

OBITUARY | Ashok Mitra, the Former Bengal Finance Minister Who Wished He Were Forgotten*

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In an age where politicians speak venomous language, have criminal backgrounds, behave in the most outrageous manner, it is difficult to imagine that a cultured person like Ashok Mitra was once the Finance Minister of West Bengal. Mitra, however, was not merely a Finance Minister. He was an outstanding economist, a doyen of Bengali prose, an essayist, a parliamentarian, an editor and so much more that it is impossible for anybody to fill the void that he has left behind.

As the Finance Minister of the first Left Front government in West Bengal he played a stellar role in bringing the issue of the skewed nature of the Centre-State financial relation to the forefront. It is because of Jyoti Basu and his efforts that devolution of more resources from the Centre to the state and restructuring of the Centre-State financial relations became major issues, uniting non-Congress state governments, in the 1980s. However, when differences with the party in power arose, he resigned from the post of Finance Minister and went back to his passion for writing.

Mitra was perhaps the last of the bilingual intellectuals in India. He wrote as an outstanding essayist in both English and Bengali. His columns in The Telegraph were famous for its razor sharp analysis and humour. He wrote in the Economic and Political Weekly, since its inception. A collection of these columns known as Calcutta Diary were published as a book during the 1970s. The book was a fierce critique of the Emergency imposed in 1975 and the preceding semi-fascist repression unleashed on the people of West Bengal by the Congress regime. His book Terms of Trade and Class Relations in India is an example how to analyse Indian economy through the prism of political economy.

At the same time, he was an outstanding writer in Bengali and won the Sahitya Academy award for his contributions to Bengali literature. Generations of left activists in West Bengal were inspired by his brilliant collection of essays, Kabita theke Michhile. His memoirs in Bengali, Aapila Chaapila, chronicles his life and with it the rise of Marxism and left politics in West Bengal. It remains a hugely popular text for all those who want to understand the history of post-independence West Bengal.

Mitra belonged to the first generation of post-independence economists in India who formulated the planning strategy of the country. He finished his PhD under the supervision of Nobel laureate Jan Tinbergen. At a very young age, he was appointed as the Chairperson of Commission for Agriculture Cost and Prices in the late 1960s and later he was appointed as the Chief Economic Advisor to the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1970, a position from which he resigned in 1972 protesting against the repression unleashed by the Congress government in West Bengal.

What made Mitra stand apart from other fellow economists or intellectuals was his unwavering support for the cause of the working people and the Left in India and West Bengal. He was a staunch critique of the neoliberal economic policies being pursued in the country. Being a witness to the horrors of communal politics, during the Partition, he completely abhorred communalism and argued against the communal

politics of the current government at centre. At the same time, he did not shy away from criticising the left for its mistakes and grave errors in West Bengal. He had disagreements with many, but had no personal enemies.

In the last few years of his life, he founded and edited a Bengali periodical, Arekrakam, where he relentlessly argued for a better and just India, tried to persuade the Left in India to rectify its mistakes of compromising on core ideological political issues and uphold the cause of the downtrodden.

He disliked being praised. In the last few lines of his memoirs Aapila Chaapila, he wished that he may be forgotten by everybody, he did not want his readers to remember him. Therefore, he would have strongly disagreed with this obituary of his. But those who knew him, loved him would agree that it is impossible to forget him.

(Subhanil Chowdhury is an economist. He assisted Dr. Ashok Mitra in editing the Bengali periodical Arekrakam.)

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