

# Revealing a Spade in Its Own Identity

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This collection of AM's "Calcutta Diary" columns revived memories of how in the years gone by one used to open the EPW to search for his piece to read before turning to the editorials. The essays, which appeared in the EPW from February 1986 to August 1993, cover a variety of subjects. He writes in his introduction:

The act of persistence is an expression of faith, faith that the future could yet be different from what the present portrays.... Humanity survives because it does not adjourn its soul-searching sessions, never mind war and pestilence, never mind the vacuum in philosophy.

He answers the question of whether the world has changed far enough for these essays to become irrelevant, thus:

...India now stands ramrod against a globalised landscape, with promises of emerging soon as an economic superpower. There is little point going overboard though....Less than 1.5 million persons employed in this (Information Technology) sector, constituting not even one-third of 1% of India's total working force, are appropriating more than 5% of (the) gross domestic product....The buoyancy in the services sector has been responsible for a second-order buoyancy specially in consumer-goods manufactures, with further rippling effects on the rest of the industrial sector (pp xii-xiii).

Then, he goes on to remind the readers:

If account is taken of the fact that ... two-thirds of the nation still depend on farm income for their survival, the contemporary Indian tragedy gets revealed in sharper profile. This is quite an extraordinary situation: (the) gross domestic product is making impressive strides, but it is having no impression on the level of earnings of overwhelming sections of the working class. The curious of jobless growth, already partly noticeable in the early 1990s, is now established as a hard, nearly inflexible datum (p xiii).

**The Starkness of It** by Ashok Mitra (*New Delhi: Roli Books*, 2008; pp 350, Rs 295).

It is as though, with minor changes, he could be speaking of the present. As he puts it:

The issues the essays in this volume had focused on have not disappeared. A society which believes in turning its back on its majority had already come into existence; it has now received the imprimatur of formal recognition. The Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act is beautifully designed to thwart any initiative on the part of the public sector to make even moderately generous outlays on social services intended for the distressed sections...

We thus come to face the crucial question. Can a nation survive and prosper in an ideological vacuum? Once upon a distant time, the Indian National Congress had wrapped itself in the ethos of nationalism. With independence, that theme lost its relevance. Another pre-Independence commitment was for the upliftment of the poor and down-trodden. A further promise was the introduction of universal adult suffrage....Ideology, though, has ceased to make the grade, unless it be the ideology of opportunism (pp xvi-xvii).

While the FRBM had to give way before the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2006 after a bitter battle, since the economic meltdown it has been given a quiet burial. Thus, insofar as specific references are concerned, of course, his columns are context bound to the time when he wrote them; some of the things may not hold true today. However, these are few and far between. Therefore, these columns are more than context bound. The critique he offers is so useful. For instance, privatisation and faith in the philanthropy of the rich, which he commented on, has now unfolded in all its glory. The way in which public-private partnerships have

enabled the transfer of public funds for private profit is staggeringly evident in the field of privatised education and hospitals. Further, despite some improvements and legislations in the last few years, which coincided with the elevation of "Left-wing Extremism" as the single-most important "internal security threat", the ideology of opportunism reigns supreme. In other words, what AM wrote during 1986-1993, a period of intense debate about economic policy, and what he feared, has unfolded. In this sense, he was perspicacious.

## Elegance and Passion

The selected 53 columns included in the book are divided into three sections: People (1-16), Power and Politics (17-32) and Agony of Ideology (33-53).

The very first essay "A Quality Called Passion" is about someone about whom very little would have been written. It is about "an old India hand; he was, once upon a time, between 1929 and 1938, in the Indian Civil Service...." Michael Carritt was a secret emissary of British Communist Party, assigned to maintain liaison with leading Indian comrades. AM writes that when he was posted in Midnapore as probationary assistant magistrate, he witnessed the killing of his two district officers.

