

Hiren Basu

Nityapriya Ghosh

Frontier and *Darpan* shared the same floor at 61 Mott Lane, Calcutta. *Darpan*, the Bengali weekly, was older than the English weekly but there was much common between the two papers. Left-leaning journalists, who could not pour out their anti-Congress and anti-establishment venom, used these two weeklies, of course, without byelines. The Bengali weekly differed from its contemporary in one significant aspect. It trod dangerously on the thin line between outspoken views and scurrilous reports. The English weekly attacked corruption, the Bengali one attacked corrupt people by name. Inevitably, the editor of *Darpan*, Hiren Basu, faced numerous defamation cases. Fighting court cases in metropolitan and suburban courts not only caused waste of time and energy of the editor, it was ruinous for him financially. He braved the hazards with a mischievous, sometimes sardonic, smile. Court cases are proverbially a time-consuming affair, dragging in for ages. The flip side of the nuisance was that cases were seldom disposed of and Hiren Basu did not have to face severe penalties, except nominal fines occasionally. Defamation cases are, anyway, hard to prove in courts, the line between personal interest and public interest being again very thin.

Hirenbabu wrote a book on his court experiences, after he had to spend weeks after weeks in the Andaman islands, where he was dragged by mischievous court officials in collusion with the plaintiff. The book was not quite satisfactory as he could not speak out freely as many of the cases did not wind up and the writer had to dilate on views rather than on facts.

In 1968, Hirenbabu generously offered accommodation to Samar Sen who was about to launch his new weekly *Frontier*. At the back of it was, of course Prasanta Sarkar, the star reporter of *The Statesman*, who knew both Samarbabu and Hirenbabu. *Darpan* itself benefited by sharing office rent. The dilapidated house on the lane that would give a creeping feeling to any newcomer, was however, centrally located in Calcutta. The Modern India Press where both the papers were printed for quite some time and the Central Avenue Coffee House were within walking distance. Both the papers worked on skeletal staff strength and the small cubicles never looked too crowded.

There was, however, little communication between the two editors, except at the press or the coffee house. Hirenbabu was not quite comfortable with the innate sophistication of Samarbabu, who though jealous of the larger circulation figure of the Bengali weekly, did not quite approve of the petty scandals the latter frequently indulged in. In 1968 Samarbabu became increasingly critical for the CPI(M); Hirenbabu was pro-CPI(M) except occasionally.

Unlike the sensational stories *Darpan* published, its editor was a soft-spoken gentleman, always in immaculately white dhoti and punjabi. It was baffling how he could afford washing expenses—the Bengali weekly was never famous, like its English contemporary, for advertising revenue. I never saw him allowing others to pay for his coffee and toast, although I am not sure who paid for his drinks at the Calcutta Press Club, his usual haunt at the evening hours.

Hirenbabu had keen interest in contemporary Bengali stories and novels. Debunking writers who made pretty bucks by their trashy literature was his

favourite pastime. He knew most of them personally but increasingly distanced himself from the writer-cum-journalists who worked for the newspaper office adjacent to the Coffee House. He often cited a date, sadly or proudly I was not sure, when the gatekeepers of the newspaper office were instructed to block his entry—Hiren Basu was persona non grata for that newspaper office.

His views of some of his own contributors might not have been palatable to them. Once his paper reviewed a book on the need for a coherent spelling system in Bengali language. The reviewer vaguely praised the author and advised him to be more careful about printing errors. The author happened to be my father. He summoned me and asked if I knew the editor of a weekly called *Darpan*. Learning that I did, he asked me to request the editor if the reviewer could point out which errors he wrote about. The request was duly made and the editor grinned broadly and remarked : “Do you think reviewers read books for reviewing in newspapers? And for that matter, that particular reviewer is as illiterate as a railway coolie.” “But what about printing errors?” I persisted. The editor blandly replied, “Can you cite a single Bengali book without printing errors? That is a safe remark that can be made about any Bengali book. There is no need to take the observation literally! How would that bloke know this particular book was spared by the Printers’ Devil?”

Hirenbabu was a lover of Bengali songs. His was the decisive opinion whenever there was at the coffee table a quarrel about the composer of a lyric or tune. But his method in recognising a classical raag was intriguing. Being a duffer in classical music grammar, I asked him how he identified raags. “You must be conversant with Kanika Banerji’s rendition of *anandadhara bahichhe bhubane* and you must be knowing that the song is composed in Malkosh. When you hear a classical song similar to the tune of the song, well, you should know that is Malkosh. Simple.”

When he was ill in the last two years of his life and could hardly step out of his Ultadanga residence, his eyes becoming dimmer and dimmer, his lungs progressively failing to function, his constant worry was how to preserve the file copies of *Darpan*. Bhabes Das of Akashvani, a former contributor to the weekly, was contacted and thanks to his initiative, the journalism department of Calcutta University consented to provide space for the *Darpan* copies and what was more heartening, the department had the copies decently bound. Bhabes and Timir Basu of *Frontier* retrieved the file copies from the rotting shelves of *Darpan* office. That was perhaps the last glimmer of happy eyes, when a sample bound volume was shown to Hirenbabu—the excellent binding was beyond his expectations. *Darpan*, he was gratified to know, would find a niche in the history of journalism. □□□

[Hiren Basu, the editor of *Darpan* died in Kolkata at the age of 82 on September 24, 2009, after a brief illness]