

WOULD you say that the cancellation of your visit to the Soviet Union is only part of a broader campaign against you?

R. S. SHARMA: Yes, I would certainly say so. The attack on me began two or three months prior to the cancellation of my trip. It all started with the dissolving of the governing bodies of 14 Delhi colleges by the Delhi Metropolitan Council. They put up a list of new members which was packed with RSS and ex-Jana Sangh members and sympathisers. I was the only official professor member of the university's executive council who opposed this and because of this opposition, which was later also joined by four other members, this discussion went on for 20 hours extending over four days in August 1977. Eventually five members out of 20 voted against the proposed list of the Delhi administration. This naturally angered them very much against me.

You are certain that the list contained ex-Jana Sangh and RSS men?

Oh yes, I am quite certain. Now, the second reason is that my book on ancient India (as a text for class XI students) was published by NCERT in August. The same communal elements objected to about 11 passages in this book. The gist is that my book tends to denigrate Hindu culture and that it preaches class war.

This is perhaps the only book which has a chapter on the legacy of India in science and civilization. It is absolutely wrong to say that it denigrates Hindu culture. On the contrary, it emphasises the values of Hindu culture in its broader aspect—by which I mean tolerance, the spirit of criticism, unity-in-diversity and so on. For the fanatic, any account of the social conflict and flaws of ancient society is denigration. They would like the historian to say that everything was perfect in that so-called Golden Age of Hindu

Historians Under Attack

The conflict between those who advocate chauvinist communalism on the one hand and socialist secularism on the other is a time-honoured one. This struggle has most recently surfaced in the controversy over the banning of four history text-books, the demonstrations against a fifth book and the last-minute cancellation of permission to its author, Dr. R. S. Sharma, to attend a seminar in the Soviet Union. At the same time, the RSS has inspired a vilification campaign against the 'red caucus' which allegedly gained control of bodies like the University Grants Commission, Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University, which it is now being demanded, must be 'cleansed' of communists.

Professors R. S. Sharma (head of History Department, Delhi University) and Bipan Chandra (head, Centre for Historical Studies, JNU) have been the major targets of attack in this controversy. Of the two, Dr. R. S. Sharma has aroused stronger passions (witness slogans like 'R. S. Sharma Hatao—Hindu Dharma Bachao!') because in addition to his 'atrocities' as head of the department, he is also a Jawaharlal Nehru Fellow and the author of a newly released text-book ('Ancient India' for class XI students) which has greatly agitated RSS and Arya Samaj intellectuals.

In addition, he was until very recently Chairman of the Indian Council of Historical Research which, interestingly, came under heavy criticism from both the marxist camp (for sponsoring obscurantist and uncritical history) and from the communalist camp (for sponsoring pro-marxist and uncritical history)! Moreover, many unsuccessful applicants for research grants and costs at Delhi University and ICHR have loudly assailed him for favouritism and casteism. He was to lead a seven-man delegation of historians in October to a seminar in the Soviet Union. The Janata government granted permission to the delegation—not to its leader! What is more, the reaction of the delegates was very mixed—not everyone was unhappy at its last-minute change.

Dr. Bipan Chandra has featured as one of the main spokesmen for the beleaguered historians in some very stormy public meetings, pitted against Dr. Subramaniam Swamy, MP, spokesman for the RSS viewpoint at the campuses of Delhi and JN universities over the last three months.

The specific background to this drama consists of the rise of some left-wing intellectuals to various positions of power and eminence due to a certain liberalism and indulgence practised by the Congress Party leadership in the period between 1969 and 1975. This was an unprecedented phenomenon in the country's political and cultural life. Add to this the fact that capturing power in centres of learning is very much a priority in the RSS strategy. The expansion of left-wing influence in this sphere, which has undeniably taken place as a result of people like R. S. Sharma and Bipan Chandra being in positions of power, has naturally brought forth an agitated response from the communalists.

What follows is a discussion on some of these issues with R. S. Sharma and Bipan Chandra

[The Times of India, 27 November 1977]

Civilisation. Apart from this kind of unscientific criticism, they also stoop to brazen white lies. For instance, in a recent issue of *Organiser* they stated that my book says that Mahavir was a reactionary. Now you read my book and you will find that no such statement occurs at all!

Moreover, I am a man of mild temperament and do not believe in using such language—even if you are a reactionary, I won't call you one!

Another element of this campaign against you is the charge that you have practised favouritism and casteism in the appointments made by you as head of the history department, Delhi University.