Hate and violence and fear were in the air. Carritt could have succumbed into the conventional role as a member of the master race, sent out to teach the natives the lesson of their lives. This was the natural, predictable thing to do. But he turned away. He de-classed himself, ceased to be a part of the ruling class...

AM recounts the story of Jogen Babu,

the lawyer in Tangail, a fierce nationalist, who would defend young terrorists and the rack-rented peasants in the magistrate's court...Carritt scandalising the police, would invariably let the prisoners go. Jogen Babu and Carritt never met each other outside the open court, but Jogen Babu knew, a half-wink of a drooping eyelid, the flicker of a smile on the tired old face....that the young British magistrate had crossed the Rubicon, that he belonged to them.

Read what AM had to say about Samar Sen in "A Lonely Trek". He writes that Samar Sen "wrote the most distilled poetry to define Calcutta's tragic isolation....They were both lullaby and elegy....None knew Calcutta or the vapid, cantankerous Bengalis more than Samar Sen the poet." Writing about the 1970s, he notes: "Romantic violence soon yields place, to romantic frustration, and frustration lays bare the feudal infrastructure of those whose emotions are largely derivatives of the intellect."

Consider what he writes about Samarendranath Sanyal, secretary of district unit of the party [the CPI(Marxist)], about whom he jots down: "It is Sanyal, and others like him, who built the left movement into what it is around these parts". It was built by individuals

whose goodness was always to the fore.... through decade after painstaking decade, [they] lived with the people, earned their trust, mobilised them, taught them to fight unitedly for the cause, convinced them that the party lives for them, and, should the necessity arise, its cadres and leaders will die for them too, while fighting their class battles.

Consider this in "Now A Way of Life". Writing about Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister in October 1992, he begins by stating that

the one who has just been sacked, was using his public office for private purposes. But, let there be no misunderstanding, his going was

not because he was deeply engaged in such malfeasance....He had to go because the High Court judgment was couched in such explicit terms that to retain him as chief minister would....have an adverse consequence on the fortunes of the ruling party.

Writing about Kashmir in February 1990 in "Neither History Nor Legality to Fall Back On", AM wrote then that we Indians get

caught in the maze of our irrationality. We are an unsullied, unsulliable democracy, the largest in the world. Our Constitution allows freedom of association and expression. It permits multiple political choices. We are besides...by both conviction and temperament, against imperialism and colonial exploitation. A terrible contradiction exists between these claims and our corny stand over Kashmir....

In his column titled "Heads Traders Win, Tails People Suffer" he writes:

Liberalisation is a total concept, and the marketing of sugar could not forever remain un-free. Surreptitiously, or not so surreptitiously, the government was pushed into abdicating its position. Changes in public policy are supposed to be announced in the parliament; in this instance, no need was felt to observe this formality. Study the date of releases of sugar, under government orders, in any of the recent months. The relative proportions of levy and free sugar have been reversed. As much as 70% of the monthly releases of sugar is now intended for free sales....and only 30% is channelised through the public distribution system....

One can go on and on. But it is best, dear reader, that you pick up this collection of essays and decide for yourself. Even when you disagree with AM, you will find his elegant prose captivating, something one can go back to repeatedly for the sheer pleasure of reading, if not to reinvigorate oneself. It is not a reference book but it is a book that encourages and provokes in equal measure to reflect and understand where we are headed and why. Reading it brought home to me that the generation following mine would benefit much from reading this collection of his essays in trying to understand the making of the present.

This will also make apparent to contemporary readers of EPW why his column provided such unparalleled intellectual nourishment to nearly two generations of EW/EPW readers and why the void he left behind remains unfilled. Yes, one did not agree with his politics at times or even felt upset with what he wrote. However, could anyone other than him have written so elegantly and with such passion, inviting us to ponder over issues he took up and lives he re-counted? All I can say is, buy this book, read and then decide. It would be worth the labour.

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A collection of essays from the *Economic & Political Weekly* seeks to find tentative answers to these questions, and more.

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