

Ashok Mitra, the Marxist Economist Who Was a Fierce Critic of the Government*

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The former finance minister of West Bengal was not just an academic, an administrator, a politician and an activist, but also a writer of amazing eloquence and insight in both Bengali and English.

On the morning of May Day, former finance minister of West Bengal, member of parliament, prolific writer, bureaucrat, economist and Marxist thinker Ashok Mitra passed away in a Kolkata nursing home. He was born in 1928 and had turned 90 on April 10 this year.

To describe him as a multi-faceted personality would be more than an understatement. His career as an academic, an administrator, a politician, an activist and, above all, a writer of amazing eloquence and insight in both Bengali and English, have all meshed and merged so seamlessly that it is an impossible task to even attempt to cubbyhole him into specific categories.

After graduating from the University of Dacca (now Dhaka) in 1948, a year after India became politically independent and was partitioned, he crossed over from East Pakistan (which became Bangladesh in 1971) to West Bengal. While he sought to gain admission to the University of Calcutta for a post-graduate degree in economics and even attended classes, he was refused admission (for reasons which were never very clear to him).

Thereafter, he moved to the Banaras Hindu University from where he obtained a master's degree. Mitra then joined the Delhi School of Economics that had then been recently established in the University of Delhi. He taught economics at the University of Lucknow for two years before travelling abroad to be associated with the International Institute of Social Studies in Netherlands.

In 1953, he earned a doctorate degree in economic sciences from the University of Rotterdam (now The Netherlands School of Economics) under the guidance of the well-known Dutch economist professor Jan Tinbergen (1903-94), who was the first to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1969.

In late 1956, he returned to Delhi to join the newly-started National Council of Applied Economic Research. He then went to the Netherlands once again, came back to Delhi where he spent a little more than a year as Officer on Special Duty in the Ministry of Finance, before joining the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific at Bangkok, Thailand.

Subsequently, in 1961, he travelled to the US where he worked with the Economic Development Institute in Washington DC as a member of its teaching faculty. The institute had been started by the World Bank but was situated in a different part of the city and had no direct links with the bank. Mitra was a vehement critic of the policies of the World Bank.

He returned to India and became a professor of economics at the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta (IIM-C) that had been established as the first national institute for post-graduate studies and research in management by the government of India in collaboration with the Alfred P. Sloan School of Management (in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), the government of West Bengal, the Ford Foundation and Indian industry.

The institute had as its first director K.T. Chandy who, in the 1930s, was part of the young group actively associated with the India League spearheaded by V.K. Krishna Menon. Some of the members of this group later became important communist leaders in India. His joining the IIM-C was really an offshoot of what could be called the “old boy network”.

He went back to Delhi to join the fledgling Agricultural Prices Commission and was responsible for giving it shape. The Commission (now the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices), among other things, would calculate the minimum support prices of cereals like wheat and rice. In 1970, Mitra was invited to take over as chief economic adviser (CEA) to the government of India in the finance ministry, from which post he resigned in April 1972.

While he was the chief economic adviser (CEA), Manmohan Singh – who went on to become prime minister of India – was the economic adviser in the ministry of commerce and went on to succeed Mitra as CEA. His association with then prime minister Indira Gandhi during the days when she rode high on the slogan of garibi hatao (banish poverty) – whose bitter critic he subsequently became – was used by Mitra’s critics to claim that he was hypocritical and had turned against those who had helped him, a claim he has always denied.

Returning to Kolkata, over the next 3.5 years, he was a national fellow at the Indian Council of Social Science Research and simultaneously, a visiting professor at the Administrative Staff College of India at Hyderabad. This was the period when he began writing regularly for the Economic and Political Weekly.

He received an invitation to join the Institute of Development Studies at Brighton, UK, as a professorial fellow for the year 1975-76. The Emergency was declared in June 1975 and the censors of the Indira Gandhi government clamped a ban on Mitra’s articles. He recalled to me that he had sent a letter to The Economist weekly, which is published out of London, complaining bitterly against the imposition of the Emergency and the “horrors” that followed – the letter was promptly published. He was, nevertheless, able to proceed to Brighton without hindrance in October 1975. While in the UK, he wrote an article for The Economist on the completion of one year of the Emergency; the particular issue of the magazine was prohibited from circulation in the country.

After the Emergency was lifted in March 1977 and fresh elections conducted, later that year in June, Mitra became the finance minister of the government of West Bengal headed by Jyoti Basu, a post he held for almost a decade till January 1986. During this period, he attracted considerable attention of the media, especially for his remarks against the Union government in Delhi and how it had economically discriminated against the eastern region of India in general and West Bengal in particular, especially in terms of investing in major public sector projects. By then,

Mitra was very much a part of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which had led the Left Front government in the state. During his stint as finance minister, he once got angry with journalists who were questioning him about why the state government had abruptly removed a bureaucrat (S.M. Murshed) from his post. He famously retorted: “I’m not a bhadralok (gentleman). I’m a communist!”

Though his personal relations with Basu (India’s longest serving chief minister) remained cordial, Mitra started having serious differences of opinion with him and the policies and programmes of the CPI(M)-led government in West Bengal. He decided to quit the government and be on his own, writing and speaking, for a few years. He was soon “persuaded” by the party to move to Delhi to become a member of the Rajya Sabha. He served as chairman of Parliament’s Standing Committee on Industry and Commerce. During his six-year term as an MP during the mid-1990s, the government of India led by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao had embarked on its policies of economic liberalisation under the tutelage of the then finance minister Manmohan Singh – policies which Mitra intensely opposed in parliament and outside it, through his writings and his utterances.

