

The last lion

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HARUN UR RASHID

VETERAN CPM (M) leader Jyoti Basu is no more with us. He passed away on January 17 at a Salt Lake Hospital. He would have been 96 years old this July.

I had the great privilege of meeting him as the Bangladesh Deputy High Commissioner in Kolkata during 1979-81.

A statesman, a politician, a lover of common people and workers, a social reformer and a barrister -- all rolled into one. He was a true internationalist and the best of the brightest in left-wing politics. He was chief minister for 23 years and resigned voluntarily in 2000.

When he was a student in Calcutta and then London he wanted to change the living conditions of farmers and workers and, all through his life, he had devoted his energy towards that end. Land reforms in West Bengal provided farmers a new chance, because of which they have become agents of economic growth. Reforms in local government helped them to become self-governing and self-reliant.

Although he was a Communist leader he was elected by the people in a multi-party democracy, handsomely defeating all political parties. He was not an authoritarian but a democratic leader.

Mr. Basu was a pragmatist, and realised that they needed industrialisation in private the sector to remove poverty. His government provided incentives for Indian business people to invest in West Bengal and, as a result, many non-Bengali businessmen and industrialists poured money into West Bengal. The skyline in Kolkata was changed as new corporate buildings and modern business houses began to mushroom in several places in and around Kolkata.

He believed in party discipline, and because of opposition by a single vote at the Politburo he did not accept the post of prime minister of India, and later refused to become the president of India. The non-acceptance of the top political positions demonstrated his unparalleled strength of mind, character and integrity. As a result, his reputation soared, and during his illness Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh came to visit him as a mark of respect.

While I was posted as the Deputy High Commissioner of Bangladesh in Kolkata during 1979-81, I had the opportunity of meeting the Chief Minister Jyoti Basu many a time. He was accessible, kind, attentive and very polite to me. Whenever I wanted to meet him, he never said "no" despite his busy schedule, which demonstrated

his love and respect for the people of Bangladesh.

I used to meet with Mr. Basu on a regular basis to brief him on events in Bangladesh. He was keen to know about Bangladesh and its people. Often, I used to narrate the correct version of events in Bangladesh, which often were misreported in Kolkata newspapers.

In my dealings with Mr. Basu, I found him very constructive and helpful. There was no doubt about his fine intellect, and it was obvious after even the shortest discussion on any subject.

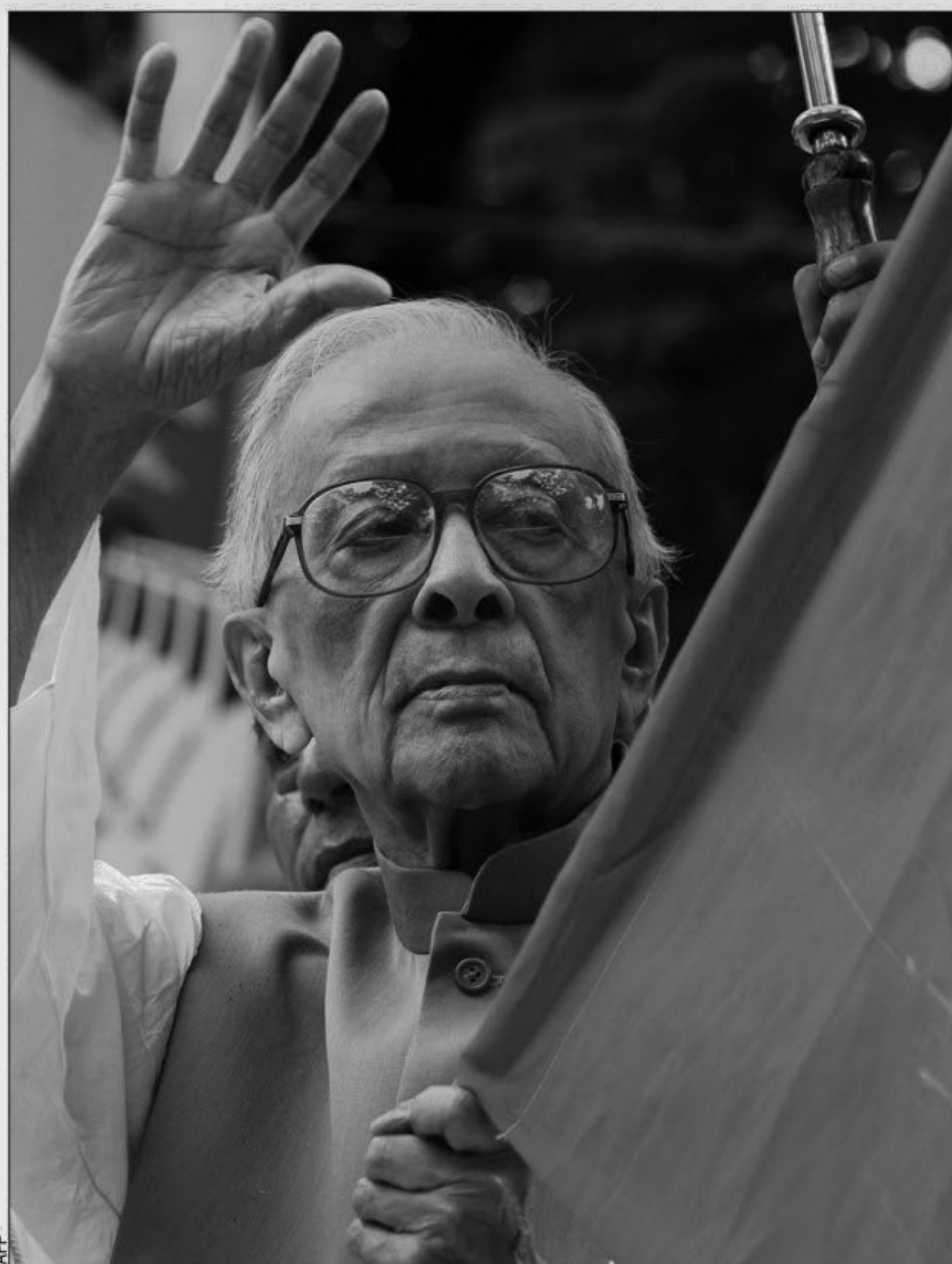
Once, I briefed him about the 1977 Agreement on sharing of the Ganges water, specifically on the augmentation of the Ganges to meet the needs of the two countries. He listened to me very attentively, and diplomatically said that it was a matter of the union government in New Delhi and he could only provide his views if asked.

