

Obituary

Prof K T Shah

TO those suffering from a surfeit of his books, meeting Professor K T Shah in person must always have been an exhilarating experience, tins happened to me only a tort night before death snatched him away, all of a sudden but not without notice. Professor Shah told me while showing me the verandah where he worked, straight at the typewriter, that the doctors had advised him to take rest and not to strain his heart. His book on China was in the press, getting ready for publication. So China was naturally the opening subject of conversation.

It was not only ignorance of language which had troubled him in China; it was China's thought pattern and not that of Mao's regime only. China had always been empirical, now it is materialistic. Our conception of life is so very different. And why conceal that the Indian attitude of mind is basically aristocratic, ethical and on a very high plane? This has been best described, I believe, by Lowes Dickenson in his Letters of John China nun. Professor Shah was full of praise for Mao's achievements for he appreciated the background of China's movement of liberation. It was liberation from groups of their fellow countrymen. The movement had not been directed primarily against a foreign conqueror as in our case. That explained a lot.

Then we took leave of China and drifted on to Grihya Sutras, via kautika's controlled economy. Professor Shah had come to realise how greatly the use of a foreign medium inhibited originality and robbed our social thinking of vitality and fruitfulness. Words divorced from experience which clothes them 'with meaning and substance cannot be fit counters in interchange of ideas. When an Englishman talks of trade unions he means something quite different from what we have in mind and so on. This is probably basic in social thinking, not so much in science or mathematics which use symbols so rigidly defined as to be easily and widely interchangeable. In economics even when the language of mathematics is used, it has to be translated subsequently into the language of the market place and clothed with meaning derived from everyday life. This was one of the reasons why Prof Shah felt we had made so little progress in economics; another being our complete obsession, to the exclusion of everything else, with fashioning the weapons of warfare in fighting the British. Were

there not economists of the pure and impure variety? Mere was one who unashamedly belonged to the latter.

The impression that the Professor left on one's mind was of immense mental vitality and of a mind alive and alert, not one track like that of a serious or professional economist but many-sided, breaking into fragments as light is refracted from a prism... He had even written plays in Gujrati, Prof Shah told me and *The Glory That Was Ind* had engaged him for years in the study of our past. Of the facets which I found most attractive were those that harked back to the past and tried to discover the roots from which life can draw sustenance, and strength. Frustration? I would not say that, though there were no nostalgic references to the National Planning Committee. It was Subhas Bose, by the way, the then Congress President who initiated the first Committee on National Planning and not Pandit Nehru. I was promised a look at the correspondence that passed between Prof Shah and Subha. Hose, but alas, that promise can no longer be fulfilled. There was hardly any mention of Pandit Nehru in connection with planning. And yet I would not say that the wound was still so raw that Prof Shah wanted to avoid the subject deliberately.

Many have forsaken economics for the attraction of the bar or business. In the case of Prof Shah, Professor without a Chair, it was the other way about. He was made to leave the academic field to seek a career as a professional economist and I believe he was the first in this country to fall back on economics as a profession and source of living, without holding any academic or official appointment. That he succeeded in doing it says much for his tenacity and devotion to his own profession as also for the respect in which he was held in monied, if not influential, circles. And yet in the end he was alone. He gathered no group of students around him, founded no institute of research, nor did he leave behind a school of thought, breaking thereby the tradition of parampara on which we ended the evening's talk, not knowing then that this was the last talk I would ever have with him.

Prolific in his writings and prodigious in his labours, I could not help suspecting that the futility of the printed word was at last dawning upon him. Much reading bringeth weariness of flesh and vexation of spirit. He was turning, instead, to the perfected word.

But that, unfortunately had not been his life's calling. Even so, I suppose, any day Prof K T Shah would have preferred to be a Don Quixote and tilt at windmills rather than deliberately choose to remain ineffective. That, is why he positively delighted in being unpractical, so long as he remained idealistic. Facts probably bored him. A broad sweep was his metier; patient, slow and pedestrian unravelling of tangled skeins cramped his style. Not unnaturally a legend grew around him. But one does not have to invent things, considering that Prof Shah had seriously suggested decades ago that the gold and silver in our territories should be utilised for the economic reconstruction of the country. Even in his mature years, as the Chairman of the National Planning Committee, he turned down a serious proposal for investigating the operation of exchange banks in the country because he thought it would be waste of time and labour. He quite seriously told a friend who had suggested this investigation, "Why worry about exchange banks or monetary problems." We will build up an economy which will supercede anything that Marx could imagine. We will do away with exchange altogether!

There was the light—the light that beckons and betrays.

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