Some people never die: thoughts of Nikhil Chakravarty

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Nikhil Chakravarty: The great Indian Journalist and historian of contemporary India

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CSSP Working Paper

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There are many people who never die though their mortal body may have evaporated in accordance to the law of nature but their thoughts often turn into golden oracle and keep them alive. Nikhil da was such a personality who still visits our mental frame and shapes our psyche, thinking and behavioural pattern.

His thoughts are impregnated with moral values and are prophetic. He was witness to many upheavals in the modern Indian history. He had his own framework for analyzing these events. His conclusions to these were passed as messages to the generations to come. His thoughts are widely spread covering almost all the aspects of modern India. He was not only a journalist par excellence but a thinker in his own right and helped many to develop themselves as intellectual leaders. The impressive point in this respect is that these words are still relevant and are capable to shape modern Indian youth in ethical manner. He was prolific writer with a mass awakening platform of Mainstream that helped to preserve his ideas in substantial manner.

He was very much keen since start to establish a magazine with critical and honest thinking. That was age of intellectual darkness. There were many greats, some newspapers and journals were also published but Mainstream was established with research bent of writing, was focused to common people and provided them honest analysis, all these attributes nurtured young minds of many generations in highly quality full manner. Nikhil da had conceptualized Mainstream with a nationalistic thought. He revealed that [he] “was in search of a forum where there could be dialogue between Congress opinion and the Left, to start with; and then if
the experiment succeeded, its spread would cover the entire spectrum of our national life.

“[Mainstream, August 11, 1990]

He searched a good editor for the same and Chitta Ranjan became its first editor with whom he “struck a very close friendship. And out of that friendship was born the idea of a paper to act as the connector between diverse opinions but all committed to striving for national regeneration. Hence the name Mainstream. [He accepted that] between the two of us, we even worked out a working principle—the editorial opinion would reflect whatever we both commonly shared. But if the Left was to be criticised, he could do so over his own signature while if I felt like attacking the Congress, I would similarly do so under my name. Sharp criticism to be permitted but no abuse.” [ibid]

This way of working was extraordinary because a participatory editorial concept was devised, a rare thought even in the contemporary world but a great thought as he allocated more value to the magazine than to personal glory. His thoughts also established basic principles of the journalism that plurality of thoughts is to be respected and diversity of opinions must be hallmark of journalism which need to be connected with different types of thoughts. Journalism is selfless service with exclusive aim of national reconstruction; it can not be a commercial venture as has happened in the current phase where media has emerged source of power and monetary resources for many big corporate houses.

His journalistic philosophy also established that respect to freedom of expression is to be followed but reasonable restriction as use of foul language has no place in this discipline, even not in the political writing.

He was man with emotional attachment with the deprived section of the society. They usually have no support in the complex web of money world. For him the globalization was likely to make life of weaker section of the society more degrading, a thought which has unfortunately come true. He was though not an absolute critic of globalization but wanted it to be introduced selectively. This has been done in China with success but in our country such critical analysis has never been undertaken at the level of top policy planners. “During the current drive for economic reforms in our country, the term very much in fashion today is globalization. There is
certainly no place for an autarchy in today’s interdependent world. Both the advance of technology and extension of the frontiers of knowledge have made narrow nationalism anachronistic and definitely harmful to our economy and polity as well. At the same time, a copycat importing of any foreign model would not only be repugnant but harmful for our country. “ [Mainstream, November 12, 1994]

His emphatic analysis of true nature of globalization grew with the passage of time. He knew its real meaning and defined it as start point of inequality in the global economic affairs. His voice has proved correct in the present time as “globalization means not equal treatment for Indian and foreign capital, but a definite partiality for the foreign capital—a new form a economic colonialism. The economic arguments being trotted out can hardly hoodwink the public. [Mainstream, January 15, 1994]

Globalization breeds consumerism, sometime to an extent that it becomes fatal as has happened in the country. The increased deficit in Current Account Deficit [CAD] is attributed to unbridled growth of automobile industry with ever increasing fossil fuel bill and a mad rush for the gold. This has put doubts upon the economic governance of the country. Nikhil da was prophetic on this issue. He had announced its fate quite earlier that India was not a fit country to absorb the consumerism of unrestricted manner.