Chief Minister Jyoti Basu never missed the function at the Bangladesh High Commission on Bangladesh Independence Day, and he encouraged cabinet minister to attend. In 1980, nine cabinet ministers and the Chief Minister Basu graced the occasion.

In fact, Mr. Basu directed his ministers and senior officials to cooperate with me in my duties to strengthen the relations not only between the governments but, most importantly, between the people of the two countries as well. My task was made easier in Kolkata because of him.

Mr. Basu was always personally well groomed and had many social graces. His dress (dhoti and kurta) were impeccably white and ironed. He was a perfect gentleman in every way.

He gave me the impression of being a



leader who was agile, highly intelligent, and a tactful politician. He always took a moderate position within his party. He was able to redefine his party, and gave

direction and meaning to the rural people in West Bengal.

Despite the gap in age and status between us I gradually became close to

him personally, and he invited me and my wife to his apartment where he lived with his gracious wife. I was surprised at the simple way he lived. The living room was small and consisted of ordinary furnishings, which belonged to him. This impressed me very much, because he could have lived in a much bigger residence with pomp and splendour.

The people of Bangladesh mourn the loss of the legendary figure. The president, the prime minister, the leader of the opposition and former president H.M. Ershad of Bangladesh have recounted his contribution to the people of Bangladesh and sent condolence messages to his family. On January 17, the Bangladesh Parliament mourned the death of Jyoti Basu by unanimously adopting a motion of condolence, with a one-minute silence in his honour, and adjourned the business of the day.

This great leader will be known as a person who was interested in purpose not process, in policy, and in ideas about a willingness to challenge the status quo. I think he made a huge contribution towards demonstrable and substantial reforms for the poor.

The patriarch leader of Communist Party has left a legacy and vision to be imbibed by young generations to come for a better world and South Asia. The Communist Party (M) will be much poorer without him.

Finally, it was the life of a great Bengali, a man who was respected and loved not only in his own country but also throughout South Asia and the world. His was a life that mattered. We all pray for the eternal peace of his soul.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Life and times of a Marxist icon



