

Dwijendra Tripathi (1930–2018)

Dwijendra Tripathi, doyen of Indian business history, and faculty member at the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad (IIMA) from 1964 to 1990, passed away on September 5 (Teacher's Day in India), 2018, at the age of 88.

I met him in 2015, when I began teaching business history at IIMA. Though the field had remained dormant in Indian universities since his retirement in 1990, he responded with great enthusiasm and kindness to mentor me, a rookie in the field. We developed a wonderful friendship, separated in age by several decades but united by a passion for business history. In March 2018, I had the opportunity to interview him as part of the IIMA Oral History Project, where he reflected at length upon his life and career.¹

Tripathi was born on July 29, 1930 in a remote village in Azamgarh district of eastern Uttar Pradesh in north India, still under colonial rule, and grew up walking many miles to the nearest village school. He was the only student in Azamgarh district to get a First Class in the Arts stream of Class 12. He completed his BA in History, Economics, and English Literature in 1952 and his MA in History at the University of Allahabad in 1954. He and his wife, Saraswati, were married for over fifty years and had three children—Parimal, Tushar, and Smita.

His acquaintance with history, and later business history, was serendipitous. Civil services, the traditional attraction for Brahmins of that time, was not an option for him because he had seen his father, a freedom fighter and role model, being arrested in front of his eyes, imprinting a lifelong disdain for government services. One of his regrets, in fact, was that he never went to jail during the freedom movement. After completing his MA, he took a job as a teacher in an obscure college in Jabalpur in 1954. He had always been interested in American history, with strong memories of growing up reading books on Washington, Lincoln, Dewey, and the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in his father's library. He applied for and received a Fulbright scholarship to pursue graduate work in history, beginning at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1960. He completed his dissertation on the economic links

¹The IIMA Archives in Ahmedabad, accessible to the public for research, holds the Dwijendra Tripathi collection, including the transcript of a two-hour oral history on his life and career.

between the United States and India in the late nineteenth century, with Richard N. Current as his adviser.

Tripathi returned briefly to Jabalpur; he then moved to Bombay in May 1964 as Research Officer in the Historical Research Department of the State Bank of India, one of the oldest banks in India, that was attempting to chronicle its history. The compulsions of wearing ties and suits quickly wore him down and he accepted a call for a job interview at IIMA. Dr. Kamla Chowdhry, faculty at IIMA, one of the first female management educators in the world and herself a Fulbright Scholar, had found Tripathi's name in the Fulbright directory and invited him for an interview. The interview was successful, and Tripathi joined IIMA on July 1, 1964, the same day as the inauguration of the institute's first class of Postgraduate Programme or PGP (MBA-equivalent) students. In the first year, Tripathi rarely spoke as he was getting his bearings in the new world outside the traditional university system. Given a choice between Organizational Behavior and Economics as his institutional areas, he chose the latter mostly because he got along better with colleagues in that area. He went to Harvard Business School as part of the International Teachers Program in 1965, where he interacted with Ralph Hidy and the business history fraternity and gained more confidence about the discipline.

Between 1964 and 1990, Tripathi had an eventful career in teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities at the IIMA. In his reflections, he lamented that there had been few doctoral students he could nudge toward business history and that the course on business history had not become popular. This he attributed to the lack of institutional support for historical work after the initial thrust provided by Ravi Matthai, a charismatic Director of IIMA, with whom he shared a deep friendship.

As an administrator, Tripathi commanded wide respect, beginning with his four-year tenure as the PGP Chairperson (1968–1972) overseeing the flagship student program. Early in his academic career, he was confronted with a case of plagiarism by one of his colleagues, and he circulated a note on the matter which caused an uproar among the faculty. He stood firm throughout the incident, insisting that condemning plagiarism was more important than maintaining serene collegiality. His integrity led to his promotion to the newly created position of Dean (1972–1976) at a young age, to assist a new Director during a transition phase in the 1970s. He gave up a fellowship offer at HBS to take up this position for the sake of the Institute. In the 1980s, he would again be called on to serve as a faculty representative on the Board of Governors of IIMA and as the Chairperson of the Economics Area. Even after his retirement in 1990 until 1996, he remained actively involved, taking

on a position as Senior Faculty at the Entrepreneurship Development Institute of India (EDII), established in Ahmedabad in 1983.

