



## AI & Society: In Memoriam

### Swasti Mitter: the radical economist

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AI & Society's links with Swasti Mitter go back to early 1980s, when she helped shape the socially useful technology debates at the annual AI for Society conferences at University of Brighton. These conferences laid the foundation for the launch of the AI & Society journal in 1986, and Swasti became a pioneering founding member of its advisory board. Not only she facilitated social, economic and cultural aspects of these debates, as a renowned radical economist, Swasti Mitter pioneered research on the impact of global shifts in work and technology on women. She played a key part in linking grassroots activists, trade unionists, academic researchers, and governmental as well as non-governmental organisations, notably the United Nations. A hard-headed, mathematically inclined economist, she had an exceptional capacity for empathetic investigation of the human consequences of changes in the international division of labour.

Her book *Common Fate, Common Bond: Women in the Global Economy* (1986), continued the exploration of her commitment to articulate and clarify the impact of technology on globalisation, arguing that changes in the organisation of production, made possible by new technology, were contributing to the emergence of “a third world among the first”, and called for the creation of a new labour movement in the developed world that was prepared to learn from methods of empowering poor women in developing countries. She pursued similar themes in the book she edited with Sheila Rowbotham, *Dignity and Daily Bread: New Forms of Economic Organising Among Poor Women in the Third World* and the

First (1994), which detailed attempts to organise labour in free trade zones, in clothing sweatshops in Mexico, among homeworkers in India and West Yorkshire, and in small businesses run by women in Tanzania. The research was made possible by the United Nations University's World Institute for Development Economics Research and led to Swasti's involvement with the UNU's Institute for New Technologies (Intech) and another edited work, *Women Encounter Technology* (1995). This showed the contradictory effects of new technology upon women workers while exploring the relations between tacit “knowhow” and theoretical knowledge.

She was born in Baharampur in West Bengal, India, married Partha Mitter, now a renowned art historian, moved to Britain, where Swasti studied at the London School of Economics and Cambridge University. Her initial research ranged from an account of the demand for food and agricultural products in the UK to an oral history of how peasant movements in West Bengal altered agrarian class relations. Employed by Brighton Polytechnic (later the University of Brighton) from 1974, she was appointed professor of gender and technology there in 1993. Between 1994 and 2000 she was deputy director of Intech, where she continued to study the human consequences of economic transformation, focusing particularly on new technology in Europe and in Asia. She never abandoned her commitment to opening up new opportunities for democratic participation of poor women by expanding the narrow circuits through which economic knowledge is exchanged internationally.

Opposed to all forms of injustice, she wanted to enable poor women to develop their voices so they could assert their needs. She understood that this involved access to information and the transfer of economic and social resources from the powerful to the vulnerable. She also played a key part in linking grassroots activists and trade unionists with academic researchers and large-scale organisations such as the United Nations.

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Her intellectual brilliance and her lasting contribution consisted in interpreting the effects that new technologies would have on the real lives of poor women. The title of her inaugural professorial lecture was “What Women Demand of Technology.” She had the ability to communicate on a grassroots level with workers and powerbrokers alike in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and she had many joyous tales of nights in Irish bars with political activists and factory organisers. She was highly skilled at cutting through to ask the most pertinent questions and bring out creative thinking in others. She never came back from a foreign trip without new ideas, new enthusiasms—and sometimes a new outfit—most notably the robes of a Ugandan chieftain given to her by a prominent politician.

Beyond the academic pursuit, Swasti was known to Brighton’s multi-cultural community as a tireless proponent of humanistic values of social equity, equality of opportunity and cross-cultural harmony, imbued with her deep sense

of friendship and collegiality. I came to know her in 1976, through her social commitment to the founding and evolution of a unique multi-cultural project, ‘Brighton Parosi’ (Parosi—neighbour in Hindi), that brought together women for various ethnic communities in Brighton and shaped the cross-cultural landscape. This landscape of 1970s still bears a fond resonance among those who participated and cultivated it during the 1970 and 1980s. As a colleague at University of Brighton, she came to be known as a fearless proponent of justice, bringing into play her extensive international academic network.

AI & Society joins many other international well-wishers to say fond farewell to the radical economist Swasti Mitter, who died of cancer aged 76, an academic who pioneered in the investigation of how global changes in work and technology have affected women in developing countries.