The first point I would stress is the timing of this attack against

me. Most of the appointments in question were made by me around April-July 1974. They could have come up with these accusations earlier—I have been here all along—but no, they have chosen to do so three years after the event! No objection was made either in public or in university forums at that time and that—please remember—was one whole year before the emergency.

Today these communal elements believe that they have privileged access to the ruling party and government and so they have chosen this time to launch a campaign against me. So the whole thing I think is politically motivated. If they had any genuine academic grounds they would have come out at that time, itself, as many others did in the case of other departments.

Recently there was a major newspaper article listing specific charges of favouritism against you and asked you to step down

motion took place in 1968—much before I came to Delhi University.

Professor Gupta was promoted after 13 and not 15 years of postgraduate teaching soon after I joined as head of the department. Dr. R. L. Shukla and Dr. Sumit Sarkar had published their books just before they were selected as readers in 1974. The selection committee was so impressed by their qualifications that it recommended five immediate increments on their pay-scale as readers. By 1976, their books had been widely reviewed in journals which enabled the scholarly world to judge their merit as historians. Now the article alleges that they were promoted to the posts of professor after two years of postgraduate teaching. The fact is that Dr. Shukla was made professor after 15 years of postgraduate teaching and Sumit Sarkar after 13 years of it.

I have provided detailed refutation of these baseless charges in a printed open letter circulated by

hat's all. Other institutions, including universities, have, in contrast, functioned in that manner and that is why we are being accused of being pro-marxist.

As a matter of information, of the 96 books selected by the ICHR or translation into regional languages, only 20 or so have been written by marxists.

Coming now to the issue of the infamous Time Capsule—now would you defend your and the ICHR's association with it?

One of the functions of the ICHR, according to its constitution, is to carry out proposals received from the government. ICHR received a proposal from it that it wanted the history of 25 years after independence to be written. So Dr. S. Gopal was authorised by the Research Projects Committee (which decides on all research grants, and of which I am only a member) to select one scholar for this purpose. He selected Dr. S. Krishnaswamy of

a rather different matter from an ordinary research project. It would eventually go under the name, so to speak, of the Indian government or the people of India and then secondly of the ICHR as an institution?

No, no—the ICHR in that sense has nothing to do with it. We got the draft prepared and sent it to the government. That's all, finished. After that we were not concerned whether it was buried or is now going to be exhumed.

But surely the Time Capsule was too important a thing to be treated in this manner? And did you yourself look at the draft?

I think some blunders were corrected by Dr. Gopal—but no substantial changes were made. And as a matter of fact, I did not look at the draft.

You didn't feel it was your responsibility to do so at all?

No, not at all. Why should I consider it my responsibility? Any

versity. A copy of the resolution was sent to the government. Secondly, I refused to sign a Congress resolution supporting the 42nd amendment during the emergency even though a lot of pressure was brought to bear on me to do so.

But why should a person go on defending himself all the time? The very heroes of the anti-emergency struggle are now acting in a none-too-democratic manner as can be seen most recently in the case of the NCERT textbooks.

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It is not often that textbooks become a subject of public controversy. Nor is it often that scholars sit down to write textbooks for school children. A lot has already been said and written about how 'harmful' these books allegedly are. Would you instead tell us why you decided to take time off to write these texts, how you went about doing so and what you hoped to achieve?

BIPAN CHANDRA: One is very aware when writing a textbook of the danger of writing in such a way that it goes above the heads of school students; or in trying to simplify, one may simplify too much.

One of our main objectives was to write the books in such a way as to get students to take history seriously because many of us as university teachers are acutely aware that history is taken by most students at college level because they could not take anything else! People make fun of history as being an irrelevant record of names and dates of battles. We wanted to write history so as to show that it can be logical and scientific and capable of throwing useful light on the present.

I showed the books in draft form to several of my college teacher friends, to school teachers and even school students themselves. For instance, in 1968 my friend Dr. S. Gopal sent a copy

of the book to his schoolgoing daughter in Madras and she replied that this was the first history book she had read non-stop. I also received several criticisms from different quarters and as a result had to rewrite my draft several times.

And what was the reaction of school teachers to whom you showed your draft?

Some of them said that this book (*Modern India*) had been written really for the good students. I said yes, because we must write for the good students. I mean it should be understandable to the average students but it should also provide some extra stimulation for the good students who take a special interest in the subject.

How would you say the content of your books compare with others written so far?