His vision seems to be more realistic than many of economists of his time. He clearly finds fault with such sorts of living when country faces many potent problems. His “objection to the consumerist phenomenon is two-fold. In a society where we lack drinking water, education, health, shelter and other basic necessities, it would be tragic if our productive resources were to be devoted largely to the satisfaction of the needs of a small minority. The country’s need for water—for drinking and for irrigation—rural roads, good urban infrastructure, and massive investments in primary education and basic health services for the poor are so great as to effectively preclude encouragement to consumerist behaviour imitative of advanced industrial societies.” [Mainstream, August 17, 1991]

Nikhil da has a solution for it. He is pragmatically sensitive to problems of poor folks. He suggests his own brand of austerity. As “approach to development has to combine efficiency
with austerity. Austerity not in the sense of negation of life or a dry, arid creed that casts a baleful eye on joy and laughter.” [ibid] He convincingly states that social cohesion is possible only by this philosophical tool. “Austerity is a way of holding our society together in pursuit of the noble goal of banishing poverty, hunger and disease from this ancient land or ours. [ibid]

A critical analysis of the global financial crisis shows that consumerism, an evil generated in the capitalist system and thereafter its containment by austerity measures has become a potential solution in many of the European countries, India and US are also not far behind in talking about austerity measures. Nikhil da was a better economist when he had not only visualized the problem but also was competent to provide its solution.

His philosophy of communism and socialism was quite pragmatic. For him socialism was an instrument by which the problems of common people could be addressed with a proper solution. For its implementation he devised a plan, in which the role of left parties was crucial. He had voiced that left parties could come to play an important role in the politics at centre and once it happens not only the interests of common people will be served but also the socialism can be introduced in a true manner in the country. “[Left] has the advantage of being in the interests of the common people and hence capable of mustering massive popular support. This then is the task that the Left should set for itself in the immediate future: if later on a situation arises in which the Leftist forces feel confident of taking over at the Centre and quickening the pace of progress towards socialism.” [Mainstream, November 4, 1967]

In fact such circumstances arose in the Indian political history when left parties had a restraining influence upon the governments in the centre. This assessment was made quite early by him, though the task of establishment of true socialism remains unfulfilled.

For him socialism is a pragmatic philosophy which is destined to make this planet really worth living for every one. He treats it as productive humanistic philosophy. He says that “unrelenting struggle for the building of a better world is the saga of this mighty endeavour of socialism”. [ibid]

Socialism ensures a better world for millions of people, usually economic understanding of poverty in India is more statically oriented than humanistic and emotional one. Planning
Commission decided petty money sufficient for survival of Indian citizen. It is typical economic attitude of rigid and wrong calculations, whereas the socialist thought looks at the problems of humanity in realistic and humane manner. It has its own definition of a better life in which none cries. Socialism makes promises for good life to every one not only to few ones as promoted by the prevalent neoliberal world order.

Nikhil da appears to have analyzed it in his early meditative phase as he says that "more important is the promise of a better life that has been ensured to the millions of the country. When millions are deprived of its benefits—by the artificial contraption of the so-called “poverty line”—there is naturally an ominous uncertainty in the country. Affluence at one end and impoverishment at the other—that is what the new system of the market has ensured for the people. When the common people get restless at this patent inequity of the system, it is not surprising that the polity of this country is forced into instability." [Mainstream, December 20, 1997]

This is a critical analysis of Indian society which has now emerged as a society with two classes, he had warned about it quite long back. The role of typical economic terms as poverty line is still a matter of great debate in the country and defies the precise definition. He belonged the stream of pure journalism but emerged more prudent than many of the contemporary economists with stack of peer reviewed research papers, books and policy planning reports.

