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First Person Singular

*For*

*Rudrangshu  
who dislikes most of what I write  
yet suffers silently*

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First Person Singular

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## **PUBLISHER'S NOTE**

Early in 2014 we had re-printed Ashok Mitra's well-known collection of essays, *Calcutta Diary*,

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which was no longer available in the market for decades. The re-printing met with runaway success. We have now ventured to publish a new collection of his writings. The main body of the new book brings together the First Person Singular series of articles Ashok Mitra has contributed over the past three years to *The Telegraph*, the Calcutta-based newspaper, under the rubric 'First Person Singular'; the rubric that has been chosen as the title of the book. There is a second section in the new book titled 'Postscript' comprising commemorative articles about persons and events that had been published in, besides *The Telegraph*, the *Economic and Political Weekly*, the now defunct *Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Social Scientist*, and a few other publications. Putting together some of these articles published decades ago was a challenge.

I First Person Singular am grateful to Maya Palit, First Person Singular Shachi Seth and Kaushik Ghosh for their assistance in compiling the book.

Paranjoy Guha Thakurta

## INTRODUCTION

Readers may, I feel, like to know what quirk of mind drove me to write the essays in this collection. I had been writing a regular fortnightly column First Person Singular for *The Telegraph* newspaper ever since it began publishing in July 1982, First Person Singular there were one or two breaks, and otherwise it had emerged as a fixed feature First Person Singular for the newspaper. My continuously deteriorating state of health—including almost total loss of sight—impelled me to discontinue the column. *The Telegraph* however was delighted to print occasional pieces from me whenever I feel like writing under the rubric "First Person Singular". Since I am now unable to read books, journals or newspapers, these pieces are the product of left-over memories. Memory can play tricks, what is even more awkward, it is, more often than not, whimsical in recollecting events, occasions or personal experiences. First Person Singular These pieces are therefore by their very nature conceivably only one version of reality. Several friends nonetheless feel that notwithstanding their idiosyncrasy, these contributions throw valuable light on major facets of the nation's socio-political developments over the past half century or thereabouts. As if to salute their haphazardness, the essays are being published in

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the sequence in which they were published in *The Telegraph*.

A few supplementary remarks on the articles carried in the "Postscript" are perhaps called for. 'The Chaudhuris of Bharenga' is a tribute to a family which, in my view, has advanced the cause of the nation in different ways. The piece I wrote on Nilima Devi more or less as an obituary has, let me confess, an amusing association in my mind. From the late 1970's till her tragic death, I was involved in a continuous political skirmish with Indira Gandhi; over the issue of a drastic realignment of Centre-State relations. I believe she developed a personal animosity towards me. There was First Person Singular however one brief interlude. She sent me a complimentary message after she chanced to read my article on Nilima Devi, probably because it had a catty comment about her aunt, Vijayalakshmi Pandit!

The piece 'Burden of Conscience', occasioned by the publication of a book of memories by K.S. Krishnaswamy, narrates some of the inner stories concerning the devaluation of the rupee which had far-reaching consequences for the Indian economy and could be some help to future historians.

The rest of the "Postscript" is about very dear friends who have passed away. I continue to First Person Singular feel greatly dissatisfied with the obituary note on Krishna Raj: it is uncharitably churlish in its reference to Krishna Raj's role in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (or *EPW*) attaining the stature it has reached. I now can discern the reason for my economy of expression First Person Singular at the time of his most untimely death. He had been, till the late 1990s, a severe critic, along with us, of the economic liberalization programme officially sponsored in 1991. He had signed with enthusiasm, along with Iqbal Gulati, K.S. Krishnaswamy, Deepak Nayyar, Prabhat Patnaik, K.N. Raj and myself, a public statement warning the nation of the perils it faces unless the government reverses. The on-going neo-liberal policies; editorial articles in the *EPW* reflect the same point of view. But a shift was noticeable in Krishna Raj's attitude towards the close of the century. He grew increasingly more sympathetic towards liberalization, sometimes quite overtly and the *EPW* editorial policy began to reflect this shift. I had been a member of the Sameeksha Trust, which owns the journal since 1966. But it was the Trust's firm principle to allow the editor to have absolute freedom on the First Person Singular issue of editorial policy. Our personal relationship remained most cordial, though both of us were careful not to refer to issues of policy. I had soon an occasion to be witness to an instance of his determination to protect and assert editorial freedom. I had continued with my column, 'Calcutta Diary', on the pages of the *EPW* through the decades, and it was still going strong. The neo-liberal crowd immensely disliked the views expressed in my column and chose the moment to launch a virulent campaign to banish it from the *EPW*. They succeeded in persuading a distinguished member First Person Singular of the Trust to sponsor their cause at a meeting of the Trustees. Nothing doing, Krishna Raj was full of restraint but firm: it was his decision to run my column and he would continue to do so. Even as I recall the episode, I feel small that my tribute to him, published in the *EPW*, was so curt in its appreciation of the magnificence of his role as the journal's editor.