Teaching and administration, however, were distractions from his real love, research, which ultimately gave him academic satisfaction and personal fulfilment. He wrote biographies, not hagiographies, of industrialist Kasturbhai Lalbhai *and* the firms Larsen & Toubro and Bank of Baroda. His scholarship was rooted in entrepreneurial history, stressing multifactorial models for understanding the phenomenon, and enriched by an unparalleled access to Lalbhai, a leading industrialist of his time. In the 1980s, he held four seminars on business history at IIMA leading to three important edited volumes that continue to be indispensable in the field. These seminars were inspired by what he had observed in international seminars in Japan, where he spent time as a visiting research fellow at the Institute of Developing Economies in Tokyo in 1985–1986. Much later, in 1997, he would write a comparative study on entrepreneurial history in India and Japan, just as he had absorbed himself in the 1960s and 1970s with the links between India and America, culminating in a visiting professorship at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, in 1979–1980. His interests in America and Japan were in sharp contrast to the majority of historians of India, who tended to focus on Britain or the world of the Indian Ocean. He established connections with historians in other fields as he regularly attended the International Economic History Congress and Indian History Congress. He was the General President of the latter body in 2002–2003.

Tripathi's major research contributions were in more than a dozen books and monographs.² His contribution to the *Business History Review* was limited to a few book reviews and an Introduction to a special issue on India (Spring 2014). He founded the *Journal of Entrepreneurship* in 1992 at the EDII, a journal that continues to run under Sage Publications, albeit with little history left in it. At the age of 74, he finally wrote his masterpiece, the *Oxford History of Indian Business*, a grand narrative on the evolution of Indian business over several centuries. Asked by a Director of the TATA group how many years it took him to write it, he replied "All my life."

Tripathi identified himself as a liberal, unpersuaded by the Marxist dogma of his times in the history discipline. He studied capitalists at a time when most historians studied labor, and considered business history to be closer to social history than economic history. His critique

² Among his many contributions are Dwijendra Tripathi, *The Oxford History of Indian Business* (Delhi, 2004); and Tripathi and Jyoti Jumani, *Oxford History of Contemporary Indian Business* (Delhi, 2013).

of colonialism was nuanced, as expressed in a paper in *The Developing Economies* in 1996, outlining how colonialism shaped attitudes towards technology choice and why Indian cotton mill owners lagged behind Japan in adopting new technologies. Troubled by the growth of religious nationalism in India, he wrote articles drawing on Indian history to understand and contest this trend.

Tripathi recently said, in a conversation with Tirthankar Roy, that “criticism was the lifeblood of scholarship” and he appreciated critiques himself. He pointed out that reviewers of the *Oxford History of Indian Business* had failed to read the preface which mentioned that the book mainly covered the pre-Independence period. But he nonetheless took the reviewers comments seriously and started a new book project when he was well into his 80s, culminating in his last book, the *Oxford History of Contemporary Indian Business*. Here, among other things, he showed the difference in attitudes toward business between Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter, Indira Gandhi, arguing that standard critiques of the Nehruvian socialist economy were mistaken because the infamous License Raj, in his view, was mainly the product of Indira Gandhi’s reign.

I had the opportunity to visit him at his house in Ahmedabad a few weeks before he passed away, to give him a copy of my first book. I told him that his birthplace, Azamgarh, was featured in it as a core region of the Great Indian Migration Wave. He smiled and said that he was dying to read it. Those last words I heard from him, yet again, were punctuated by warmth, wit, and foresight. But even he, that boy from a village where the tributaries of the Ganges flow and who lived his life by the Sabarmati, would not have predicted that his obituary would one day be recorded in the country of his childhood imagination on the banks of the Charles River.

Those who have known “Dwijji,” as he was called by his friends, recall his warmth, intellect, and humility.

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