- July 8, 1914: Born Jyotirindra Basu in Calcutta to N.K. Basu, a leading doctor of his time. He was the third of three siblings.
- 1920-24: Studied at Loreto Convent, Dharamtala, in Kolkata. It was here that his father shortened his name to Jyoti.
- 1925-32: Studied at St Xavier's Collegiate School, Kolkata.
- 1933-35: Graduated with English (Honours) from Hindu (now Presidency) College.
- 1935-40: Qualified as a barrister-at-law from Middle Temple, London. Came under the influence of socialist philosopher Harold Joseph Laski and Communist Party of Great Britain General Secretary Rajani Palme Dutt and embraced communism.
- 1937-40: Became a member of the India League, the Federation of Indian Students in Great Britain and secretary of the London Majlis, all organisations of Indian students in England. Was dissuaded from joining CPGB by Harry Pollitt, then general secretary of the party.
- 1940: Basu returned to India and joined the Communist Party of India, which was then banned by the British rulers. His shocked parents tried to dissuade him but to no avail. Basu's first assignment in the CPI was to arrange safe houses for the party's underground leaders, and he soon became the main link between the leadership and its overground sympathisers. Married Basanti Ghosh.
- 1942: Basu's wife died.
- 1941: Given responsibility by the party of organising railway workers. Appointed secretary of the Bengal-Assam Railway.
- 1943: Elected provincial committee member (PCO) of CPI, his first official position in the party.
- 1946: Helped organise Gandhiji's

- peace march in Kolkata following widespread communal rioting in the city. Elected to the (undivided) Bengal assembly from the Railway constituency.
- 1948: Married Kamal Basu.
- 1951: Appointed president of the editorial board of CPI mouthpiece Swadhinata.
- 1953: Elected to the CPI's West Bengal state committee for the first time.
- 1954: Elected to the party's central committee.
- 1957-67: Was leader of the opposition in the West Bengal assembly.
- 1958: Elected to the party's national council.
- 1964: Suspended from the national council, following disagreements with the party leadership. Split the party along with several other senior members and formed the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Was one of nine members elected to the new party's first politburo. Remained a member of the politburo till 2008.
- 1967 and 1969: Became deputy chief minister of two successive United Front governments in West Bengal.
- 1972: Lost the assembly election (the only time he lost one).
- 1977-2000: Elected chief minister of West Bengal for five consecutive terms November 6, 2000: Resigned as chief minister on health grounds.
- 1996: Invited by the United Front to become prime minister. Denied permission to do so by his party. Basu calls it a "historic blunder."
- 2008: Resigned from the politburo on health grounds. Became a permanent invitee to the party's highest decision-making body.
- January 1, 2010: Admitted to AMRI, Kolkata.
- January 17, 2010: Died after suffering prolonged illness.

Master of the game

Despite his fame as a spellbinding speaker, he abhorred histrionics; his voice never deviated from the normal pitch, the electric current nonetheless hurtled across in waves and a bond got instantly established between the person on the podium and the assembled dishevelled rows of humanity.

ASHOK MITRA

INDIA is to be without Jyoti Basu. The new reality will not sink easily into most minds. For most of the past half-a-century, the man had filled a crucial spot in the country's political landscape. It was a movable spot since circumstances were evolving all the time, but the picture would never be complete without this man's position and point of view.

Allies, permanent or temporary, would be there to seek his counsel. Adversaries, too, would be aware of the differences and the weight of his views. The general feeling of a lack of coordinates, which has accompanied the announcement of his passing, is therefore understandable. This vacuum of feelings will, however, be different from person to person. That too owes to the magic of his persona. He had a way of interacting on the individual plane with whomever he met.

And this is perhaps what charisma is about. After Subhas Chandra Bose, Jyoti Basu was the next idol the Bengali masses created and clung to. The chemistry at work was almost inexplicable, for Jyoti Basu was by nature a shy and reserved individual.

That apart, despite his fame as a spellbinding speaker, he abhorred histrionics; his voice never deviated from the normal pitch, the electric current nonetheless hurtled across in waves and a bond got instantly established between the person on the podium and the assembled dishevelled rows of humanity. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Left Front owe an immense debt to this inexplicable phenomenon.

The Jyoti Basu story has a somewhat out-of-the-ordinary beginning. Some three quarters of a century ago, India was still a subjugated nation. The main agenda was the struggle for freedom. But a few youngsters with a background of affluence, living and studying in India, were convinced that liberation from foreign bondage was not enough: postcolonial India must be a just India, a socialist India, an India which would be an integral part of the great proletarian revolution ushered in by the Soviet Union. Jyoti Basu joined in and found company in the imperial capital. The young cadets even redistributed their allegiance between the India League and the Communist Party of Great Britain.

He returned to Calcutta as a full-time party worker, learning the rudiments of trade unionism in the loco-shed at Kanchrapara, at the docks in Kidderpore, spending long hard days at the Terai as comrade-in-arms of the struggling tea-garden workers, agitating for the tenurial rights for the share-croppers and living rights for the landless workers, learning the art of public speaking at impromptu

street-corner sessions in Calcutta, getting to know comrades with different backgrounds in party classes where one learnt as much as one taught, finally arriving at the exhilarating awareness of reaching emotional integration with the down-and-outs in society.

