

## **Ashok Mitra\***

### **Mohan Rao**

Many years back I had written an essay “Cholera and the Post-Modern World”, (Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XXVII, No.34, August 22nd, 1992.) that brought forth an extraordinary response. It stunned me.

I got a hand-written letter from Ashok Mitra, an inland letter as we had then, appreciating my piece and saying how much he had learned from it, and hoping I would continue to write and inform and enthrall him. He said he particularly liked my style of writing.

I was so utterly delighted to get this letter, although I did not know I had a style of writing. I had read AM’s columns in the EPW, admiring his range of interests, from economics to politics and literature and even gossip. His Obituary to Dharma Kumar was apparently about gossip and caused a controversy. I didn’t think so, because it was lovingly written, and no one who knew Dharma Kumar denies she was a gossip.

I loved his style of writing, quotations from Shakespeare or the Bible, sat easily with quotations from the Hindu scriptures as he described how economists had failed the wretched of the earth. He wrote scathingly, also with wit, and with irony.

### **He was truly a poly-math**

I met him, dark, terribly handsome, sharp featured, but somehow distracted, at some room near the Parliament, to hand over papers relating to the quinacrine sterilization scandal that I was working on. Prof. Jayati Ghosh had arranged this meeting. This must have been in 1997, for the Supreme Court ban on quinacrine sterilizations came in 1998.

Ashok Mitra’s intervention on this issue was significant. He asked a starred question in Parliament if the government had permitted “trials” with quinacrine in the country, and if so, who and how much of this drug was imported into the country. He also asked if the government was aware that WHO had banned human trials with quinacrine.

The responses of the Minister of State then (I don’t remember his name) was startling.

He said:

1. ICMR had given up trials given the high failure rate with quinacrine.
2. The Government was aware of the WHO’s position.
3. The Government had not permitted any trials for quinacrine sterilization.

It was on the basis of his questions in Parliament and the response obtained that in 1998, the Supreme Court banned quinacrine sterilization. But paid no heed to our demand that doctors who had carried these out be punished, that women who had been sterilized with quinacrine be compensated and followed up.

I would like to recall this, because I do not believe any Obituary to Ashok Mitra will also recall his quest for gender justice.

I do not know this, but I suspect Ashok Mitra liked Bach and Mozart.

We do not have intellectuals like him anymore. Thus the worship of FLW. What a sad country we have become.