

Jagdish Bhagwati

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Jagdish Bhagwati has been the great intellectual protagonist of free trade of our era. With his unique blend of wit and wisdom, he has struggled tirelessly against the ranks of the unbelievers, be they foolish policy-makers, protectionist interests or misguided protesters against globalisation. He has upbraided those who should know better for sacrificing the solid principles of non-discrimination, liberalism and multilateralism to the false gods of preferences, protectionism and bilateralism. He has criticised those who refuse to know better for remaining so stubborn in their ignorance. He has been a voice of conscience for the great and one of wisdom for the multitude.

In both what he writes and what he says, Jagdish displays wit without malice and boldness without rancour. His path has demanded not just firm convictions, intelligence, knowledge and verbal dexterity, but moral and occasionally even physical courage. That he has been left largely alone in this struggle should be a source of shame to other academics. That he has persisted should be an equal cause for respect.

Isaiah Berlin once described Leo Tolstoy as a fox who wanted to be a hedgehog. The fox, he said, is a cunning animal that knows many things, while the hedgehog knows just one thing. Jagdish, however, combines the focus of the hedgehog with the cleverness of the fox. Few scholars are prepared to focus on one great topic over decades and far fewer match Jagdish's diverse skills. He is one of the world's foremost theorists of international trade, an outstanding analyst of trade and development, a man of wide and civilised learning, a formidable debater, the author of superb popular books and the contributor of an unending stream of brilliant, witty, and pungent columns in newspapers and magazines.

I should say that I wish there were many more like Jagdish. From a purely personal point of view, that is not so. If there were many more like Jagdish, I would have no job. Fortunately, there is little risk of this, since he is unique. He is the paradigm of the economist not as narrow technician, but as engaged public intellectual. He speaks not just to economists, but to the world, and, in doing so, he speaks not for special interests, but for economics itself.

Jagdish has shown what a difference an economist of such stature and ability can make if he is prepared to write cogently and clearly for a popular audience. In a democracy, an argument is not won merely by being right. Nor is it won by being stated just once. It is won by being repeated tirelessly, inexorably and compellingly. Jagdish understands that repetition is the essence of persuasion. He has stood almost alone for decades in the struggle for a liberal trading system. He has persisted through illness and continued, despite unpopularity. We owe him our thanks and our admiration. The world would be immeasurably poorer without him.