him to see. He was thus an altogether new kind of an economist, *au fait* both in economic theory and in applied economics, including economic history. The first outstanding product of his prodigious scholarship was his book *Private Investment in India 1900-1939*, which many reviewers, even critics unsympathetic to his argument, have compared to the monumental works of anti-colonial historiography, such as those by Dadabhai Naoroji, Romesh Chunder Dutt, and D.R.Gadgil. This work was followed by his research on "Deindustrialization in the Indian economy in the Colonial Period" which again provided definitive evidence to clinch a long-standing debate that had gone on since the days of Naoroji and Dutt.

Among his numerous books and articles, most of which are path-breaking, the one that stands out for me is a piece he wrote in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1972, in which he provided a superb and original outline of the dialectics of development and under-development in a historical setting in the world economy. This work, in its simplicity and its persuasiveness, can be considered a true descendant of Paul Baran's masterly book *The Political Economy of Growth*. It provides a pithy introduction to the argument developed more elaborately, though perhaps with less immediate impact, in his later work, *The Political Economy of Underdevelopment*. His last magnum opus was *Perilous Passage: Mankind and the Global Ascendancy of Capital* in which he covered a range of experiences of countries in the Global South, focusing on the demographic collapse initiated by

imperialism.

After his stint at Cambridge, Bagchi returned to Kolkata to take up a teaching position in his alma mater, the Presidency College, from where he shifted after some years to the then newly established Centre for the Study of Social Sciences, Calcutta, of which he subsequently became the Director. A staunch believer in Left politics, Bagchi served for a long time as a member and then as the Vice-Chairman of the West Bengal State Planning Board, under the Left Front government. After leaving the government, he established and directed the Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata. He remained attached to this institution as a Professor Emeritus till his last days.

An institution-builder

Admired and respected by legions of students whom he taught and guided for Ph.D. work, he was an institution-builder who was an institution himself. He was a pioneer who re-established on a firmer footing the propositions first advanced by the Indian nationalist writers, and in the process illuminated with extraordinary clarity the workings of imperialism in producing underdevelopment. His work was as influential among historians as among economists, and he was elected the General President of the Indian History Congress at its 80th session.

All his life however Bagchi remained loyal to Kolkata, never permanently leaving this favourite city of his, even though he had numerous offers of prestigious jobs elsewhere, including in Delhi. He was simply a part of the Kolkata landscape, actively involved in the cultural and intellectual life of that city. He contributed articles regularly in Bengali to several small magazines that flourish at the initiative of young scholars in that State. Indeed, he was for a long time a remarkable bridge between Kolkata and Cambridge, a friend of distinguished Cambridge economists like Maurice Dobb, Piero Sraffa, Richard Goodwin, and Joan Robinson; he also took great pleasure in listening to Rabindra Sangeet and discussing the latest poem of Shakti Chattopadhyay (his exact contemporary) and the latest play of Utpal Dutt. Above all however, he never lost his faith in a future where there will be a world free of exploitation.

Prabhat Patnaik

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The Hindu

https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/economic-historian-amiya-kumar-bagchi-passes-away/article68924567.ece?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR0cZQgRaDmoMlpEt-LNEIfobiImPEUXxDYvuBFR1ON6itNklhF9MguQORM_aem_zfwS1Cn0cE27RJR-yHCMgA