

Brief Bio

Professor Harasankar Bhattacharyya (nicknamed Buro, also Paritosh) was born on 20th February, 1928, in Mahilara village of Barisal district of the then East Bengal, to Professor Dr Ashutosh Bhattacharyya and Mrs Soudamini Bhattacharyya. He was the youngest of three sons who survived the successive death of five daughters; his eldest brother was Mr Bhabatosh Bhattacharyya (nick name Pran) and the one immediately before him was Dr Santosh Bhattacharyya. Ashutosh was a Sanskrit teacher and the local priest in the village but moved to [Calcutta](#) shortly after the birth of Harasankar to initially teach in [Jagabandhu Institution](#) on Fern Road in South Calcutta, and then, after graduating from Calcutta University as a Gold Medallist, in [Ashutosh College](#) near Hazra Park in South Calcutta. Harasankar married his sweetheart, Jamuna Nandy, the youngest of eight siblings from a comparatively wealthier and politically active Brahma family who lived in a mansion on the Lower Circular Road near South-Central Calcutta on 19th July, 1950. Harasankar and Jamuna had three children, the eldest son was Late Mr Sandip Bhattacharyya, who died in 1995 at the young age of 42, Dr Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt who is an academic at the [Australian National University](#), and Mr Sukanti Bhattacharyya, who is an engineer by training but who works as a bank manager in the [Punjab National Bank](#) in Calcutta.



Harasankar was influenced by Marxist ideology during in [Calcutta University](#), and became a full member of the [Communist Party of India](#) from its early days of establishment in India. His commitment to the Marxist ideology remained unwavering until his death on 10th January, 1991, in his own home in Burdwan at the age of 63. At the time of his death, he was the Principal of [Tribeni Devi Bhalotia](#) (TDB) College located in the coal mining cum industrial belt in

[Raniganj](#), West Bengal.

Harasankar with the trademark captivating smile on his face (Photo from 1987)

Harasankar had a long-lasting impact on different aspects of social, political and educational life of West Bengal, as the state came to be known after Partition (and subsequent independence) of India. In short: he left a deep mark as a leading educator, an economic historian of the subinfeudation and the formation of a rentier class after the 1793 Permanent Settlement of Bengal, as an organiser of College and University Teachers which became a powerful trade union, viz West Bengal College and University Teachers' Association or WBCUTA, and a populariser of Marxist ideology. He was the author of many books on economics, the [Economic History of India](#), and the impact of the British industrial revolution on the Indian economy. His research work, [Zamindars and Patnidars](#) was published by the University of Burdwan in 1985. Unfortunately, the political climate in West Bengal during the

1980s was such that his great talents were less recognised than they should have been had he lived in another time or place.



Harasankar as the Principal, TDB College, Raniganj (photo from 1988)



During the early days of WBCUTA. Harasankar is 5th from the right in the front row (Photo from 1950s)

As an individual, Harasankar was spirited, honest, witty and extremely intelligent person. His magnetic personality and leadership qualities, drew many around him as much as his great oration skills which he developed overcoming a speech difficulty of stuttering. Most of his career was as an academic; after short stints in the Accountant General's office, he spent two

years in the Kanungo Para College of Chittagong (in 1951-'52), in what is now in Bangladesh, and then joined the Raj College in Burdwan where he rose to the position of the Head of Department, before taking up the position of the Principal of Tribeni Devi Bhalotia (TDB) College of Raniganj in 1980. When he died, he was in this position.

Early Years



Mahilara village in [Barisal district](#), where Harasankar was born on 20th February, 1928, is located in a rather wet and remote part of [Bangladesh](#). The high road that takes one into the village; is separated from [Dhaka](#) by the mighty river [Padma](#).

Not much is known about his childhood, except the family was poor but rigorous in the education of their sons. Ashutosh moved to [Calcutta](#) sometime in the 1930s, but retaining landed property in the village. Eventually, he constructed the family home at 18/3 Fern Road (about halfway between the shopping district of [Gariahat](#) and [Ballygunge Station](#)). Of three sons, the eldest excelled in body-building, and became famous for his physical prowess, whereas both the middle and youngest pursued academic excellence. Harasankar's completed his secondary education from Jagabandhu Institution in, and then graduated in economics (with Honours) from Ashutosh College of Calcutta and finally a Masters degree in Economics from Calcutta University. Throughout his college and university education, Harasankar was an above average performer, excelling in academic as well as in co-curricular activities such as debating. At that time, he was known by his nickname 'Paritosh': someone who spoke with a slight stutter, but still had the magnetic ability to charm and influence his listeners. He was also a good singer and could recite poetry from a wide range of sources as he had a near-photographic memory.

