

ASHOK MITRA (1928–2018)

Voice of dissent

Ashok Mitra's death on Tuesday morning is the passing of an era. That cliché has a certain poignant resonance. Ashok Mitra embodied certain values and attitudes and a definite voice of which he was the last representative. The values were those of dissent and thinking against the grain and the voice expressed itself with equal ease and sharpness in Bengali and in English. In Calcutta, as Kolkata was known till recently, he came from a long line of dissenting bi-lingual men of letters.

Ashok Mitra's provenance was not Calcutta. In conversation — and he was unforgettable as a raconteur — he never let you forget that. He came from Dacca, a place whose culture, whose leading families and friends he had made there he remembered vividly and very fondly. When he came to Calcutta with the intention of doing a Master's in Economics, Calcutta University denied him admission. Ashok Mitra could not forget this. He moved to Benares Hindu University where he accepted the economist Amiya Dasgupta as his guru to whom he remained devoted. He went on to Rotterdam to finish a doctoral dissertation with Tinbergen.

After this Mitra's career was rich and varied. His interests and his intellectual energies could not be contained within an academic job even though he began his career as a lecturer in Lucknow University. He worked briefly

in New Delhi as a part of a group advising the Planning Commission and the finance ministry. He also worked for the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East in Bangkok and for the World Bank in Washington, DC. He joined the newly established Indian Institute of Management in Calcutta (IIMC) where with the help of the freedom given to him by the director K.T.Chandi, he built up a strong academic community with a diverse group of people like Surajit Sinha, Barun De, Kamini Adhikari, Nirmal Chandra and others. From IIMC he moved to New Delhi with onerous responsibilities — first as Chairman Agricultural Price Commission and then as Chief Economic Advisor, government of India. In both positions, he worked closely with P.N.Haksar, then the principal secretary to Indira Gandhi. Haksar became a lifelong friend. Mitra, because of his links with Dacca, became closely involved with Haksar in fashioning the movement that led to the creation of Bangladesh.

Ashok Mitra left his high office in New Delhi just prior to the Emergency to which he was steadfastly opposed. This opposition brought him very close to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) — he had had from his youth left leanings and links with the communist movement — and he became part of the Left Front

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that ruled West Bengal for 34 years from 1977. He served as the finance minister, a post from which he resigned in 1987, and later in the 1990s went on to represent the CPI(M) in the Rajya Sabha.

Ashok Mitra's interests took him to the world of writing for a wider reading public. Many believe, including this writer, that this was his real forte. He had an unerring eye for the relevant subject and wrote in enviable prose on politics, economics, literature and culture. He was at his best when he penned portraits of men and women with whom he had met and interacted. He was closely connected with a number of magazines and journals. The most important of these was *The Economic Weekly* and later the *Economic and Political Weekly*.

He was particularly close to Sachin Chaudhuri, the founder-editor of these — another Dacca connection. In Bengal in his youth he had been close to a group of young poets like Arun Sarkar and to Buddhadev Bose. His recall of lines from his favourite poets was astounding. In the twilight of his life, he began to edit a journal called *Arek Rakam* that articulated different points of view on a variety of issues. He was a regular columnist for *The Telegraph* as long as Aveek Sarkar was the chief editor of the ABP group.

Ashok Mitra had held important and powerful positions but he could step away from them as soon as they clashed with his cherished values. He was totally unwilling to stifle his voice of dissent, even if it meant being critical of the CPI(M), a party whose membership he much valued. But he valued his independence more.

He was severely critical of all that he saw around him in Mamata Banerjee's Bengal and in Narendra Modi's India. He wrote trenchantly against these tendencies as long as he could — till days before he died. He did not go gently into the good night. He raged against the fading of the light.

But those, like me, who were fortunate to receive his affection knew that beneath the rage was a tender heart. No one showered affection the way Ashok Mitra did. Adieu, comrade Mitra, on May Day.

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