

## **Former Bengal Finance Minister was a Polymath Member of Significant Groups\***

**Jayati Ghosh**

Ashok Mitra was one of the most remarkable personalities of Independent India. A polymath who spanned technical economics, literature, policy and politics, he brought to all of these his distinctive flair, razor-sharp intelligence, and enormous energy and passion.

His death — in Kolkata on Tuesday after almost a month's stay in hospital for diarrhoea and later respiratory problems — marks the end of multiple eras, as he was the last surviving member of several significant groups: the influential progressive economists who in the 1950s laid the groundwork for economic strategies of the subsequent decades; the founder trustees of the Economic Weekly (later Economic and Political Weekly ) that played such a significant role in the intellectual life of India; the Cabinet of the first Left Front government in West Bengal that came to power in 1977 and became the longest serving such elected government anywhere in the world.

Born in pre-Independent East Bengal, Mitra first studied at Dhaka University, then Banaras Hindu University, and completed a doctorate in The Netherlands with Jan Tinbergen.

He claimed that he ended up studying economics because the queue was too long to get into his first choice, literature. But he never abandoned that first love, combining his academic and policy-making activities with continuous and prolific literary output in English and Bengali.

### **Income distribution**

Mitra's Ph.D. dissertation on "The share of wages in national income" addressed income distribution, which remained at the heart of his concerns throughout his life.

On returning to India in 1954, he worked in government as well as other research institutions. In the 1960s he was Chairman of the Agricultural Prices Commission and then Chief Economic Adviser in the Finance Ministry. After leaving the government in 1972 because of dissatisfaction with the direction of official policy, he wrote the book Terms of trade and class relations that highlighted how government price policies affected distributional tensions between large farmers and other classes in the country.

In 1977, he became Finance Minister in the newly elected Left Front government in West Bengal led by Jyoti Basu, serving for nearly a decade with distinction and commitment.

He emphasised inequalities in centre-state fiscal relations and strongly advocated greater federalism.

He resigned in 1986 because of differences on education policy, and threw himself into writing that brought out injustice, identified contradictions, demanded accountability and pointed to progressive possibilities.

His columns, including the famous Calcutta Diary; his trenchant commentary on economic policies and devastating critique of neoliberalism; his forays into literature, art and music; his immensely varied Bengali pieces; and then later his memoirs: all were widely read and influential.

The continuous stream of sharp and stylish writing that emerged from his pen made people think, wonder, learn and laugh.

Friends hoped to predecease him, because he was so good at capturing their essence in his obituaries.

Erudition matched memory: he could remember almost everything, from the lines of poems to the details of significant historical events to amusing and insightful anecdotes about the galaxy of people he knew in India and around the world.

### **Intellectually active**

Most of all, he remained intellectually alive and passionate almost to the very end.

Fittingly, he died on May Day — a decade to the day after his beloved wife, Gouri. But even a few weeks before that, despite his frail body, failed eyesight and failing hearing, he was as involved as ever in the progress of the new Bengali journal *Arek Rakam* that he had helped to set up as its first editor; wanted to add his name to an economists' statement on public banking; added to the guest list for a proposed celebration of his 90th birthday. We can be proud of living in a society that could produce such a person.

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