

The Age of Professor Narmadeshwar Jha

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Dr. Narmadeshwar Jha was Professor and Head of the Department of Economics, Bhagalpur University, Bihar (India) during the late 1960's and 1970's. He was also the Pro-Vice Chancellor of Bhagalpur University and later the Vice Chancellor of Bihar University.

Professor Jha did his MA from Patna University. Subsequently, he did his PhD in the University of Leeds, UK, where he worked under the supervision of Professors A.J. Brown and L.G. Johnson. His doctoral work was published, with a commendatory foreword by Sir Dennis Holme Robertson, as "***The Age of Marshall. Aspects of British Economic Thought, 1890-1915***" (Patna: Novelty and Co., 1963 and later edition London: F. Cass, 1973).



Among the correspondence papers of Sir Dennis H. Robertson with Professor Jha (see *Janus*, a self-funded project, established in October 2002 to provide a single point of networked access to catalogues of archives and manuscript collections held throughout Cambridge) we find three documents dated back to the period 1953-60. Those documents relate to the research work of professor Jha. In another letter, dated June 24th 1957, Professor Jha acknowledges his indebtedness to Professor Robertson and thanks him for help on his thesis. In his letter dated March 4th 1963, Professor Jha requested Professor Robertson to write a foreword to his book "*The Age of Marshall. Aspects of British Economic Thought, 1890-1915*" to be published. The book turned out to be one of the most authentic research documentations on the history of economic thought and since its publication it has been used as a reference book by a large number of authors in the subject.

Sir Dennis H. Robertson in appreciation of the work of Professor Jha (Foreword: *The Age of Marshall*, p. xiii) wrote:

“Dr. Jha has, in my view, deserved well of students of Economics, not only in India but elsewhere, by the patient thoroughness with which he has worked through twenty-five solid volumes of the *Economic Journal*, and the discerning and temperate judgment with which he has sought to present an ordered account of what he has found there.

Of course the range of his scholarship extends far beyond the bounds of the Journal. ... it is also among his purposes to show in what manner what was thought and written in 1891 – 1915 differed from what had been thought and written earlier, and how far it foreshadowed what was to be thought and written in later years.”

Professor Jha was also deeply interested in literature and education. One of his important works is summarized in his paper “Rabindranath Tagore” published by UNESCO. This paper is available in several European languages also.

Since 1986, after his retirement from the University Service, Professor Jha was living in Deoghar (a small township in Bihar). I came to know that he passed away in 2008.

I saw Professor Jha for the first time in 1970, after being admitted to the 2-years Masters’ degree course in Economics (Bhagalpur University). I had passed out from Marwari College, then having an ill fame for perpetually failing to turn out students with BA Honours in Economics. After our admission to the MA programme, the first (introductory) lecture was delivered by Professor Jha. At the outset, each of us introduced ourselves along with the college we came from. Most of our classmates were from TNB college, well known for turning out BA Economics (Hons) students. When I associated myself with Marwari College, Professor Jha was a little surprised; but in a flash he remarked: well, we have admitted you, so you must have passed with honours.

We studied eight papers in Economics for two years at a stretch before taking the final examinations (there were no intermediary or annual examinations). Professor Jha taught us the Economics of Development. By now I have forgotten much of what he taught except the chapters on the “Will to Economise” and “Economic Institutions” in W.A. Lewis’s *The Theory of Economic Growth*. Professor Jha lectured on those chapters for over a month and made us aware of the works of Gunnar Myrdal, Thorstein Veblen and the American Pragmatists, Max Weber (Protestant Ethic) and Vikas Mishra (Hinduism and Economic Growth). He also connected many of those ideas to Adam Smith and Alfred Marshall. Professor Jha’s lectures depicted Smith and Marshall to be closer to the Institutionalists than the Classicists/Neoclassicists. Notably, Professor Jha had a socialistic inclination, even though he was a noted scholar on Alfred Marshall. Those lectures have been of a lasting effect on me.

Professor Jha was extremely strict on regularity of attendance of students and engagement of classes by teachers in the Department. Occasionally, when a teacher was absent, he (often) used to engage the classes himself, but at times he requested some other teachers to engage the classes. I recollect the occasions of three of his lectures;