When the political class lose the morality and executive class fails to be proactive in its activity or reluctant to face the realities of mundane world and is not desirous of effecting the changes, in such situations media and court play crucial role as we find happening in our country. Nikhil da was prophetic on this count and had identified the role of SC in promoting the democracy.

He believes that parliamentary democracy can be nurtured by any institution. "It brings out the stark reality that in this country, we have reached a stage where the executive, instead of acting as the upholder of law and order, is fast turning into an instrument of terror for the citizen. In its place, the Supreme Court, much maligned as the bastion of reaction by many a pseudo-radical in the keep of the Establishment, has been compelled to act as an executive authority in defence of democracy:" [Mainstream, December 6, 1980]
He rightly proclaims that the democracy of India is in zone of troubles and political leaders, metamorphosed as executive at the level of governance, are its main cause of decline. He therefore says that “India is entering a dangerously unstable phase in her career, thanks to the short-sightedness and bankruptcy of its political leaders, Right, Centre and Left. Destabilization is being perpetrated by our own hands, foreign hands can do no better.” [Mainstream, June 18, 1980]

Political leaders are root cause of many of the major political problems negating the true thought of democracy. They have promoted many political evils. He thinks that “money-power and muscle-power are not the only threats to our democratic order. Along with these have come the blatant recourse to appeal for votes along caste and communal loyalties.” [Mainstream, August 21, 1993]

He finds fault with the political leadership. He further compares the leadership of two ages, pre independence and of the current time. “Political leadership in the days of the freedom struggle fought such forces of blind intolerances, but in the years since independence, it has not only tolerated them but have tried to strike deals with them for the purpose of collecting votes. This way our social fabric has been torn asunder and our political life debased.” [Mainstream, December 19, 1992]

This comparison brings into neon light the cause of decline of India. He has proved himself absolutely correct. What is standard of Indian political leadership?, a great consensus among most that tainted politicians can be allowed in the system. Nikhil da had visualized it quite early but his thoughts did not ring as alarm bell among the political elites but today people at large are not ready to accept the bad politicians. Things stand a little different today.

If executive falters, ruling elites fail to listen the drum noise and decline in political morality is more pronounced, in such background the nation building can never take place. A nation can be united and its integrity can be maintained only if people of varied spectrum club together. Nikhil da had pointed out it as the only viable solution to deal with the ever emerging problems of the nation and crisis in the process of nation building, a task which is bedrock of every nation state. His solution is simple enough that there is a great need of an “awareness of the urgency of
forging a unity of purpose and a commitment to combat all forces, social, economic and political, that stand in the way of that unity.” [Mainstream, May 26, 1984] His recipe demands selfless work by all stakeholders of the nation which includes people from all walks of life, common citizens and political leaders.

Owing to this lackness of nation building in true sense, India faces many problems but the most potent and lethal is problem of communalism and fundamentalism. It has played havoc with the unity of India. Nikhil da defines fundamentalist as “an orthodox group in any religion[which] is today dubbed as fundamentalist—the conservative no-changers, the orthodox as opposed to the liberal within any religion—which amounts to promoting intolerance and bigotry. “[Mainstream, August 20, 1994] He is critical of the fundamentalists present in two major religions as “within each community, the campaigners for widening the communal divide have gained ground masquerading as orthodox and pure fundamental adherents of the creed. Hence even in recent days, the phenomenon of bigots on one side forcing the Muslim Women's Act and trying to persecute rational scholarship whether in Jamia Millia or at the Khuda Box Library in Patna. And much in the same way, their counterpart in bigotry in the Hindu community builds up Ram not as a unifier but as a divider of society. “[Mainstream, December 19, 1992]

