

Wisdom, for the People*

Prabhat Patnaik

Ashok Mitra's achievements in both academia and public life made him exceptional

Ashok Mitra who passed away on May 1, was a person of renaissance versatility. A major writer of prose in Bengali, he published several volumes of essays and was a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi award. A brilliant economist, he wrote two exceptional works, *The Share of Wages in National Income and Terms of Trade and Class Relations*, that would stand the test of time. As an economist working for the government, he held the posts of Chairman of the Agricultural Prices Commission and Chief Economic Advisor at the Ministry of Finance. A columnist at various times for *Now*, *Economic Weekly*, its successor *Economic and Political Weekly*, and *The Telegraph*, he was read avidly by thousands. A life-long Communist who made no secret of his ideology, he was not only the doyen among the Left intellectuals of the country, but became the Minister for Finance, Development and Planning in the first Left Front government in West Bengal in 1977 and remained in that office till 1986 when he resigned. His achievements in each of these fields were formidable. Together, they make him one of the truly outstanding figures of post-independence India.

Born on April 10, 1928, in what is now Bangladesh, he studied at Armanitola Government High School, Dhaka, and Dhaka University. But before he could take his MA examination in economics he had to leave Dhaka in the wake of the Partition. He followed his teacher A K Dasgupta to Banaras Hindu University, from where he finally took his MA degree; and, on the basis of a brilliant essay written as part of this examination, was invited by D P Mukherji, its examiner, to join Lucknow University as a lecturer. He taught at Lucknow and later at the Delhi School of Economics, and worked for a while at the National Council for Applied Economic Research.

His doctoral dissertation, completed in the Netherlands under the supervision of renowned economist and Nobel laureate, Jan Tinbergen, was a modification of the theory of distribution propounded by Michal Kalecki, and earned him international acclaim. Upon his return, he was associated with the Indian Institute of Management, Kolkata, and helped to build up that institution into one of the finest social science centres of the country.

From the IIM he moved to the government and, after a stint abroad in exile during the Emergency, fought the West Bengal Assembly elections in 1977 and became a minister in the government led by Jyoti Basu. His ministerial tenure coincided with momentous changes in the rural landscape of that state, and his own contribution towards these changes was considerable. This was the period of "Operation Barga", of the resumption of the process of land redistribution, and of substantial devolution of resources and decision-making to panchayats. In addition, there was a big step-up of plan outlay on agriculture, irrigation and rural infrastructure, which broke the long-term agricultural stagnation of West Bengal.

A person of impeccable courtesy, indomitable courage, and absolute integrity, Ashok Mitra never minced his words. Extremely affectionate as a friend, he could be devastatingly blunt in his criticism (as I know from experience). Absolutely loyal to

the Party he could be scathing in his criticism of it. But because he was free of malice, none took offence at his criticism.

Even though he resigned from the Left Front government on a point of principle, the CPM nominated him for a Rajya Sabha seat, which he won shortly after neo-liberal policies were introduced in the country. As a Rajya Sabha member, he became the chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Industry and Commerce, and in that capacity struggled hard against the Intellectual Property Rights regime that was being sought to be imposed at the time by the US, supported by other advanced countries, through the WTO.

Ashok Mitra will be remembered above all as a strong champion of the rights of states. He played a major role in exposing the high degree of centralisation of powers and resources that existed in the country and went almost unnoticed. He persuaded the Left to accord centrality to the question of federalism, and, with the support of Jyoti Basu, was instrumental in uniting opposition parties and governments on the federal platform. This led to several conclaves of non-Congress chief ministers, culminating in a conclave at Srinagar.

Though the nation's attention shifted away from this issue after the mid-Eighties, Ashok Mitra remained steadfast in his commitment to federalism. He was totally opposed to the Goods and Services Tax, which he saw as a serious encroachment upon states' rights. Despite his failing health, he wrote passionately on the subject, and was disappointed that the states acquiesced in the GST.

In his death, the country has lost a person of great wisdom, for whom the interests of its working people always came first.

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