

## **Ashok Mitra\***

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Ashok Mitra spoke truth to power. Among the many attributes of this extraordinary man (his fierce intelligence, his passionate and continuous engagement with politics and society, his literary flair in writings of vast erudition and variety, his restless energy, his profound sentimentality and his engagement with a veritable ocean of friends and acquaintances) this particular one may well turn out to be the one with the most lasting impact.

Because the truth, when he spoke it (very much his own truth, of course, and deeply felt) was usually unvarnished and could be expressed in extreme, even acerbic, terms. And he spoke this truth to power of all sorts, unafraid of the consequences: the mighty state, whether at central or state or local government levels; large corporations of national and global provenance; international organisations that saw themselves above the doubts and concerns of mere individuals; political parties whether of other or his own persuasion; his own “superiors” in age, rank or experience in work situations; close colleagues and even dear friends. Not everyone could take it: there was often resentment, in some cases even a parting of ways. But even those who had experienced the most devastating of his assessments would be forced to acknowledge the sincerity, commitment and lack of malice in them, and some would (internally or subsequently) also admit to the veracity of his critiques.

This fearlessness with respect to the consequences of speaking the truth is a very unusual trait. Many people avoid being completely truthful when there could be adverse consequences for their professional advancement and then find ways to rationalise their opacity. In the current unfriendly and aggressive socio-political climate where frankness, however necessary, is quickly punished, it is even harder to find people willing to speak their minds. But it is often hardest of all to speak the full truth to those to whom we have made an emotional commitment, whether for political or social or personal reasons. Most of us tend to temper our statements in such situations, to phrase them in guarded and polite terms to avoid the risk of offending. But not Ashok Mitra. He said it straight – albeit in his own inimitable style – because he felt that it was important to express it, to make people aware, no matter what impact it could then have on him.

It could be that this lack of inhibition about uttering the truth as he saw it, is what attracted so many young people to him over the decades of his long life, even when he was a raging old man, anguished by political developments around him but still willing to lend his voice to any progressive tendencies that needed his support. It is certainly a deep form of courage that is very essential today.

It was most often expressed in his writing. He was completely bilingual, which showed in the different but confidently idiosyncratic literary styles he adopted in each language. His output (an endless stream of articles, as well as academic monographs, books and memoirs) was prolific, continuous over many decades, always topical and hugely influential.

His contributions to economics have often been overshadowed by the influence of his more journalistic commentary, but they were also impressive. He had a lifelong

concern with economic distribution, how it affects and is affected by social relations and most of all by political power. His PhD thesis under the supervision of the Nobel Prize winning economist Jan Tinbergen, was on the share of wages in national income, in which he took forward the Marxist ideas of the Marxist economist Michal Kalecki. Subsequently, in his seminal work “Terms of trade and class relations”, he used his experience as Chairman of the Agricultural Prices Commission of the Government of India to analyse how the setting of procurement prices by the government reflected the political and lobbying power of large farmers, and how this in turn affected various other economic processes in the country.

He was also greatly concerned with the distribution of fiscal powers across different levels of government. As Finance Minister of West Bengal, he was astute in raising revenues and balancing budgets to prevent any state fiscal crises, and was part of the team that gave a significant push to decentralisation down to panchayats, which became an essential plank of the Left Front government’s early economic strategy. He also became a passionate advocate of the economic rights of state governments, and fiercely fought fiscal centralisation even as it became more pronounced in India. Upto his final days, he was outraged at the loss of fiscal space of state governments resulting from the imposition of the unified Goods and Services Tax, and wanted to file a case against the central government on this.

He was passionate and even purist about all of these issues, but he was also willing to work with different groups and tendencies in order to achieve these goals, to explore all possible avenues to change and influence policies in a progressive direction. This meant that, as a policy maker, he definitely took strong and principled positions, but he was not sectarian in pushing for them. For example, as a member of the Rajya Sabha in the 1990s (supported by the CPI-M) he was crucial in mobilising cross-party support in the fight against the TRIPS regime, seeking to ensure that consequent changes in the Indian Patents Act still left it as progressive and non-monopolistic as possible.

He was not sectarian in his social dealings either, maintaining close friendships with people with whom he had strong political and intellectual differences. Indeed, in personal relations, there was a remarkable absence of hierarchy. Or rather, he did indeed have a hierarchy; but it was not defined along the conventional axes of age, rank and experience so much as in terms of his own personal and intellectual assessment of others. This meant, for example, that he could often relate to much younger people as equals, just as he could appear to be dismissive of those who may have thought they deserved greater consideration precisely because of convention. Some people therefore found him quirky and prickly to deal with, but the soft – even gooey – emotional core of his occasionally caustic personality was easily identified by those who knew him.

His varied engagements – from political economy to the practice of politics, from literature to music (Rabindra sangeet in particular) to sport (he was an avid cricket-watcher), from enthusiastic participation in very social addas to intensely private experiences – provide some idea of how even such a long life can be so fully and intensely lived. Most impressive of all was his astounding ability to remain so involved, committed and intellectually engaged right to the end. Just consider: a man well into his ninth decade, dealing with cancer, failed eyesight and failed hearing, still finding it necessary to take on the editorship of a new journal designed to

transform the intellectual life of Bengal, still willing to be part of signature campaigns for progressive causes, still full of ideas and concerns about how to alter political trajectories. That never-say-die approach is what should never die.

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