

## Did Bhabha trigger off China's nuclear ambitions?

Did Homi Bhabha, father of Indian atomic energy programme, make a mistake by showing off India's nuclear achievements to Chinese prime minister Zhou Enlai during his visit to Trombay in 1960?

Homi Sethna, a former chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) thinks so, suggesting Bhabha's act might have unwittingly provoked China to accelerate its nuclear weapons programme.

'When Zhou Enlai visited us, Dr. Bhabha showed him an ingot of uranium weighing 50 kg and asked him (the prime minister) to try lifting it,' Sethna said in an interview to a special issue of Physics News, the journal of the Indian Physics Association. The special issue was commemorating Bhabha's birth centenary.

'He (Zhou Enlai) told us we were ten years ahead of them (China),' Sethna said. 'But he went back and within two years China exploded the atomic bomb with uranium they produced by taking technical help from Russia.'

Sethna said: 'On hindsight it was not right for us to show off our capability to him (Zhou Enlai).' He added that the fear of being overtaken by India gave momentum to China's nuclear programme.

On Bhabha's relations with late prime minister Indira Gandhi, Sethna said that the only thing Bhabha said to him was that 'she is not very bright (unlike her father Nehru).'

'These are the words he used - she is not very bright,' he recalled.

Sethna said that Bhabha, along with the then finance secretary, travelled to many nuclear countries to get assistance but returned empty handed.

'That is where Mrs. Gandhi decided that we have to be entirely on our own and that is when she handed over the plutonium plant to me and said go ahead and do what you want to do. But I want to get a device to shake the world,' he recalled.

The world was indeed shaken when India first tested its atomic bomb in 1974 but according to Sethna, who was then the AEC chairman, the test was possible only because Mrs. Gandhi had replaced the scientific adviser to the defence minister, S. Bhagavantam with B.D. Nag Chaudhury.

'At one time Bhagavantam had taken an oath that there would be no ABC - atomic, biological or chemical weapons,' Sethna said.

'Nag Chaudhury was a nuclear physicist from Calcutta. Thereafter we worked like a team. He was a very good man,' he added.

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