

A Big Man Goes

NO one, or almost no one, dies without putting out a candle in some heart. When on his 81st birthday, last Sunday, Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy departed from the Bengal scene the loss, as a Calcutta daily aptly put it, was of a dimension — not merely of an outstanding personality, a considerable leader and a brilliant physician. It may be some time before his immediate mourners, the Bengalis, begin fully to realise the magnitude of their loss; to the rest of the country, which is not the richer because of the disappearance of Dr Roy, the realisation may be even more belated. Fifteen years ago, when almost every Indian was paying just tributes to Lord Mountbatten for his services to the people of this country, it was left to Chakravarti Rajagopalachariar to compliment the last Viceroy on his services to his own country and people. How came it. C R argued, that on the morrow of Independence the Indians and the British became so friendly — except for Lord Mountbatten? If West Bengal is the least intolerant of States, if Calcutta continues to be dominated by British and Marwari business with only occasional and harmless grunts and whimpers from Bengalis, well, it was largely Dr Roy's work.

Private gossip has it that Dr Roy was not very pleased when, on his replacement of Dr P C Chosh as Chief Minister of West Bengal almost 14 years ago, a Calcutta newspaper wrote a leading article entitled "A Good Man Goes", Had not another good man, perhaps a better man, come in? This was the undying child in Dr Roy protesting. There is no universally acceptable definition of goodness; and it may be that, by fits and starts and in particular phases of his life, Dr Roy, like the rest of us, strove to be "good". That was not, almost certainly, his primary passion — as it was with Mahatma Gandhi, for instance. It is "not by paying false tributes, just for the accident of his recent death, that we will honour Dr Roy. Let it be said, then, that, while the quality of his medical advice was almost invariably excellent, it was quantity that fascinated Dr Roy the more. That this is not said

in derogation of the man will be clear from this writer's thesis that nobody begins to understand the problems of this country unless he gives pride of place to numbers and thinks in terms of quantity.

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Let it be said, too, that Dr Roy was no moralist. Is this another left-handed compliment to a man just dead? Quite the contrary. In this writer's view the curse of Indian political thinking through the ages has been its moral bias, that great obscurer of a clear vision. This is not a surrender to *Realpolitik*, far less a propitiation of cynicism. It is just that anyone who begins to improve the world without knowing the world as it is does the world more harm than good. In Dr Roy, politics was perhaps a continuation of medical practice by other means. Diagnosis was its basis; and he never forgot that, much like the human body, his country and his people were imperfect. He made concessions; he made compromises (sometimes with evil); and if on Sunday many in Calcutta were able to drink, in sorrow, a toast to the rounded life of Dr Roy, why, that was because of Dr Roy too. I am not being frivolous, for the fanatical pursuit of Prohibition epitomises all that is worst in Indian political, social and economic thinking today. In that arid desert of barren orthodoxy and living in the past, West Bengal was a little oasis of sanity. Ali because of Dr Roy.

To paraphrase what Keynes said of Churchill: only he was great enough to have the great vices he had, only he was great enough to make the great mistakes he made. Here one must add a French proverb: he had not a defect to which was not attached an equally great virtue. As a doctor he earned prodigiously; he spent as generously. Earning and spending are not an economic activity alone; they represent deliberate choices guided by one's philosophy of life. Dr Roy was often criticised, rightly, for his superb indifference to audit objections; some 30,000 of them are believed to remain unanswered. Just like Dr Roy: he did not measure his "life with coffee spoons". Think, rather, of an enormous ladie, Some

waste? Inevitably. But nobody is going to solve the problems of West Bengal with a coffee spoon; and long before the World Bank made the discovery Dr Roy had been telling everybody, New Delhi in particular, that Calcutta's problems were in a very real sense India's.

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The large industrial complex painfully coming up in Durgapur will perhaps one day bear Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy's name. He was among the not many politicians in India who could think in terms of an Indian Ruhr. He was justly criticised for his many expensive experiments which did 'not pull off. Deep sea fishing is a joke; the mention of an underground railway for Calcutta (or monorails) evokes laughter; and reclamation of the Salt Lake produces salty tears. Even this part of the ledger needs to be properly evaluated, for the things Dr Roy did not finish are precisely the things that will have to be accomplished some day — by, alas, somebody else — if West Bengal with Calcutta is not to die on its feet in our lifetime.

Dr Roy "thought big" because his vision of West Bengal was not that of a small State resigned to its smallness. Dr Roy was not one of those saints to whom the leadership of this country comes naturally, explaining its poverty which is often glorified. In this he was a total departure from the Indian tradition; and his acceptance of the machine was complete — which can be said for few Indians. In spite of the dams and factories going up here, there and everywhere, it is still far from certain that the Indian people will not again reject modernism, the machine and the scientific outlook. That day will see Dr Roy's second death, with perhaps not much left of India. It is no use lamenting deaths like Dr Roy's without recognising that these people were ardent subverters of the Indian tradition, worshippers of things totally alien to the native ethos. Hard work such as Dr Roy did to the last of his days is almost an un-Indian activity; and it is an unflattering commentary on what is called the Indian heritage that the greatest Indians of our time — Nehru, Roy — are, in a very real sense, non-Indians except by birth.

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