Almost all before ours have been written from a colonial viewpoint. Most were written in the 1930s and at that time this approach was dominant. Since then they have been revised, updated but not substantially changed. New textbooks of the made-easy type are carbon copies of such originals! Nationalism and the nationalist struggle are contained in them only additively. We have attempted for the first time to conceive and restructure the whole account in a nationalist spirit—where the people of India, their lives, their struggles and achievements occupy the centre of the historical stage.

I would even claim that my textbook is the only one which tries to bring out the nature, the origins and mechanisms of colonialism at the school level. The burden of the first three chapters of *Modern India* is to explain why did the British need to conquer and colonise India—something which no other textbooks have ever done! It is sad that this should be so, but it is a fact that

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DR. R. S. SHARMA, head of Delhi University's History Department: "Today these communal elements believe that they have privileged access to the ruling party..."

NARENDRA PANJWANI talks to controversial historians **R. S. Sharma** and **Bipan Chandra** who have of late been the major targets of a campaign of vilification by communal organisations.

to enable an inquiry commission to go into the matter.

The fact is that all eligible candidates for professorship and readership were called for interview by the university's duly constituted selection committees.

The selection committees comprised historians of high academic stature and unquestionable integrity. By calling such appointments into question, the accusers seem to arrogate to themselves the competence of a super-selection committee and to pontificate over the state of historical scholarship in the country, for which they have no academic credentials. It is not possible here to go into all the charges against me but I will cite a few of them.

The impression is created that I was responsible for blocking the promotion of Professors Amba Prasad and P.S. Gupta for "15 years" and hastening that of Professors R.L. Shukla and Sumit Sarkar. Professor Amba Prasad's pro-

me, but I hope you have got an idea of the worth of such allegations.

Is it not true at all that the Indian Council of Historical Research has sponsored and financed research projects with marxist leanings rather more than any other comparable funding institutions?

We have strictly evaluated books and projects on their merit as contributions to scientific historical scholarship. If we found that a certain research project met all the criteria of up-to-date historiography—both in content and method—we sanctioned it, and their being written by marxists did not at all come in the way. So it was just an accident that in the course of the selection made by a big committee of eight to ten experts—that certain books of marxist persuasion were selected.

The only valid charge against the ICHR may be that it has not been deliberately anti-marxist,

Madras Christian college. Now, when we ask a scholar to write a piece of research we don't as a matter of policy regiment him, you see. We don't order him or her to produce only such facts and leave out other facts. We leave it entirely to the scholar's intellectual integrity and discretion—provided he does not commit blunders of form, like language etc. But so far as the substance is concerned, it is entirely up to him. So how can the ICHR be held guilty for what the capsule draft contains?

But the draft before being finally accepted and sent off to the government would come to you for approval, wouldn't it?

Yes, that's all right, but as I told you we have a policy of not making substantial changes in the draft even if it were to come to me—because it is the author's responsibility. The draft goes under the writer's name, you see.

But the Time Capsule surely is

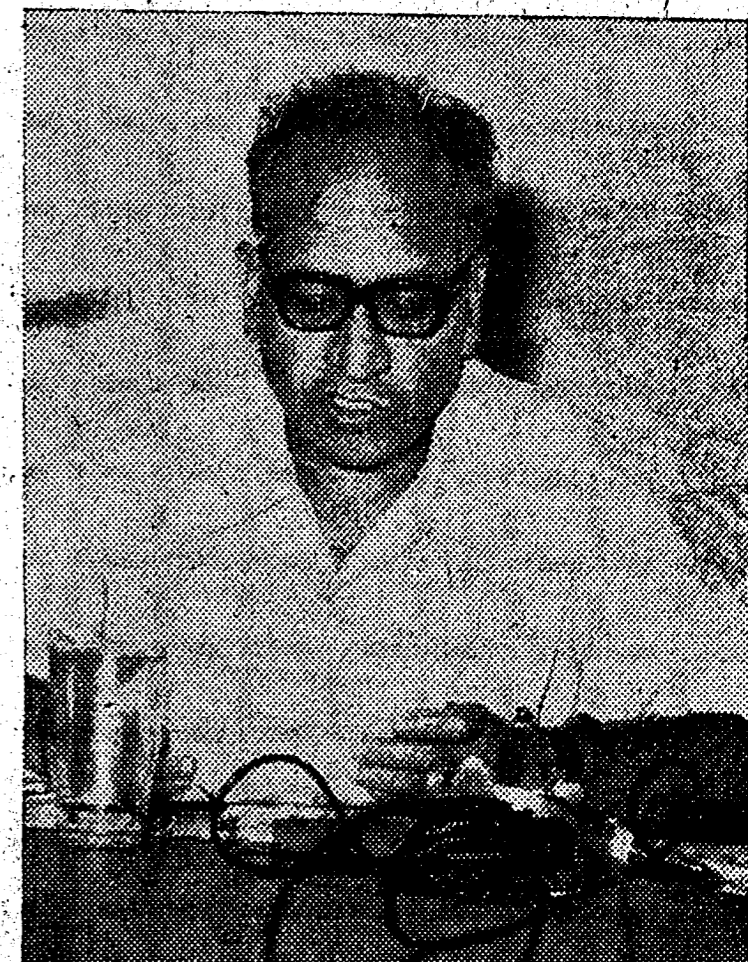
number of projects are being sponsored by the ICHR—I never look at the end-product of each project. I only scrutinise those projects which are referred to me as an expert in ancient Indian history.

