

Indian Left: Tribute to Praful Bidwai, a fearless comrade who always took pro-people stand

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It is difficult to accept that Praful is no more. Two days back he passed away in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Now, who will spontaneously respond to right wing onslaught on the masses in these difficult times, both globally and within India?



I got to know Praful in 1974 in Mumbai in a meeting organised by the New Left group of young revolutionaries to which he belonged, when Com. Ernest Mandel, a noted Marxist economist visited India for lecture series. At that time, all of us known as “the New Left” believed that revolution was round the corner. Praful was intellectually versatile and spoke on any political issue with passion, data base, logic and aggression. Though he came from science and technology stream, Praful was strongly grounded in political economy. During 1970s, he was a star of New Left Group called MAGOVA (English meaning of this Marathi word is Road Map) had a convincing style of speaking. While studying at Indian Institute of Technology, Praful and his friends got influenced by international youth radicalization shaped by anti-Vietnam war struggles, liberation struggles in Africa and Latin America, youth movement in Sri Lanka. During 1975-1977, most of us met in the informal study circles as the Emergency Rule did not allow any public gatherings.

In the millennium year, after nuclear testing in Pokhran, along with Com. Achin Vanayak, Praful founded the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace. Both of them also co-authored a book *South Asia on a Short Fuse-Nuclear Politics and the Future of Global Disarmament* for which they were awarded the Sean McBride International Peace Prize by the International Peace Bureau in recognition of their work challenging development of nuclear weapons in South Asia.

In 1977, when I moved to Mumbai and got active in the women’s movement and trade union movement, Praful had become prolific in his journalistic career and was always, always politically correct and wrote and spoke with unassuming courage of conviction. He wrote on wide range of strategically important issues- industrialization, human development, vested interests of sectarian forces, caste and communal conflicts, human rights, turmoil in the North East India, environmental issues, climate change, nuclear policy, national politics and arrest of a woman smuggler. He was never sensational or titillating in his writings.

Praful had thorough understanding of grammar of Indian classical music and regularly attended concerts. During 1977-1979, Praful, Gayatri Singh and me, all three of us, homeless activists, used to attend several cultural events in Mumbai city together. I was staying in a working women's hostel, Gayatri and Praful has taken refuge in Sonal and Himanshu Shukla home.

In 1982, when his mother was detected with cancer, Praful was shaken. I got to meet his sisters who came from Nagpur with his ailing mother and got to see sensitive aspect of his personality. In his mother's memory, he made contribution to Medico Friends Circle in which my husband, Dr. Amar Jesani was active.

In 1986, as a full-timer of Women's Centre I was entrusted with responsibility of organizing Asian Conference on Women, Religion and Family Laws in which delegates from 14 Asian Countries had registered to participate. Even after making several trips to various government offices in Delhi, I could not get visa clearance for most of the delegates. I was running from pillar to post to get visa for the delegates from Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka without any success. When I told my difficulties to Praful who at that time was a senior journalist with the *Times of India*, Delhi office, he threw his weight around and got visa clearance for our delegates.

The most crucial contribution Praful made was after 1992 riots that gave major blow to the secular fabric of our country. He took head on confrontations with the cultural nationalists. He started speaking from public platforms against TNC-MNC controlled economic globalisation, neo-liberalism, capitalist crisis, nuclearisation of economy, communal tension, caste riots, violation of human rights, displacement in the name of mega development projects so on and so forth. His column for *Frontline* and *The Hindustan Times* created ripple effects among the activists of social movements.

Last time, I met him in May, 2014 at the Press Club to discuss the book he was planning to write on the Indian Left for which he interviewed me at length. During the interview, he was calm, asking questions on trade union movement, women's movement, left movement, Dalit and tribal struggles---. He asked me about our common friends and co-travelers in the people's movements since 1970s. Both of us were nostalgic about our revolutionary past. When I told him, "How much proud we all are of your writings!" he coyly smiled.

Praful had a large fan following in Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Agartala, Guwahati. Whenever he happened to be in these cities, he would invite his buddies to discuss with him volatile political issues.

Untimely passing away of Praful Bidwai has created an irreparable loss for the cause of social justice, secular humanism, human development and human rights.

Vibhuti Patel (An activist of the New Left Movement since 1970), 25-6-2015