This undemocratic and perverted religious outlook is responsible for the growth of communalism. It is a major threat to the Indian politico-social fabric. Our founding fathers of the nation have given us a good nation based on the ethical pillars. Democratic life with liberty and equality is greatest gift. Nikhil da is satisfied with what we have got but is more concerned about the securing and protecting these intrinsic values of India as a whole. He therefore states in explicit terms that “our democracy is under siege today assailed from all sides. The monster of communalism is again raising its head. The propagation of the communal divide strikes at the very root of our democratic tradition and the edifice of democratic functioning. The direct offensive of secessionists has turned a corner of our country into a battle-ground of terrorism and police violence and this is spreading to other areas as well. [Mainstream January 26, 1988]
His thoughts are a lesson to all of us. He has deciphered the biggest malaise of our social unity. He again provides solution to these sorts of evils. Every citizen whatsoever be his or her affiliation must come forward to defeat these antisocial forces, thereby in due course a revolution can be built which “can only be carried forward to success by mass mobilization and mass action on basic social and economic issues without allowing communal and other bogeys raised by vested interests to divert attention from the goal. It is precisely here that we, inheritors of the great heritage, have failed miserably to live up to it.”[Mainstream, October 4, 1969] In his opinion it is people’s power which is in strength to defeat any communal force and mass mobilization on any issue is answer to reform any evilness. In this respect he comes closer to Gandhian thought and tactics of mass mobilization.

He does not limit this mobilization only to contain the communal forces but also other social evils in which corruption in the political and administrative world is a great hindrance in the realization of good life. It hinders the establishment of a peaceful and truth based life. He talks about corruption as an evil of the political system gradually engulfing the other aspects of human existence and profession. He clarifies “what is yet to be realised by our political leaders is that in the public eye, corruption is looked down upon and anybody tarred with it carries no authority whatsoever in the judgement of the common public. Politicians may look at corruption as a manageable private affair but the wider public getting more and more awakened.”[Mainstream, December 22, 2012] His clear exposition on this issue has immense value. Its relevance is unquestioned and the last few years are testimony of his writings when civil society movement has succeeded in awakening the common people on this issue.

Nikhil da was man of diverse tastes in intellectual sphere. He had a sharp vision to identify the extra political problems which had to impact the contemporary civilization in quite adverse manner. Climate change and environmental degradation are major problems of our world which threaten even the existence of present civilization. He discussed these problems in terms of globe and studied as case study. He knew that these problems could be dealt with in a successful manner if different nations pooled their efforts.
This is a novel idea and world is looking to this avenue in more realistic manner. The COP conferences illustrate his point of argument. He talks about the problem in Tibet, which he takes up as a case study, as “in three decades and more there has been serious environmental destruction of Tibet. There has been massive deforestation of the rich forest belts of Tibet. In Amdo province alone, it is estimated that about 50 million trees have been felled in the last forty years. Southern Tibet has been equally denuded of forests. The Tibetans do not use much timber, most of the wood product has gone to the other parts of China. This massive deforestation has led to serious soil erosion and flood. Today, Brahmaputra and Indus, Yangtze and Huang Ho are among the five most heavily-silted rivers in the world. Deforestation endangers the monsoon balance, which is of direct concern for us. With the denuding of the great pastures of Tibet, desertification has begun.” [Mainstream, July 24, 1993]

He reemphasizes that all these developments are matter of direct concern for many countries. “Without infringing upon the sovereignty of any Latin American country, the ecological preservation of the Amazon River basin inspired a remarkable international initiative. Similarly, it is time that the preservation of the unique environmental balance of Tibet became the concern of the world community, in which the countries directly affected next door have to come forward. This is an issue of direct international concern as important as the upholding of human rights, since it endangers the very life and living of billions of people linked by Nature to Tibet, its flora and fauna. [ibid]