Formative Years as a Marxist

During his time in Calcutta University, Harasankar came into contact with Marxist ideology through his reading of [Rajani Palme Datt](#) and [Manabendra Nath Roy](#)'s revolutionary ideas. Gradually, he became involved in politics; initially with student politics where he took the early lessons in Communist ideology, and then with the [Indian People's Theatrical Association](#) (IPTA)'s Calcutta Chapter that centred around Jamuna's family. The association with the sons of the Nandy family, particularly Surapati, who was the third son and an elder brother of Jamuna, was also critical to him personality blossoming into a great orator with deep knowledge of Marxist literature and a free spirit. The Nandy mansion in Lower Circular Road was at the centre of the Indian People's Theatrical Movement at that time, and the activities of IPTA exposed both to individuals who later went on to be important personalities for the Bengalis – [Salil Chowdhury](#) and [Debabrata Biswas](#) were notable among them. Gradually became more inclined towards labour movements, particularly the organisation of industrial labour into unions. By 1947, when India became independent, he was a member of the Communist Party of India, as one of the early activists for the organisation.

Harasankar and Jamuna married through a civil union on 19th July, in 1950. Jamuna was at that time a young girl of sixteen years. Professor Ashutosh Bhattacharyya, Harasankar's father and

a conservative Brahmin, and also a staunch pro-nationalist, could not accept this union and disowned Harasankar. Later, through a legal deed of statement written in 1960, Harasankar's father disinherited him from his property. All this was because, although she was from a well-known Brahmo family, Jamuna was originally from a lower caste woman from a different religion, and such unions were relatively unheard of in those days. As one can imagine, this rejection by his father left a long-lasting imprint on Harasankar; on the one hand, he strove for recognition by his father through his -achievement in life as an academic and scholar, but also as a successful man who was able to create his own assets and direct his own life. [He largely built up his assets through income from teaching and writing books](#) and owned several properties. On the other hand, he chose not to follow any particular religion and embraced Marxism more deeply. He stood up for his own secular and enlightened beliefs, upholding honesty and social activism and religiously following them as the guiding principles in life. He also became a champion of inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, and many of his students later received support from him when they ventured into the then not widely charted path in their lives. He taught his students and children to become fiercely independent and rational in their views, upholding the ability to judge things for themselves and think about things critically. Small efforts, such as working on his stutter by speaking slowly, worked wonders and soon his oratory skills became unparalleled amongst his colleagues. His oration remained with him until death, making him one of the legendary public speakers, who inspired generations of younger people in leftist ideology.

Early Career

Following his marriage to Jamuna, Harasankar had taken up a job in the [Accountant General of Bengal](#)'s (AG Bengal) office located in Dalhousie Square, the Central Business District of in Calcutta. It was from this position that he sat in the highly competitive Indian Administrative Services (IAS) examination. It is known that he took a leave of four days from the AG Bengal office for this examination, and ranked fourth in this extremely difficult all-India examination. It is rumoured that at the interview, he surprised the interviewers by appearing in his typical Bengali attire of a set of white 'dhoti and punjabi', something that was quite uncommon at the time amongst the young and bright men, aspiring to administer India following the rules and conventions established by the colonial British. Once selected, the political background of all IAS officers were searched by the police in those days, and they found that he was a member of the Communist Party which was banned by the then Prime Minister of India, [Jawaharlal Nehru](#), for its activism amongst the refugees who had migrated across the borders during the Partition. He was instructed to sign a bond, giving up his ideology and Party membership, but he refused. Consequently, not only did he not get admitted into the IAS cadre, but he was sacked from the government job at the AG Bengal. This led the young couple in deeper into financial penury, encouraging him eventually to take up the position of a Lecturer in Economics in [Kanungopara College](#) in Chittagong, East Pakistan (now [Bangladesh](#)) in 1953.

