

"Bibek Debroy Was Not Just a Polymath but a True InterDisciplinarian"

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Bibek Debroy Was Not Just a Polymath but a True Interdisciplinary

Though there was more to disagree with him, his clarity and tenacious exuberance provided a distinct equilibrium.

Source: [BloombergQ](#)



Bibek Debroy, chairman of the PM's economic advisory council, has passed away. He was 69. Four days ago, before his death, Mr. Debroy wrote his own obituary (see [here](#)), saying: "There is a world outside that exists. What if I am not there? What indeed".

Reading this deeply reflective obituary written by Mr Debroy himself brings out his ingenuity and remarkable ability to communicate complex emotions and personalised ideas with great clarity and prose.

He leaves behind an invaluable, towering intellectual, epistemic, academic legacy- the breadth of which can hardly be captured by any *obituary* written on him or in

celebratory reference to his academic, policy, ideological, humanist, and literary contributions- including a priceless contribution to learning (and documenting) the history of India-made fountain pens.

His commitment to epistemic knowledge systems, democratizing complex vernacular ideas through a rich translation of epics, made him to apply interdisciplinarity of knowledge not only in thought but in practice, without being overidentified with the pursuit any (given) discipline or scholarship.

From trade reform to legal reform, to regulatory reform, to railway reform, or the economy, there is no aspect of reform-based approach undertaken over the last few decades, that was not touched by his intellectual, critical-thinking prowess.

This is particularly inspiring given how Mr. Debroy could never be defined as an institutionalized academic or a university professor, since he spent more time outside academia or university-based *silos* writing on academic subjects, perhaps contributing to different scholarships far more than what institutionalized intellectuals may do in their own field these days.

Pratap Bhanu Mehta [in a recent column](#) (rightly) calls him a *person of his own*, someone who could manage to exist, influence decision making -inside and outside the government, with unplumbed depth in an otherwise bhakti-obsessed bureaucratic cobweb of Delhi.

As Mehta [adds](#): “What struck me the most in that conversation about the Mahabharata was his *character*: his extraordinary tenacity, a sense of being possessed, as if he were following some inner law of his own being.”

As someone who happened to meet Mr. Debroy on a few occasions upon his visit to our university campus in Sonipat, and in Delhi, I attest to feeling this while being around him and engaging on issues.

Though, in argument and debate, there was more to disagree on with him, particularly on public policy, the current government’s policy ideology (as incoherent it still is), than to find common areas where our own thoughts converged, but despite that, his energy, clarity and tenacious exuberance provided a distinct reflective equilibrium.

As almost an epistemic musician, he could bring, cite, extrapolate uncommon knowledge from any field or scholarship as a musical *saam* (rhythm) to any critical dialogue, adding sense, objectivity to something with enviable clarity.

Beyond that, there was always so much to absorb in his erudite company, while listening to his performative articulation of a photographic memory, demonstrated by him in discussions on any subject one could have. His debate on the post liberalization Indian economy with Pranab Sen at our campus designed for students is an occasion one can’t miss recollecting, if one was there.

In any of the rebuttals and points offered to Dr Sen's reasoned reflections on campus, Mr Debroy hardly quoted any mainstream economics, data or jargon, but could still revert with coherent arguments citing illustrative reference to public law, the Indian Constitutional provisions, etc for justifying his position/views.

Apart from being industriously arduous, self-driven, Mr. Debroy also personified the rare craft of contributing, quite prolifically, deep, profound observations through great simplicity and coherence for his audience, while using stories, *shlokas* from epochs, classical literature, historical anecdotes, law, or an anecdote of lived experience, which could help him explain/add a perspective. You couldn't ignore his views, insights (despite recurring disagreements) while engaging with him.

One of the other special attributes that inspired me the most as a learning from Mr Debroy was his broad mindedness and ability to scope out an issue/subject from its granular detail to developing (and providing) a bird eye view.

The reflective dimensions of his applied thought-and statement- converged the macro with the micro beautifully, a distinct rarity in the vocal practice of social scientists (or intellectuals in general). The only other person in that spirit who comes close to that depth, at least in public humanities and macro-to-micro thought convergence is perhaps Dr Pratap Bhanu Mehta himself, but it would be a long time before India can see -and experience the writings/work of another Bibek Debroy.

He truly may be remembered as a *person of his own*.

Om Shanti 🙏-----