He also brings into light the national aspect of this horrible problem and suggests that role of environment activists is more critical in the containment of nature’s degradation. He believes that role of government may be supportive in this effort. He ponders over an important aspect of Indian growth story where development and environment degradation has come face to face in the policy making process. What is right course of action is detailed by him. “While environment has got its due recognition as an essential element in the development process, the question that comes to the forefront is: how does one define such a problem, what are the identifiable landmarks in dealing with the question of environment?”[and] What is needed is a serious national debate about the dimension of the issue of environment and its protection. Let all points of view jostle with one another, and out of such endeavour must arise a common denominator as
to what has to be done to save the environment. This is a task which our environment activists themselves should take up, and the government would be wise in promoting such a debate for a common national consensus on a burning issue of global concern.”[ET, reproduced in Mainstream, July 11, 1992]

Nikhil da has was always vocal on the foreign policy issue. He was impressed with the success and potential of nonalignment, a policy which helped all the developing nations to maintain freedom at the level of foreign policy activism, allowed these nations to maintain a distance from the cold war politics and membership of the military alliances. He claims rightly that the “wisdom of this policy of non-alignment has been amply vindicated in the last two decades just as the bankruptcy of the policy of military blocs has been equally forcefully demonstrated.
“[Mainstream, May 10, 1975]

He also provides the bases on which a foreign policy in the rapidly changing world order can be formulated particularly after the collapse of USSR in 1991. He thinks that “the need today is to strive for a foreign policy based on solid appraisal of the forces at work in our region, their credibility and durability, and the possibility of our interaction with them. Not impulse but experience, not gimmickry but statesmanship, can provide the solid foundation of an enduring foreign policy. [TOI, reproduced as enlarged version in Mainstream May 3, 1986]

He also suggests role for India in protecting the interests of developing countries including itself. For this purpose he provides a pragmatic paradigm of cooperation between India and USA, as he believes that India is in a position to extract maximum benefit from USA. His thoughts are relevant even in today’s complex world. “A friendly but firm, unbending stand on the part of this country can go a long way towards helping the USA to take a chastened, realistic view particularly towards the Third World. New Delhi can hardly afford to minimise its important responsibility not only to guard this country’s national interests but help Washington to realise its own responsibility towards the world at large.”[Mainstream, March 21, 1992] Thus he never limits role of Indian foreign policy only to serve its interest but also to take care of the other ones which are weak and deprived of many resources. He wants India to take up the leadership of the developing countries.
Nikhil da is pragmatic idealist. He knows that ideal state can be obtained. He looks to the salad
days of freedom struggle as the fountainhead of many good things. He thinks that a new nation
can be constructed following the great ideals of this age when happiness was born with each
sacrifice. “The freedom struggle of our great people has witnessed a whole galaxy of Titans,
whose memory is embossed in our history. Today they are all in that unforgettable dream
garden of Elysium, as the pure and the mighty live in our memory. In that haven of bliss, her
countrymen in eternal gratitude shall always ensconce. “[Mainstream, August 10, 1996] He
wants that present breed of politicians must follow the ideals of greats of our independence
struggle. He searches new leaders to resolve the expanding problems of our nation. “As the
Republic faces the future with trepidation, as turbulence besieges it from all sides, it has to
throw up new leaders, new pathfinders, who can take it to that haven of freedom and
prosperity, which indeed it deserves in full measure. Not a copycat Gandhi, not just the
surname, but men and women of the heroic mould of Gandhi—that is what this great nation
needs today at this critical juncture.”[Mainstream January 26, 1988]

His thoughts are impactful and pieces of writings are prophetic and honest. He is a man of
conviction. His thoughts are impregnated with journalistic honesty which makes him a great
contributor in the nation building.

He has given every succeeding generation many thoughts, words and imaginations to discover
the intellectualism in truest manner. His writings have become landmark in providing us a
guidelines for our action and behaviour. He has transcended himself from a mere journalist to a
status of philosopher and intellectual leader. He is truly a philosopher journalist. He will be
remembered in this ways for years to come. Some people never die, they live with rare attributes
forever in the human society and psyche. Nikhil da rests with these greats.