*The Telegraph* newspaper gladly consented to let me compile in book form the articles under the rubric "First Person Singular"; it has also agreed to the inclusion in the "Postscript" of a number of essays which it had printed. Let me not forget to acknowledge my debt to the *EPW* and the journals from which the rest of the articles included in the "Postscript" have been

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taken. Before I conclude, let me mention that without Ranjana Dasgupta's constant assistance, *First Person Singular* would have never seen the light of day. My friend Gautam Ghosh has helped to locate for me Khurshid Hyder's obituary from the pages of the now defunct *Illustrated Weekly of India*. The speed at which my publisher, Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, accomplishes the task he sets for himself amazes me. First Person Singular My thanks to each of them.

## Thirty Pandara Road

I still remember the address: 30 Pandara Road. It was a modest little apartment, of the D-II type in official parlance, not far from India Gate. The allotment was in the name of B.N. Datar, the senior-most in our gang, who was in the statistics department in what continued to be the Bombay Presidency administration and had just joined the fledgling Planning Commission in its labour and employment division. He shared the Pandara Road flat with K.N. Raj, who too had travelled from Bombay, leaving First Person Singular the research department of the Reserve Bank of India at the invitation of J.J. Anjaria to help him set up the economic division of the Planning Commission. The Pandara Road apartment had two teeny-weeny bedrooms with attached baths and an apology of a corridor connecting the bedrooms with the living room, which was slightly more spacious. Datarji, a widower, loved younger company and was always oozing with the milk of human kindness. Besides, he firmly believed in keeping an open house. Raj, with his natural friendliness, was his ideal flatmate. During the war he had been at the London School of Economics, which First Person Singular was then First Person Singular sheltered in Cambridge and he got to know I.G. Patel, who was doing the Economics tripos at King's College. The two became great chums. As the First Person Singular war ended, Raj returned home with a piping PhD, had a stint as economic correspondent with a Ceylonese newspaper, soon changed First Person Singular his mind and joined the RBI in Bombay. The RBI's research outfit was an exciting place, but the idea of getting involved in the planned

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development of the newly independent nation was much too tempting; therefore onward to Delhi. For the first few months in the First Person Singular Planning Commission, it was playing around with building blocks and mostly learning by doing. A couple of years went by and Anjaria and Raj, between the two of them, finally put together the First Person Singular tome which passed as the country's First Person Singular first Five Year Plan. It was really a prim collection of a set of goody-goody essays touching on issues which had a direct impact on growth; any formal planning exercise did not really proceed much beyond hesitant references to a cluster of hopes and aspirations. The elementary Harrod-Domar formula of growth had just appeared in the academic journals and somewhere in the introductory chapter there was an elliptical acknowledgment of its significance. That was all. Never mind, the prime minister, who was also *ex officio* chairman of the Planning Commission, was overjoyed; here was another course India First Person Singular was taking in its tryst with a glorious destiny. The prime minister insisted that the Central cabinet must have a thorough awareness of the contents and intents of the nation's first endeavour at planning. The cabinet secretary was assigned the task of reading out the full text of First Person Singular the plan document to the assembled Central ministers. Going through the text over three days was a grim, boring chore. The ministers were generally indifferent, and often dozing off. Not that there was no interesting interlink. At one point, the cabinet secretary read a sentence from the chapter on food and agriculture, which suggested that in order to have an increase in food-grains output of such and such a percentage over the Plan period, it would be necessary to have an investment of so many thousand crores of rupees. Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, the food and agriculture minister, took umbrage: food was his portfolio, what business had the Planning Commission in intruding into his sphere? Jawaharlal Nehru, visibly perturbed, spoke a few soothing words and succeeded in calming Kidwai down.

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