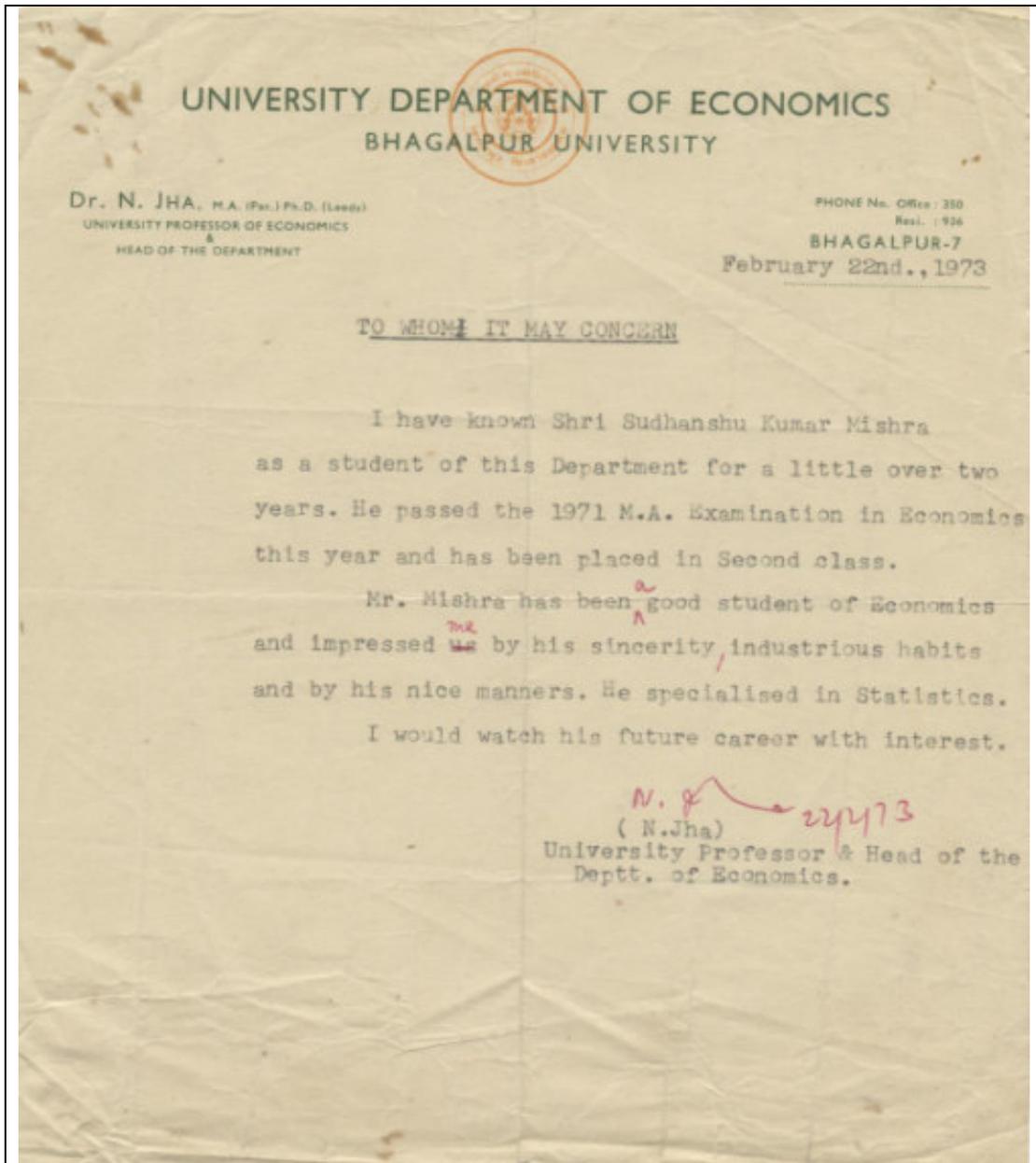
the two on economic thought when he spoke on Friedrich Hayek and Joseph Schumpeter, and the one when he spoke on the relevance of the theory of consumer's behavior. I vaguely remember of him once speaking on the circumstances that led to development of econometrics, although I am not sure of its being a class lecture. Regarding his strictness on regularity of students in the class, I recollect the Goswami episode. One Mr. Goswami was not 'sent up' to take his examinations since he was short of three or four lectures to make his attendance 75 percent of the total number of lectures delivered. Goswami got a clearance from the Vice Chancellor so as to enable him to take his examinations. On knowing this, Professor Jha met the Vice Chancellor and got his permission withdrawn. Mr. Goswami had to attend classes and then permitted to take examinations the next year. All of us learned a good lesson from that episode. I recall, once I was not able to pay my fees in time and my name was struck out from the rolls. I had to pay a fine for re-admission. I applied for waver of the fine and requested Professor Jha to recommend for the same. Professor Jha kindly obliged me but with a warning that it was PG Department, and not a primary school.

Professor Jha was equally strict on examinations. On account of having only one examination covering a 2-years' syllabus, we had no option than to read the entire course. I recollect how I prepared over 40 topics in Public Finance course – reading Musgrave, Prest, Due and Bhargava, but none of the questions in the examination was covered by my preparations. Professor Jha always saw to it that the questions had two parts: the one could be answered on the basis of preparation, but the other could be answered only if a student was reflective and intelligent.

Professor Jha's academic stature was much taller than the professors around and, rightly so, everyone was respectful to him. Professors Kameshwar Jha, Shiv Kumar Singh and Ramji Sahay, who were admirably good at mathematical economics, public economics and macroeconomics (respectively), sincerely praised the scholarship of Professor N. Jha.

We took our final examinations (in September 1972). One of us (marginally) secured First Class, 26 of us secured II Class and 27 of us could pass only with III Class. That was sometime in January 1973.

It was customary for the examiners those days not to give high marks in BA as well as MA examinations, especially in English literature and Economics. As a result, not more than one student could possibly secure a First Class in those examinations. The rest had to be contented with a Second Class or a Third Class. The fortunate student who secured a First Class in MA was sure to get a Lecturer's job in a good college. The high Second Class (obtaining more than 55 percent marks) had some chance to win a fairly good college for the post of a lecturer. Others had to seek jobs elsewhere.