I think we may have been wrong, but that is how we thought about the capsule then.

Finally, what do you feel about the charge that you were an accomplice to the emergency regime and that you did not protest against it?

I am not a professional protester! I will protest only when it concerns my work as a scholar or the history profession in general.

As the general President of the 35th Session of the Indian History Congress held at Aligarh in December 1975, I moved the resolution (which was passed unanimously) demanding the release of all history teachers including Dr. L. B. Keny of Bombay Uni-



DR. BIPAN CHANDRA, head, Centre for Historical Studies, JNU: "What if the writers of these five textbooks by chance happened to be Muslims?" (Pictures by Jagdish Kandalkar)

Historians Under Attack

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our textbook writers have provided generations of students with an abysmal diet. Dadabhai Naoroji and R. C. Dutt wrote on colonialism nearly a hundred years ago, R. P. Dutt, A. R. Desai and C. N. Vakil's seminal books were written 30 to 40 years ago. But none of these writers' findings got even a mention in our textbooks until today.

Are the books written from a marxist point of view?

No, they have not been written from a marxist viewpoint. That would be silly. India is not a socialist society in the marxian sense; the government which has commissioned them is not a marxist government and secondly, a very large number of historians would disagree with a straight marxian framework. So what we tried to do was—let us see what are the aspects of modern history which can be written within a certain broad consensus among our historians today.

What would you say is the basic reason why the communalists have got so angered by your books?

This is just what I have been trying to explain to my friends from the departments of economics, sociology and politics — some of whom are upset and puzzled because they are not being attacked! Why only historians, they keep asking me?

One has to understand that in the last 50 to 60 years, there has been a constant struggle between nationalism and anti-colonialism on one side whose focus was to unite people, and communalism whose aim was to divide Hindus and Muslims. This whole struggle started after the end of the first World War; both Hindu and Muslim communal ideologies were born around this time. The *Hindutva* of Savarkar was written in the late 1930s. The RSS was formed in the early 1930s. The Hindu Mahasabha was formed around 1924-25. The first people attacked by the communalists

were Gandhi and Motilal Nehru. Jawaharlal and Subhash Bose have always been criticised by them.

Now in this ideological struggle, the crucial role has been that of history. Why? Because the whole rationale of communalism (as an ideology) derives from a certain interpretation of history. The heart of this interpretation is that Hindus were the greatest of nations and cultures in ancient times. The Muslim rule, meant decline and decadence. And the task now — according to this school—is to go back to the greatness of that Golden Past.

Let me illustrate this while dealing with one of the objections raised to Romilla Thapar's textbook, *Medieval India*. She is accused of not mentioning that Mahmud Ghazni plundered Hindu temples for religious reasons. In explaining the plunders of Ghazni, she says that he justified his acts in the name of religion. Why is the RSS not satisfied with such a statement which would satisfy any historian anywhere in the

world? Because they want us to say, or at least imply, that there is something in Islam which leads men to plunder. While our research shows that religion can be and is often used to justify plunder, sometimes religion may even be the motivation — in the case of fanatics, for instance. But no historical period can be scientifically explained merely as the march of a single religion which is allegedly inherently aggressive. Now this does not suit the communalists because they would like people to believe that Ghazni's sole motive was religion — which would imply that there is something in Islam which leads its followers to plunder and destroy.

Permit me, finally, to pose a question to you in this context. What if the writers of these five textbooks by chance happened to be Muslims? It is just an accident that all of us are Hindus by birth—can you imagine what an ugly furore there would have been had a Muslim written what we have, about Ghazni, Aurangzeb, Shivaji etc.? My god, I shudder to think of it! This should give you an idea of the extent of communalism underlying the whole controversy. ■■■■