Charisma develops from a modest base, but once that base was formed, there was an inevitability in the manner Jyoti Basu went to win mass adulation. His entry into the Bengal legislature was a happenstance that turned into a qualitative departure. The clipped three-fourth complete sentences that comprised his individual style of speaking to comrades, mixed with controlled passion and an added tincture of sarcasm, began to make history since.

The post-freedom Congress ruling the country had its own agenda. The fledgling communist party, often irrepressible, was a nuisance. Jyoti Basu was an integral part of that nuisance. Prison terms, short or long, therefore became commonplace.

That further contributed to the charisma. For many from the lower echelons of society, going to his meetings or participating in a strike led by him was a privilege cum romantic adventure. But there was another side to his personality. He did not think much of the so-called intellectuals. He, however, knew that in Indian conditions a revolutionary party must strike its roots in the psyche of the middle-class.

The intellectual community is an excellent intermediary. It was not difficult for Jyoti Basu to speak to them in their own lingo and tickle their ego. He, however, also knew how far to depend on them.

When the uprooted millions arrived from East Pakistan, his charisma worked wonders again. The great coalition formed in the Sixties and Seventies of the middle- and lower-classes, the peasants, the organized workers, the millions of unemployed and underemployed seemingly lost in the wilderness of the informal sector and, finally, the displaced persons provided the communists with its massive base of support in West Bengal, and in turn became the capital asset of the Left Front.

Jyoti Basu emerged as the natural leader because of one particular personal attribute: he knew the limits of feasibility. He did not promise the moon either to the peasantry or to the workers or the destitute refugees. When he negotiated on behalf of engineering workers or college or school teachers too, he urged them to stay united, but he also warned them against indulging in excesses.

When he assumed office as chief minister, it was once more the same concern for feasibility. Entering government was not a giant stride towards revolution; a

state administration has to respect the ambitions laid down for it in the Constitution, reflecting the mindset of the feudal capitalist power structure.

The opportunity still has to be availed of to prove the point that the Left was capable of combining passion with efficiency and use the limited resources and the limited authority to advance the cause of the deprived masses. It was important to succeed in this goal, for such success would increase the credibility of the Left all over the country, thereby advancing the cause of the popular democratic revolution.

The deep regard for him at the national level was for a similar reason. Given the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multi-party chiaroscuro and the fact that the Left had to contain simultaneously the two dominant national parties, it would be necessary to combine formations that did not that easily combine.

It was therefore important to harp on issues that bring disparate elements together. Jyoti Basu found a uniting theme in the early 1980s: the third alternative was a living reality.

Debate continues whether the refusal of his party in 1996 to let him be prime minister was a historic blunder or not. What can, however, be asserted with a measure of confidence is that but for the historic mishap which took place in October 31, 1984 -- Indira Gandhi murdered by her own bodyguards -- Jyoti Basu might well have emerged as the nation's prime minister following the 1985 Lok Sabha elections.

The powerful movement for restructuring Centre-state relations which Jyoti Basu initiated had gone from strength to strength and counted within its fold apart from the Left the as yet unfractured Janata Dal, the DMK, the Telugu Desam, and even the National Conference in Kashmir.



Public fury at Indira Gandhi's coups in Kashmir and Andhra Pradesh -- the first successful, the second a disaster -- was intense and there was, of course, the standing discontent with runaway prices.

It could have been a famous victory for the Opposition and the Left and its allies might have emerged as a major and decisive force in the rainbow coalition that would have come to power. Indira Gandhi's assassination overturned the psephologic arithmetic.

The coalition Jyoti Basu had put together disintegrated. The 1996 scenario was qualitatively different. After that, it was a more inward looking statesman concentrating on West Bengal and retiring with grace in the final year of the century. The last few years were sad. Unfortunately his legacy was made a hash of in the last couple of years. But he still maintained his fortitude.

But he must have been an intensely lonely man missing his comrades, such as E.M.S Nambudiripad, B.T. Ranadive, P. Sundarayera and Pramode Dasgupta. And even earlier from his London days -- Snehangshu Kanti Acharya and Bhupesh Gupta. The tranquillity of death could not have been altogether unwelcome to him, for he departed with his faith in the inevitability of the historical process totally unimpaired. Did he not, given his long long years in the movement, face the sequences, ups and downs?

This piece is a humble homage from a comrade 13 years his younger who happened to be sworn in as minister under his leadership in the first Left Front government on that morning of June 21, 1977. Of the five sworn in that day, the rest are gone, only the junior comrade will perhaps have to survive for a while longer.

Ashok Mitra writes for The Telegraph. The article was originally published in The Telegraph (India).