As in the case of his relationship with Jyoti Basu, despite having worked closely with Manmohan Singh in Indira Gandhi’s government and despite their personal affinity, Mitra was his trenchant critic. Till he became Union finance minister in June 1991, Singh was seen as an economist who had endorsed the ‘socialist’ policy framework of the Indian government. Even as the South Commission’s Secretary General in the late-1980s, he had articulated the economic aspirations of the developing countries and been critical of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

He did surprise many when he espoused a sharp rightward shift in India’s economic policy regime as finance minister between June 1991 and April 1996. Even as prime minister, Singh has been perceived as among the more right-wing leaders of the Indian National Congress as far as his economic ideology is concerned. Mitra contended in his book (*A Prattler’s Tale: Bengal, Marxism and Governance*, Samya, 2007) that Singh’s appointment as finance minister in the Narasimha Rao government was on account of American pressure.

While Mitra has written academic books, including one titled *China: Issues in Development*, his short articles, first published in the EPW and then in Kolkata’s Telegraph daily, have been avidly read by a wide cross-section of readers in India and across the world.

Besides *Calcutta Diary* and *From the Ramparts*, two other collections of articles he wrote for the EPW have been published – *The Hoodlum Years* (Orient Longman, 1979) and *The Starkness of It* (Roli Books, 2008). His second book in the Prattler’s Tale series with the sub-title *Recollections of a Contrary Marxist* has been published in Bengali as *Apila Chapala*.

Equally proficient in English and his mother tongue Bengali and in writing fiction as well as non-fiction, Mitra was the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1996 for his contributions to Bengali literature. He has written 20 books in Bengali on diverse themes. Five years ago, then at the ripe young age of 85, he told me that he had the “cheek” to edit, print and publish a Bengali fortnightly, *Arek Rakam* (or “that

which is different”), which should hopefully continue publication thanks to his well-wishers.

To return to the Emergency, when it was at its peak in 1976, he had two manuscripts ready for publication: Calcutta Diary and Terms of Trade and Class Relations. At that time, no publisher would dare publish him. It was at this juncture that Frank Cass came forward and offered to publish both books from London. The publisher paid him a “token” advance of 250 British pounds for both books which were published in early-1977 around the time the Emergency was lifted and the new Janata Party government was elected to power in March that year. The first print run of the book got exhausted in 1980.

I had the honour and privilege of republishing Calcutta Dairy in 2014. The collection of essays offers an unparalleled portrait of Kolkata in all its grime and glory in a way few writers have been able to capture life and longing in this infuriatingly-memorable metropolis in eastern India.

Here is a cinematic excerpt from the opening essay in the book Calcutta Every Day:

Perspiration. The odour of it. A dilapidated CSTC (Calcutta State Transport Corporation) bus emitting a morbid trail of black smoke. Burnt-out grass, dead grass, butts of crushed cigarettes, rags, pieces of paper, a quiet coexistence between the two parallel lines of the tram tracks...Revolutionary truth on the wall. Or at least a version of it. Beggars. A leper and his comely wife...Market place, odour of fish, vegetables and unwashed human species. Some counter-revolutionary truth, this time plastered across a film hoarding. Hindi make-believebreasts suggestive of infinite plasticity ...More poets per square kilometre than even football fans. A newspaper kiosk, poetry magazines by the dozen, more revolutionary truth ...A ration shop, the law of the Green Revolution ...the greater the success of the Revolution, the higher the price of wheat. Aspects of dialectics, facades, speeches at the Maidan and negotiations over lunch at the Calcutta Club. Painted women whom history has not yet caught up with...pickpockets, policemen in worn-out uniforms, a hydrant leaking since morning.

On a personal note, I have had the privilege of knowing Mitra from 1977 onwards. The first time I met him was when I had joined a monthly magazine called Perspective (now defunct) – which had been edited by the late Bhabani Sen Gupta – as a cub reporter and sub-editor, though I had been given the exalted designation of assistant editor. I later interviewed him for what was then one of the most popular English weeklies in the country, the Illustrated Weekly of India. Mitra was always patient with me, occasionally chiding me for what he felt was my immaturity and impetuosity. Once when I asked why he had given up his job as the finance minister of West Bengal ostensibly to read and write, he asked me: “Why can’t I have the luxury of relaxing?”

I have visited his home in Sonali Apartments in Kolkata’s Alipore area on many occasions. When I suggested that I interview him for a television channel since he had hardly, if ever, appeared on the “idiot box”, he recoiled in horror. He said he would never appear in front of a television camera. He added half in jest that he would develop a severe allergic reaction if a video camera was placed in front of him.

Despite his age and his failing physical health, his mind remained alert till his last years. He was a writer who wrote with such intensity and passion that his words would remain etched forever for posterity.

Portions of this obituary have been excerpted from a 'publisher's note' written on the occasion of the publication of the revised edition of Calcutta Diary in 2014.

Paranjoy Guha Thakurta is a Delhi-based journalist. His new book, *Thin Dividing Line: India, Mauritius and Global Illicit Financial Flows*, was published by Penguin Random House in December 2017.

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