

# Dr. Gajendranath Mitra

The Legendary Fisheries Expert



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## **GAJENDRANATH MITRA - AN OMNICOMPETENT LEGENDARY FISHER 1916 - 2006**

G.N. Mitra, Gaji or Gajan to those close to him, is no more, having left this earthly abode in the early hours of 18 July 2006 at his residence in Puri, Orissa. His demise was a shock to his loved ones, colleagues, friends and all those who had come to know him in his various capacities and facets of life during the last six decades. He was an extraordinary personality with an all embracing love and concern for perfection in whatever he was doing. Being a man of remarkable talents, culture and knowledge, he could leave a lasting impression on those whom he came across. His interests were catholic and he could not tolerate incompetence. To those who could not catch up, he could have appeared autocratic. Frankly, barring his outspoken countenance and indomitable appearance, at heart, he was genteel, kindhearted and a very likable person. One of impeccable character and integrity, he strode the Indian Fisheries scenario as a change agent to initiate and bring about transformations in fish farming, artisan and small-scale inland and marine fisheries in the rural sector with the goal of economic uplifting of the communities for a better way of life. A man of action, a lot can be written about his contributions to the growth of fisheries, aquaculture, rural and community development programmes in Orissa and at the national level.

In the late forties, in the nascent Department of fisheries, Orissa which he founded and headed, he had a free hand to put his innovative and creative mind to work. Reclamation of swamps for fish culture and new techniques for construction of dykes in deep silted swamps

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and fish farms evinced his engineering aptitude and skills. He had an abiding interest in Chilika Hrada and would least mind the discomforts of spending nights and days in the naukas (small fishing boats).

The first time I met Dr. Mitra was in the early fifties at a seminar on *Hilsa ilisha* organized by my mentor, Dr. Sunder Lal Hora, Director of the Zoological Survey of India at the Indian Museum, Calcutta. Hora's talk was more than once interrupted by a lanky youngster attired in a light cream suit and Hora had to pause and respond to his queries, an unusual happening in those days when listening was the rule! I gathered that this "smarty" was from the Directorate of Industries and in charge of fisheries in Orissa. That was Mitra, effervescent with ideas and unhesitating to make a query or a point.

My first "encounter" with him was after he assumed charge as Fisheries Development Commissioner/ Adviser, Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India in 1963, when he visited Cochin to see the functioning of the various fisheries and training institutes under the Ministry. News of his visits to fisheries institutes and State fisheries departments elsewhere and his non-traditional approaches to issues and problems, preceded him. The Heads of organizations at Cochin had sleepless nights worrying about how to face the new FDA, and how to react and respond to him. His reputation as a stickler for precise facts and figures and personally participating in field programmes had to be contended with and strategies developed to face him.. Dr. Raghu Prasad, Joint Director, CMFRI Research Station took me along with him to attend the meeting, as I was handling the research programmes of R.V. *VARUNA* of the erstwhile Indo-Norwegian Project. The Heads of institutes and their administrative officers were arriving each loaded with bundles of files which were stacked on the tables. Mitra, accompanied by K.Chidambaram arrived and after we took our seats, the first pronouncement Mitra made was "What are these files doing here? Sweep them off!" What he wanted was a 1:1 interaction with those present and the meeting took off on that note. He listened intently to my presentation of cruise planning on a grid

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system to include both hydrographic stations and use of acoustics and fishing operations along the east and west coasts of India. He had a number of queries and expressed the urge to participate on a cruise. However, he had to have the final say and wanted that from thence onwards for six months *VARUNA* would take a zigzag course and wherever fishing was done hydrographic data was to be collected. A waste of ship time, but he had to be convinced. He embarked later on a cruise between Visakapatnam and Chennai along with my late colleague Dr.K.V.Sekharan as cruise leader. No doubt, Mitra had excellent sea legs, but that did not help in the fishing which was very poor. After a few cruises and with no tangible results, when informed, he relented and we reverted back to normal operations. I felt that he was prone to impulsive decisions as he had a mind of his own, always seeking new and challenging avenues, but at the same time the capacity to admit what we call an "error of judgment". He could also appreciate a good piece of work and never hesitated to commend the person in public.

It was a treat to converse with him and watch him pursue his interests in various aspects of fisheries, years after he voluntarily retired from the august position of FDA and other responsibilities he held with the Government of India. His successful stints as Consultant with UNESCO, Asian Development Bank, World Bank, FAO and other International Organizations only energized his acumen for building up and updating his fishery data bank. Every time I visited him at his Professor Para residence in Cuttack, I have found him deeply involved with analyzing the statistics and economics of some problem which he felt needed his scrutiny. He was a data bank, and took pleasure in disseminating information to whom so ever went to him, be it a fisher, research scholar, departmental official, administrator or a politician. He had the sterling quality of writing long letters to his friends embodying his thoughts and even plan of action on a matters of interest. Many fade away after their superannuation, but here was a man with a zest for life and kept his mind sharp, alert and receptive,

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though physically, the last few years he underwent several episodes of ischemia about which he took pleasure in talking about!

The last time I met him, he was very distraught about what was happening in his dear Chilika Lake. The once pristine lake had become over saturated with human interference and the ecosystem was gradually becoming unsustainable and disintegrating. A blending of development with conservation management was wanting. I hope his unpublished manuscripts may bring out his outlook on this major ecosystem.

Kauslyaganga fish farm and the Central Institute of Freshwater Aquaculture were part of his vision fulfilled. The tremendous flip they have given to proven technologies developed are a testimony to his foresight.

He was through and through a gentleman and was highly praiseful of his fellow fishers such as Ailkunki, Jhingran, Chowdhury, Jones, Dubey, Devidas Menon, and Chidambaram to mention a few. He had no hesitation in recounting incidents in their lives which were hilarious.

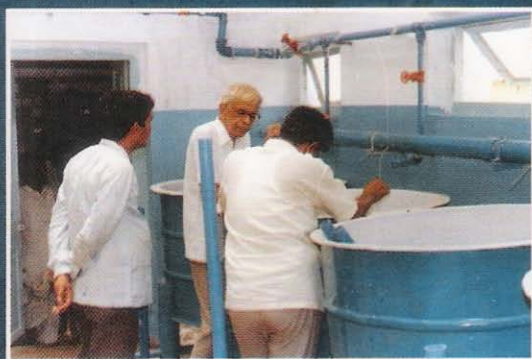
He knew that *Rohu* tickles my taste buds! and saw to it that different dishes of *Rohe macha* were prepared under his instructions during my visit to his home for lunch or dinner. I am sure he depended on his wife Nihar Kana Mitra for the recipes. He was very much concerned about her health. She pre-diseased him by two years. To their sons and daughters and their families, our heartfelt condolences. May their souls rest in peace.

**E. G. Silas**

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Dr. G.N. Mitra's last stay at his home SUMITRA, Puri on sea.



Dr. G.N. Mitra seen with Sk. Md. Jamil Ahmed  
inside Freshwater Prawn Hatchery at Paradeep, Orissa (1997)



Dr. G.N. Mitra in a pensive mood (October 2005)