After about three years, Harasankar took up a job as a Lecturer in Economics in the historic [Raj College](#) in Burdwan town, the district headquarters of Burdwan, one of the most prosperous, agriculturally and in terms of resources such as coal, rich districts of India. As can be expected, the population of Burdwan in mid-1950s was more conservative and tradition-

bound than those who lived in the Metropolitan city of Calcutta. Therefore, establishing a life in the town was a challenge.

Early Years in Burdwan

Harasankar arrived in Burdwan in 1955. Initially, he took up accommodation in a bachelors' quarters, then rented a house next door in 1956 after Jamuna moved in. By that time, they had two children: the eldest son, Sandip (Bablu), born on 11th July, 1953; and their only daughter, Kuntala (Tuku), born on 29th October, 1956. His arrival in Burdwan with his electric presence and appearance, deep knowledge of Marxist ideology and economics, and ability to charm the listeners through speech instantly created a wave of public awareness about him. It was in no time that he became the most popular teacher in Raj College, and beyond. He was also a good sportsman, playing cricket and tennis, and organising students to play sports. The young students were attracted to him like moths to a candle, and soon he developed a large group of inspired followers. Among the students who flocked around him were several who went on to become noted for their contributions to society in later life; among them are Tushar Kanjilal (the founder of [Tagore Society for Rural Development](#) in Gosaba, Sundarban area), Amanulla Akbar (Chairman of [Burdwan Municipality](#)), Shyamal Banerjee (lawyer), Pijush XXX (Leader of the RSP Party). The academic environment in Burdwan Raj College in late 1950s and 1960s was electrifying and highly political; colleagues included remarkable personalities such as the literature specialist, Professor [Abanti Sanyal](#). By early 1960s, Harasankar was actively organising the college and university teachers to form union, [WBCUTA](#), and also travelling around in the colliery belt and the newly established industrial town of Durgapur that housed the government-owned steel plant and chemical factories.

The 1961 Chinese aggression on India's border led to a split in the [Communist Party of India \(CPI\)](#) that had played a significant



role in determining the direction of Harasankar's life. As the Communist Party divided into two (the CPI and the CPI (M)) long-held close friendships were lost to ideology, marking the beginning of a deep political animosity against each other. Many childhood friends and comrades moved to the pro-China faction that split as the [CPI \(M\)](#), whereas Harasankar chose to stay

with the pro-Russia CPI. The significance of the factional division became more apparent during the 1972 elections when the CPI chose to align with the [Indian National Congress](#) which had initiated several steps to pull India out of feudal heritage (such as the abolition of first the [Zamindari system](#) and then the privy purse for the erstwhile Maharajas). It was also moving, under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, towards a more Soviet-type economic system by formalising state-control over the 'commanding heights' of the economy. The [nationalisation of collieries](#), banks and the state-owned steel plants gave the assurance to the CPI that the

national bourgeoisie was willing to adopt a socialist model, and it made more sense to ‘work with them’ rather than ‘work against them’ to achieve the socialist goals.

Time as a Member in the [Legislative Assembly of West Bengal](#)

Harasankar stood for the General Elections of the state of West Bengal in 1972 from [Bolpur](#) constituency, a traditional Congress stronghold, but as a CPI candidate. With the support from the Congress, he [won the election with a large margin, defeating his nearest candidate \(from CPI\(M\) by over 150,000 votes.](#)



Harasankar as a Member of West Bengal’s Legislative Assembly (Photo from 1977)

As the Principal of TDB College

In 1980, Harasankar took up the position of the Principal of [Tribeni Devi Bhalotia College](#), an institution established in 1957 in the colliery belt of West Bengal in eastern India. The college was one of the largest institutions under the University of Burdwan, running in three shifts – morning, day and night – and producing a very large number of graduate students in a wide range of fields and disciplines. He remained its Principal until his sudden death in 1991. During his tenure the college grew by leaps and bounds, and turned into one of the premier institutions of tertiary education with a special emphasis on practical and vocation-oriented learning. A sudden stroke intervened at the age of 63, killing Harasankar within a few hours of its strike at early morning hours on 10th January, 1990. He left his wife Jamuna, sons Sandip and Sukanti, and daughter Kuntala.