

# Mike Marqusee: Tribute to a brilliant writer-activist

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**Mike Marqusee (61), who died of cancer in London last week, was one of the finest products of the Anglo-American world's "'60s generation", with a brilliant intellect and a passionate commitment to social justice and human values. A prodigious writer and political activist, Mike was known in India primarily as a cricket writer, who brought dazzling insights into his analysis of the game in books like *Anyone but England* and *War Minus the Shooting* (on the 1996 World Cup), and influenced our more talented sports journalists.**

But Mike had a stupendous range of other interests too, including history and social change, British Labour Party politics and the American civil liberties movement, global mobilisations for peace and social solidarity, Renaissance art and contemporary popular culture (including TV serials and Indian films), and flamenco dance and Carnatic music! The quality of Mike's intellect found eloquent expression in books and the numerous columns and essays he wrote for *The Hindu*, *The Guardian*, and last but not least, the radical magazine *Red Pepper*, to which contributed right till November last.

One only has to browse through Mike's *Redemption Song* (centred on Muhammad Ali) and *Chimes of Freedom* (on Bob Dylan), both published in India, to appreciate the depth of his understanding of culture, society and politics—and complex relations between them—and his gift for felicitous expression.

Mike could write devastatingly on the iniquities of Zionism: as in *If I Am Not For Myself*, simultaneously a history of Jewish radicalism in New York, a personal account of becoming a "deracinated Jew", and a scathing critique of Israeli policies towards Palestine. But he could as easily discuss how it's possible for an atheist to be deeply moved by an unabashedly devotional Thyagaraja kriti at a sabha in the annual winter music festival at Chennai, which he regularly attended.

Mike was born in New York. He moved to England in 1971, fell in love with both cricket and Liz Davies (his partner and housing rights activist), and stayed on. He joined the Labour Party in 1980 and worked with grassroots groups. But as his co-authored book *Defeat from the Jaws of Victory* bears out, he became a fierce critic of its rightward evolution into New Labour, and had to leave. He was a founding member and chief press officer of the Stop the War coalition, set up to oppose the US invasion of Iraq, and became known for his acerbic criticism of the war's many apologists—and of sectarian Left-wing groups which tried to take over the anti-war movement.

An "unrepentant" admirer of Marxist Labour-radical Tony Benn, Mike never wavered from his commitment to socialism, internationalism, secularism, and gender and racial equality—just as he never reined in his curiosity about the world. His personified that rare combination or amalgam: work and play, hard-nosed politics and infectious charm, fierce dedication to causes and artistic

creativity. As I can testify from my two-decades-long friendship with Mike, he never ceased to inspire, and in a compelling way.

Mike's last book, *The Price of Experience* (2014), is a passionate, reasoned defence of Britain's National Health Service, once socialism's jewel, and a powerful critique of global pharmaceuticals corporations. He calls them "hostage-takers": "pay the ransom, they demand, or someone dies. The ruthlessness is breathtaking .... What makes it more arch is that the hostage-taker claims to be on the side of the hostages. Though I'm one of those being held hostage by Big Pharma, I've experienced no trace of Stockholm Syndrome... I resent the way my... vulnerability has been exploited... by a group of self-serving parasites..."

**Praful Bidwai**

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\*[http://epaper.dnaindia.com/story.aspx?id=75237&boxid=19885&ed\\_date=2015-01-22&ed\\_code=820009&ed\\_page=8](http://epaper.dnaindia.com/story.aspx?id=75237&boxid=19885&ed_date=2015-01-22&ed_code=820009&ed_page=8)