

A Singular Person*

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There are some people who are hard to classify, whether in terms of achievement or contribution to society or personality, and Ashok Mitra is one of them. Economist, policy maker, writer, organic intellectual, politician, litterateur, legislator: he has been all of these at different times, and often several of them together. In a remarkable life spanning nearly nine decades thus far, he has also shown a remarkable ability to integrate the personal and the political, the individual and the social, the emotional and the rational, in ways that express both the contradictions and the sublimity of being truly human.

But even among these varied personae that he inhabits, in terms of legacy one thing is clear: he will surely be ranked among the foremost exponents of the art of the essay that India has ever produced. This achievement is deeply bilingual, as he has written prodigiously and to great effect in both English and Bengali, in columns that have been widely popular as well as appreciated by cognoscenti. In English, first in a very longstanding column in the Economic and Political Weekly and then in numerous writings in other publications like the Telegraph newspaper, he has set a remarkably high standard for the short essay that others will strive to reach in vain because of the very singularity of his style.

A new publication of mostly recent essays (“First Person Singular”, New Delhi, Paranjoy 2016) shows that, even as he nears his nineties, Mitra’s passion, literary flair and capacity for incisive analysis remain undiminished. In addition, he retains his very idiosyncratic style, which is both unorthodox and unafraid of giving offense in all directions. He brings to bear this unique combination of attributes in pieces that deal with a wide range of issues: assessments of recent and current political and economic tendencies; reminiscences great and small; considerations of the literary and cultural influences that have shaped him; and much else. The result is a volume that is both an intellectual tour de force providing a sharp analysis of contemporary India and a sentimental journey that provides an evocative and memorable tour of some aspects of its making.

There are of course the sharply written and often disturbingly prescient commentaries on political and economic issues for which Mitra is justly famed. Commentaries cover the last inglorious years of the UPA government; trenchant criticism of the economic policies of the last decade and more; desperate concern about the incipient fascism brought about by the Trinamool government in West Bengal; tirades against the inadequacies of the Left movement with which he continues to feel associated despite mounting irritation and anger; considerations of how international relations continue to reflect imperialist underpinnings and of how Indian elites and the current Indian government are playing into this; and much more.

Some of the vignettes are memorable. The opening piece in the book, on Thirty Pandara Road, provides a flavour of the intellectual excitement and camaraderie that characterised the period just after Independence, when young economists gathered in Delhi to build a new India, and dwells on how personal relations between some of them evolved in the decades thereafter. A later piece describes some of the Mitra’s

experiences as a Member of the Rajya Sabha in the 1990s, when he describes instances of open magnanimity by political opponents, and notes that “in spite of the increasing existence of crude and vulgar behaviour on the part of a few abominable specimens, civilities still reigned in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha and members of Parliament, even when their political views were totally polarized, would often be full of consideration for, and gracefully courteous towards, one another. But that was almost two decade ago and neoliberal economic notions were yet to be firmly grafted into the nation’s ethos. It is a different universe now.” (page 222)

There is a charming story juxtaposing the inauguration of President Kennedy in Washington D.C. in January 1961 with a game of bridge played by a group of Indians (including Mitra) who were then based there, who were simultaneously watching the proceedings on television and ribbing one of the party about being interviewed for a newspaper by the woman of the moment, the glamorous Jacqueline (then Bouvier) Kennedy. Mitra and his partner won an unlikely small slam just as Kennedy ended his famous Inaugural Address, somehow resonating with the aura of hope and optimism generated at the start of that Presidency. Typical of Mitra, he ends that particular story with a different take: “Is it not ironic that by far the most outstanding initiative the Kennedy administration took was enlarging the scale of military engagement in Vietnam, a decision which caused deep misgivings across the globe and tore apart the American nation itself and its denouement was an American defeat, for the first time, in a war with a foreign power?” (page 99)

A lovely piece entitled “Incalculable debt” first tries to estimate the current value of the two rupees (plus interest) that Mitra borrowed from a fellow student in 1951, but never had the opportunity to return, arriving at a figure of more than Rs 100,000 at current prices. This is juxtaposed with another debt that is harder to calculate: that owed to his teachers at the government school in the sleepy district town in eastern Bengal where he studied in the 1930s. Ironically, their skill reflected the scarcity of jobs for recent graduates, which meant that even jobs in high schools in district towns were seen as “dream jobs”. As he puts it, “Some of them possessed a brilliance of mind and could claim a depth of knowledge that would put to shame many of those who occupy a professorial chair in any of the universities of the country these days”. (page 110) He notes their intense seriousness and commitment to their students, which were crucial in his own development, which is why the use of the term incalculable (and therefore unrequitable) to describe his debt to them “has its own dignity and splendour”.

While there are several reminiscences in the first part of the book that is based on his articles in The Telegraph, the second part of the book consists of both earlier and more recent pieces that were written as obituaries or memorial statements of people he knew and mostly loved. Many will find this the most rewarding section, as it brings out not only Mitra’s deeply felt emotional links with such people, but also provides a sense of their social and historical contexts and of the ways in which they altered the world around them.

The historian Ranajit Guha used to say that his only wish was to die before Ashok Mitra, in order to have the honour and satisfaction of an obituary written by him: no other person, he felt, could ever do justice to a person’s life with such clear-eyed empathy underlined by social understanding. As it happens, Guha has predeceased

Mitra , though I do not know if he actually wrote an obituary for him, and in any case it is not among those reproduced in this book.

Indeed, the feeling and felicity with which most of these pieces are written do make you feel that Guha was right in wanting such a memorial. Typically, the range of people covered is wide: the quiet Kolkata printer P.K. Ghosh, the singers Suchitra Mitra and Debabrata Biswas, the founders of Seminar journalists Raj and Romesh Thapar, the dedicated and civilised Communist Party worker Kitty Menon, the wonderful sculptor Sankho Chaudhuri, the founder of the Signet Press the dignified but determined Nilima Devi, the crazily charismatic Khurshid Hyder, the delightful Zohra Sehgal, the indefatigable Verghese Kurien of Anand co-operative, the cultivated economist K. S. Krishnaswamy, the academic and playwright G. P. Deshpande, the editor of EPW Krishna Raj and many others.

What is remarkable about these pieces is that Mitra does not make excessive concessions to sentimental concerns about expressing opinions that may appear critical of the dead, something that often inhibits those who are writing in memory of others. Rather, he retains his own personal (and often quirky) perspective – one that can be simultaneously satisfying and aggravating, creating a desire to enter into an argument about this or that point even while appreciating his fundamental sympathy towards the person concerned.

This is a book to dip into, to enjoy in bits and pieces or in long stretches as the whim takes the reader. Mitra's very individual voice makes this feel like a conversation with an accomplished raconteur, one who is always able to situate his voice in the wider social, economic and political context. We continue to be lucky to hear this voice in all its clarity and candour.

*** This article was originally published in the Frontline, Print edition: May 13, 2016.**