This is how Certificates were given to the 'wranglers' of Professor Jha. This is valuable in my eyes as it bears the handwriting of Professor Jha and I love it.

Professor Jha used to issue a special letter of appreciation to the students who secured top three positions in the MA Economics examinations. Sometimes, all the three 'wranglers' of Professor Jha had only a high Second Class. But most often, the first 'wrangler' alone had a (marginal) First Class and the two subsequent 'wranglers' had only a high Second Class. It appears that Professor Jha brought that notion of 'wranglers' right from Cambridge. In the opinion of Professor Jha the rest of the lot (below the third 'wrangler') were all wooden spoon. We did not know at that time that those 'wranglers' of the Department of Economics of Bhagalpur University had no market value even in

our own University or the state (of Bihar); their value in the national (or international) market not to mention.

I recollect a case. Sometime in the late 1970's while doing my research in IIT, Kharagpur, I was an applicant for a post of lecturer in the Department of Economics, Bhagalpur University. Almost everyone thought that I would be selected, partly because I appeared to be 'close' to Professor Jha. In spite of my good performance, I was not selected. Later, Professor Jha explained how an applicant (who passed from Patna University) was selected since he was a First Class. Conservatism of Professor Jha often went against his own students who competed with the students of other universities around.

Professor Jha's close association with the stalwarts of economics such as D.H. Robertson, J.R. Hicks and U.K. Hicks, A.C. Pigou, A.J. Brown and the likes immensely inspired all of us, his students. These names were for us not the names merely appearing in the textbooks, but they were the persons whom we felt to be close to us (although through Professor Jha). We felt that we were in the same family; we belonged to them and they were ours, although we never saw them in person. For one, I was quite impressed by Professor Jha's scholarship. So I aspired to do my research work under him. That was sometime in 1974. He gladly agreed to supervise me, but wanted me to write a synopsis on the life and works of Professor Arthur Pigou. Probably he wanted to extend his work on Marshall to cover the academic heirs of the master. I had little knowledge of what a synopsis could be, yet I worked for over two months to gather some information on Professor Pigou and finally wrote a synopsis-like thing. Professor Jha read the 'synopsis' and coolly advised me to 'go to the market; purchase Nesfield's Grammar and Oxford Dictionary; study them for three years; and then rewrite the synopsis'. That was the end of my research under him.

After sometime I applied for admission to the 2-years 'Master of Regional Planning' course given by the Department of Architecture and Regional Planning, IIT, Kharagpur. The application form needed a sponsorship. Professor Jha kindly sponsored me and I was admitted to the course. However, his sponsorship was understood as to provide me with the financial support from the sponsor, which Professor Jha did not intend while sponsoring me. This complicated the matter and I was denied any scholarship by IIT. I wrote to Professor Jha. Professor Jha knew the then Director of IIT, Kharagpur (Professor C.S. Jha). He wrote a letter to Professor C.S. Jha and requested him to consider my case with compassion. It worked and I got the scholarship. My education in IIT, Kharagpur (and my subsequent career) could not possibly have materialized without the favour extended to me by Professor N. Jha (as well as Professor C.S. Jha).

Years rolled on and I completed my PhD in Planning from IIT, Kharagpur. However, I have never been happy with the work I did. I always think that I would have done well if Professor Jha accepted me as his research student.

Sometime in the second half of the 1980's I visited Professor Jha. By that time he had already retired from the university (and possibly he had also resigned from Vice Chancellorship of Bihar University due to a deeply hurting tragedy in his family). I was not sure if I would be meeting him again. I did not know of his plans after retirement. So, I requested him to give me one of his photographs. He asked, "what will you do of it?" My reply was simple, "sometimes I want to see you; at those moments I will see your photograph". He gave me his passport-size photograph (that I have pasted here for the posterity to see him). In course of conversation he also appreciated that I visited him, since those days he was quite forlorn. When Professor Jha was in power, there were dozens and scores to visit him every evening. But after he retired, all tended to forget him – including his own Department people. After Professor Jha left, my alma mater – the Department of Economics, Bhagalpur University – could not be the same again. But this is my personal opinion, others need not endorse it.

After the meet mentioned above, I could not see him again. Recently, I came to know that he passed away. I tried to search for something regarding him on the internet, but in vain. In the world of academics he survives only by his book (*The Age of Marshall: Aspects of British Economic Thought, 1890-1915*) and the paper on Rabindranath Tagore. I vaguely remember to have read one of his papers on how to do research on economic thought, exemplified by how he himself worked through the thousands of pages of the Economic Journal. But at the moment I am not able to search/locate it.

Professor Jha was surely an oasis in the yawning deserts and a well-meaning Gulliver in the Lilliput. He was a man from some distant land, a citizen of some foreign territory. I have not met in my entire life an economist whom I consider better in scholarship than Professor Jha. It is a different matter altogether that I have not been fortunate enough to meet an economist who is better than him.

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