

In Celebration of Jagdish Bhagwati's 70th Birthday, August 5, 2005
Padma Desai's Comments

I am happy beyond measure that all of you have come here from near and far to be with us on this special occasion to celebrate Jagdish's birthday.

All of you know Jagdish as a brilliant economist, most of you as a loyal friend, some (including myself) as a close colleague, and a select few as a concerned teacher. I want to talk about Jagdish as I have known him, a devoted husband and an intellectual companion of nearly five decades, and a loving father to our daughter Anuradha.

Actually Anuradha and Jagdish have been, from day one, fun-loving, sparring companions rather than father and daughter. When she was hardly three, her day care teacher asked her: "Anuradha, what does your mother do?" "My mother goes to conferences." "And your father? What does your father do?" "My father talks." She had figured him out early on.

When we moved to New York in 1980, Jagdish walked her every day four blocks to the Bank Street School for Children and back. There were memorable conversations of which only a few were reported to me. I will mention only one. "Daddy, are we Jewish?" she asked him once. "No, darling, but we are the next best." And after a while, he added: "Just an epsilon away." To which she asked: "Daddy, what is an epsilon?" With a magical touch, Jagdish had shifted the conversation from the complexities of religious differences to the secular realm of mathematics.

A natural gift of laughter has been an abiding quality of Jagdish's presence at home, and away from home, in meetings and conferences and in much of his writing, which is entertaining and enlightening as well. And so when Columbia College students decided to interview married professorial couples on the campus one Valentine's Day, and approached me, I gave them a one-liner which created a buzz on the campus. I had said: "My husband enters a room and the sun comes out."

Underneath the sparkle and the wit and linguistic flourishes is his tremendous and wide-ranging intellectual output, which for Jagdish, I believe, has been a joy ride. Each published piece is almost always the first draft, hot from the griddle with few corrections, revisions, or recalls. There is no time to be lost for the next idea, with a new analytical design and a fresh policy wrinkle.

As I watched the torrential flow over the years, I had to come up with an original description of the phenomenon. So when the Chronicle of Higher Education interviewed me at length about Jagdish, I described him as Werner Heisenberg's particle. In Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, one can determine the particle's location or its velocity but not both. It carried the day and found a prominent place in the Chronicle article.

So people ask me: How is life with the particle? I mean young women economists sometimes ask me about the professional pros and cons of marrying a brilliant economist. In 1966, Jagdish and I published a joint book on India for Oxford University Press that subsequently became a bestseller. But it set me thinking about my professional goals and started me on a search for a distinct identity. I decided to move into a field that was a total area of darkness for Jagdish. So when we returned from India to the U.S. in 1968, upon Jagdish getting a tenure appointment at MIT, I moved into the Soviet field at the Russian Research Center at Harvard. Lo and behold, in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the Soviet leader, and my professional life moved into a dizzying orbit and has remained there, challenging and totally rewarding. As you can see, I cannot generalize from my experience about a professional couple working in the same discipline. Ultimately I feel that the joint probability of two independent events, namely Jagdish and Gorbachev, happening in a person's life is minuscule. All I can say is that sheer good luck combined with an independent spirit and determination to chase ideas, with Jagdish as a stimulating intellectual companion, has brought me where I am.

Finally, I want to leave you with a heart-warming thought. How can Jagdish diversify his intellectual pursuits and hectic professional routine? Should he be doing something different? I often think about it and even make occasional plans. When we were both in Berkeley visiting the Economics Department in 1973-74, I thought, given the abundant sun and surf, Jagdish might take up a vigorous sport. The very first week, we were driving along the coast and Jagdish looked out the window and said memorably: "What shall we do with this dumb ocean and these dumb mountains?" We realized we were hardy, work-oriented New Englanders and returned to Cambridge, Mass. At one point, I suggested to Jagdish that he might take up golf. To which he said: "What is the point of wanting to put a little ball in a distant hole?" So that was the end of that.

But for years, I have wanted Jagdish to take up the culinary art because he is a sophisticated sampler of gourmet food. Perhaps he might start making the morning coffee. So as a total novice, Jagdish asked me: "Darling, how do I know the water is boiling? To which I responded: "Darling, when it looks like champagne." Believe me, it worked like a charm. Jagdish has been making coffee ever since. The other day, I read that the President makes morning coffee for the First Lady. So I savor my White House moment every day in our Columbia apartment. With that, what more can I say except raise my glass this evening and wish Jagdish many happy returns of the day?