

Ashok Rudra*

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Ashok Rudra (1930–1992) was not only a fine economist but also a great scholar and a “public intellectual” in the best sense of the term. From the mid-1950s onwards, he conducted many pioneering studies of India’s economy and society. Rudra’s professional writings, based on painstaking research and strong value commitments, often challenged established theories and conventional wisdom. He was equally creative and fearless in his interventions in public debates. Rudra also wrote prolifically on literary and cultural subjects, and became an eminent Bengali writer, with a distinct style of his own. Few Indian economists achieved this remarkable blend of technique, scholarship and creativity.

Biographical Sketch

Ashok Rudra was born on 29 November 1930 in a Brahmo family in Rangoon. His parents came to Calcutta from Rangoon and later moved to London. Rudra graduated in statistics from Presidency College (Calcutta) in 1950 and obtained his doctorate in statistics from London University in 1953.

After returning to India in 1953 with his wife Colette, Rudra joined the Indian Statistical Institute (Calcutta) as a Research Officer. From then on he worked with many academic institutions in India. He served the Government of Kerala as Director, Bureau of Economic Studies from 1958 to 1960 and after that joined the ISI, Delhi. He was a Professor of Economics at Bombay University (1965-67), Delhi University (1967-68) and Visva-Bharati University (1968-73). He worked as Senior Fellow of the ICSSR from 1974 to 1977 and as a Professor of ISI, Calcutta in 1978-79. In 1979 he joined Visva-Bharati again as a Professor of Economics, and retired in 1990. In 1991 he became a National Fellow of the ICSSR, in which capacity he worked until his death on 29 October, 1992.

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Rudra had a lasting association with Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan, starting in 1968. He found Santiniketan's proximity with rural areas ideal for purposes of field surveys. He liked the natural and cultural atmosphere of Santiniketan and had a deep love for Rabindra Nath Tagore. He built a house in Santiniketan and made it his home.

During his first spell in Visva-Bharati, from 1968 to 1973, Rudra participated actively in Santiniketan's rich cultural life. He initiated a music circle, 'Sangeet Chakra', and also a Marxian Study circle in which various issues would be discussed from a Marxian point of view but without partisanship or dogma. During the 1980s he started another organization, 'Mukta Manus' (free human being). This organization used to arrange meetings in rural areas to promote scientific thought and help people to overcome superstitions.

P.C. Mahalanobis played an important role in Ashok Rudra's professional life. Rudra wrote a biography of Mahalanobis, which was published posthumously. He also had close associations with many distinguished Indian economists: A.K. Dasgupta, K.N. Raj, Amartya Sen, Sukhamoy Chakravarty, Pranab Bardhan, T.N. Srinivasan, Krishna Bharadwaj, Nikhilesh Bhattacharya, among others.

The main fields of Rudra's research include development planning, agricultural economics, political economy, Marx's theory of history, and field survey methods. A small sample of his wide-ranging contributions is discussed below.

Development Planning

In the early 1960s, Rudra was associated with the Perspective Planning Division of the Planning Commission, after joining ISI (Delhi). Under his guidance, the ISI team did pioneering work on economy-wide model building, and also played a key role in the estimation of poverty lines. Together with Alan Manne, Rudra developed a consistency model for the Fourth Plan, relating sector-wise output and investment levels to the demand for consumer goods based on alternative assumptions about future changes in the distribution of income as well as normative concepts of minimum levels of living.

Rudra was ahead of his time in his appraisal of the strengths and limitations of the planning process (Rudra 1975, 1988b). He criticized plan models (including his own) not

only in terms of assumptions or content, but also with respect to their underlying economic philosophy. He argued that in a multi-sector model there is an implicit planner who decides patterns of investment allocation and choice of technology as well as the social welfare function. Rudra wondered “how one could possibly have made such a preposterous assumption, as that of a single decision-maker commanding all the decisions in this vast overwhelmingly private sector economy.” He was also disillusioned about the efficacy of the planning process in reducing economic inequality, as envisaged in the plan documents.

In one of his last essays, “In Defence of Planning and Socialism”, Rudra (1992b) observes that though the public sector in India has an unenviable record of inefficiency and corruption, “it does not follow that the remedy lies in doing away with planning or the public sector or even reducing government intervention in economic affairs.” He feared that the New Industrial Policy (NIP) might lead to the disappearance of a whole range of industries, the use of more capital-intensive techniques, rising unemployment, and a greater concentration of economic power. He outlined a socialist alternative, based on “co-operative institutions with effective worker participation in management”. “There is no question,” he argued, “of having an unplanned free market economy. What we require is a Welfare State strongly influencing private decision making and taking care of direct delivery of welfare services for the needy.”

Agricultural Economics

Rudra’s work on agricultural economics drew on the numerous field surveys he conducted in West Bengal and elsewhere. These include Farm Management Studies for the Ministry of Agriculture, a Survey of Agrarian Relations completed in 1975, and village surveys initiated jointly with Pranab Bardhan. Here as in other fields, Rudra often challenged conventional notions.

