

Ashok Mitra (10th April 1928 to 1 May 2018): Of Another Kind

Ashwini Deshpande
(ashwini@econdse.org)

The iconoclastic economist, scholar, policy maker, author and commentator, Ashok Mitra, found his personal liberation on May Day, the international workers' day. Had he been aware of it, this serendipitously apt timing of his passing would have pleased him immensely. Over the course of his life, he had inhabited the highest echelons of policy-making and academics, but he was, and remained till the end, a committed Marxist, despite his public and well-known differences with the organized communist movement in India.

He made Kolkata his home for several decades until his death, but he was very proud of his origins in Dhaka (then called Dacca), where he spent the first two decades of his life. It was in Dhaka that he first came in contact with the Progressive Writers and Artists Association, and became close to members of the Communist Party. His formal association with first the united CPI, later the CPI(M), went through various phases, but he remained deeply engaged with the Left, both in terms of personal relationships with individual party members, as well as with ideological positions of political parties.

This engagement was complicated and often contentious. The vicissitudes of this commitment were typically characteristic of his personality and worldview, which was fiercely independent and brutally, unsparingly honest. Ashok Mitra's razor sharp mind and his fundamentally radical spirit, which unhesitatingly questioned everything, were too independent to fit any pre-established pattern.

His journey out of Dhaka took him literally around the world – Kolkata, Banaras, Delhi, Lucknow, the Netherlands, Thailand, USA – and then back to Kolkata where he finally settled down. This journey was also marked by several changes in career – from academic jobs at Lucknow University, Delhi School of Economics and Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta (IIMC), to international agencies, to working with the central government in Delhi and later the Left Front government in West Bengal as its Finance Minister. Throughout the course of these multiple gear shifts and relocations, he maintained his association with the Left movement. For instance, before accepting a job at the United Nations Commission for Asia and the Far East in Bangkok, he asked the permission of E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Kerala's first communist Chief Minister.

The descriptions “renaissance man” and “multi-faceted personality” get thrown about far too casually in obituaries. But Ashok Mitra was truly worthy of these epithets. He was one of the most insightful and elegant bilingual writers of 20th century India. Equally eloquent and articulate in his native Bangla and in English, the range of his interests and writings was phenomenal, and went far beyond a typical academic or politician's arc. His autobiographical account, “*Apila Chapila*” in Bangla, translated as “A Prattler's Tale: Bengal, Marxism and Governance” in

English is not only a delightful read, but is an extremely informative social history of Indian independence, partition of Bengal, the Left movement, and inner workings of policy making bodies.

“Calcutta Diary”, his column in Economic Weekly, later Economic and Political Weekly, between 1968 and 1975, signed with his initials AM, not only showcased his signature sharp, acerbic, devastatingly honest writing style, but also showed his extraordinary range of interests, spanning literature, music, cricket, politics, current affairs, history and crime thrillers. These essays were later re-published in book form, described by a reviewer as a “Guernica of Political Prose”. But recognizing only the explicitly political aspects of his writing would be doing his eclectic tastes a grave disservice. He wrote hauntingly beautiful word portraits of a range of personalities – musicians such as Begum Akhtar or Kanan Devi, filmmakers, authors – which were marked not only by his elegant turn of phrase, but also by a deep understanding of their craft.

These portraits reveal his gentle and soft side, and provide innumerable proof that underneath that cutting and severe exterior lay a deeply observant, warm, loving and empathetic soul. For someone with such strong political views, he had an extraordinary “*lokasangraha*” (literally a collection of lifelong friends, as we would say in Marathi), which went beyond ideological, age, class and locational chasms. He had the rare ability to form non-hierarchical deep friendships spanning several age groups; he had independent and distinct friendly relationships with four generations of my family.

There are literally hundreds of individuals who were lucky enough to have experienced the incredible hospitality and gracious generosity of the Mitras – Gauri and Ashok. His home, especially his amazing library, with books stacked from floor to ceiling, the site of so many intense conversations, banter, exceptionally delicious leisurely meals, defines Calcutta/Kolkata for me. He didn’t care much for new technology, and became a reluctant user of email in the last 4-5 years. Until then, he kept in touch with beautiful handwritten letters.

In his last years, he started a journal in Bangla called “*Arek Rokom*”. That is what he himself was – of another kind.