

## **Sreyashi Dastidar Writes about Ashok Mitra**

**Sreyashi Dastidar**

One of my many treasured experiences while working for the Edit pages of The Telegraph was the opportunity every few months to go to Ashok Mitra's Sonali Apartment flat and have him dictate that week's post-edit piece to me. The 'writing' of the piece would take little over an hour (during which I would make a mental note of how many times terms like "Foggy Bottom" and "Bretton Woods" were used). After he was done dictating the last line, I would take about 15 minutes to go through what I had keyed in, correct the typos, and print out a copy for him on the HP printer right next to the desktop monitor. He would push his thick-lensed glasses up his forehead, and, with a black ball-point pen in hand, read through the piece and make minor — very minor — edits on the margin. I have not come across anyone — and I don't think I ever will — who can dictate a thousand-plus-word piece, often with figures comparing development indices, without faltering even once, or consulting a piece of paper. For me, this was nothing short of a superpower — and the man was pushing eighty.

There would be light-hearted conversation afterwards. Never about politics, nor about communism, unless I had a specific 'academic' query. Instead, he would ask about cultural happenings in the city, or what Rabindrasangeet I had learnt most recently, and take off from there to recount his associations with singers and scholars.

And there would be food. Always. When his wife, Gouri Mitra, was alive, she would come in with laden plates and join in the conversation, often sharing memories of my grandfather whom I had never met, since he passed away two years before my birth.

Ashok Mitra would open the door himself to let me out and wait with me till the lift came up. I remember feeling a sense of dissonance every time I emerged on to the street from Sonali Apartment. A slightly resentful feeling of leaving behind a genteel world and being thrust into a coarse, brutal one.

I realize the appositeness of one of India's foremost communists leaving the world on May Day. With him probably ends an era of the Indian communist movement. But what I found myself ruing the most as I read the news of Ashok Mitra's death was the passing of a culture, deeply rooted and open to the wisdoms of the world at the same time.