He was particularly critical of the application of neo-classical economic theory to Indian agriculture. In *Indian Agricultural Economics: Myths and Realities* (Rudra, 1982), he presented a critique of neo-classical theory. One of the central “myths” exposed in this study is the myth of allocative efficiency in Indian agriculture, especially the proposition that product and factor markets are competitive. Rudra also took issue with the alleged inverse relation between farm size and productivity.

Aside from “efficiency myths”, the book criticised various “inefficiency myths”. For instance, Rudra debunked the “myth of semi-feudal inefficiency”, attributed to Bhaduri (1973), whereby semi-feudal landowners “have an economic interest in perpetuating the economic misery of the tenants”. He also challenged the myth of “tenancy inefficiency”, whereby tenant farms perform less well than owner-operated farms.

Rudra felt that understanding class relations was crucial to understand historical processes and contemporary realities. He defined class as “a set of individuals who have similar relations with means of production... and who are such that they have no contradictions among themselves, but have contradictions with members of other classes” (Rudra, 1988a). Based on this definition he argued that there are two classes in rural India: big landowners and agricultural workers (though in some areas there may be a third class, that of “subsistence farmers”). This reading of the class structure in rural India was similar to that suggested by Daniel Thorner and Alice Thorner in 1962.

Research Methodology

Ashok Rudra had an abiding interest in research methodology and developed original research methods of his own, particularly for field surveys. As a first-rate statistician he had a deep concern for technical rigour and often exposed methodological “short-cuts” in statistical investigations.

For instance, Rudra (1969, 1982) discusses common misuses of statistical methods in economic analyses. He points out that carrying out tests of significance of a null hypothesis without properly defined alternative hypotheses may be misleading. He also discusses the difficulty in applying methods of statistical inference with small samples, or when repeated observations are not possible. In such cases “a parametric test has necessarily to be carried out on the basis of a whole battery of assumptions regarding the population; and the test by itself does not throw any light on the validity or otherwise of the assumptions regarding the population.”

Similarly, while discussing problems of goodness of fit of functional forms, Rudra notes that it is rare for a model-maker to have prior empirical knowledge and theoretical

reasoning for fully specifying a model. Under such circumstances a common practice is to smuggle into the model certain pre-specified functional forms. Many results of model-making exercises depend on arbitrary mathematical properties of such assumed functional forms.

Rudra's (1989) article on "field survey methods" is an enlightening example of his ability to combine statistical theory with field experience. He discusses, for example, how sampling with clustering and stratification gives better results than complete enumeration, how random sampling and purposive sampling can be complementary rather than rivals, and how the efficiency of a sampling scheme depends on the combination of sample size and population variance. He also discusses various aspects of respondent bias as well as biases related to scrutiny and feedback, questionnaire design and stratification.

Rudra's "subjective judgment" as a statistician, or his "illuminated common sense" as he sometimes described it, often guided his choice of statistical methods. In the 1970s he conducted many quantitative statistical analyses of the agricultural economy. But later on he also studied qualitative aspects of agrarian relations using purposively selected samples and case studies, in which his personal observational skills played a key role.

Other Writings

Apart from his scientific articles, Rudra often wrote in popular journals and newspapers. He felt that his efforts as a social scientist would remain fruitless unless he was able to reach the common people.

These writings often focused on contemporary political and social issues. For instance, when the "Naxalbari uprising" erupted in West Bengal at the end of the 1960s, Rudra wrote several articles in the weeklies *Frontier* and *Desh*, attempting to interpret this movement. He also argued that the officially accepted land reform measures were grossly inadequate. Later on, however, when the movement turned into a programme of individual annihilation of "class enemies", Rudra distanced himself from it. Though he felt that some violence might be unavoidable in the context of class struggle, he did not hesitate to criticise the cult of violence.

Rudra's non-academic writings spanned an astonishing range of subjects: the relations between middle-class men and women in West Bengal, the literary writings of Albert Camus, Satyajit Ray's films, Ram Mohan Roy's contributions to social progress, the ethical foundations of Marxism, to cite a few examples. One also comes across a short story titled 'A Spring Evening in Paris' describing the chance meeting of the writer with a young lady who narrates the touching story of her lover being sent to a concentration camp.

Ashok Rudra wrote nine books in Bengali, including two books on agricultural economics, one on the contemporary influence of the Brahminic tradition, three on the middle class in West Bengal, one on Tagore's plays and songs, and two novels. In one of these novels, *Jasmine*, Rudra narrates in an autobiographical manner a somewhat complex love affair of a professor with one of his research students.

Rudra's writings reveal some important traits of his personality. As an intellectual his basic aim was to influence the thought process of social life around him. He combined an idealist outlook with a scientific appraisal of social conditions. His personal life reflected the ideals he advocated. As a matter of fact, he always regarded it as important to avoid a hiatus between his values and his personal ways.

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