

OBITUARY

## Bishnodat Persaud

Economist who worked at the Commonwealth Secretariat and was a key thinker in reports for the UN

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Persaud helped convince Manmohan Singh, the former prime minister of India, to try a free market

“Everyone in the world has something to teach you,” the economist Bishnodat Persaud would tell his children gently. “It’s your job to find out what it is.”

That, assumed his daughter Sharda, was why her father chatted freely to anybody and everybody, from the taxi driver collecting him from Heathrow to Manmohan Singh, the future prime minister of India.

A shy man who for a decade ran the economic affairs office of the Commonwealth Secretariat, Persaud helped convince Singh to try, for the first time, a free market in India. When Persaud first met him in 1987, Singh was an old-fashioned socialist welded to the concept of a state-run economy. During three years of meetings, Persaud gently coaxed Singh into believing that liberalising India from a welter of red tape would bring prosperity to even the poorest.

About 200 million Indians leapt out of poverty thanks to the radical market reforms introduced by Singh when he served India as prime minister from 2004-2014.

Persaud never used aggression to force his point. “Watching these two softly spoken, courteous men argue intensely was like watching two grandmasters play a silent game of chess,” said Persaud’s son, Avinash. It was typical of Persaud that he never complained that his contribution was not acknowledged. When the topic of India’s economic miracle cropped up in conversation, he would merely raise a wry smile.

Naturally averse to the limelight, Persaud would jot down in a little red notebook at the start of each week a set of global problems he wished to ponder in the next seven days. His answers, invariably subtle and profound, sometimes met with a frosty reception. His favouring of the private sector in a developing world still wedded to state planning roused suspicion in the late Eighties.

“He was very able and ahead of his time,” said Sir Vince Cable, who worked as Persaud’s special adviser at the Commonwealth Secretariat from 1983 to 1990. “He was thoughtful and didn’t take conventional views. He believed that peasant farmers and entrepreneurs had a lot to contribute towards development.” The pair co-wrote *Developing with Foreign Investment* (1987), a book to entice investors to consider emerging markets. Persaud put his theory into practice by starting a portfolio fund to invest in the economies of Malaysia, Barbados and Botswana. At the time, investing in such markets was distinctly offbeat. It is now a mainstream practice.

No fan of pre-packaged ideas, at home Persaud encouraged original thinking by asking his children Rajendra, now the psychiatrist Dr Raj Persaud, Avinash, now an economist and investor, and Sharda who today teaches economics, to discuss current affairs for an hour each night at the dinner table. When his daughter struggled to make herself heard, Persaud would break into his son's intense arguments, saying, "Sharda's turn now! Let her speak."

Although a nervous public speaker, Persaud was a shrewd speculator who grew rich on his stock market gambles. One survey placed him in the top 1 per cent of investors and his colleagues frequently asked him for financial tips. He was no cold capitalist, however. An upbringing in British Guiana — now Guyana — sensitised Persaud to the difficulties of former colonies struggling to adapt to a world market and buffeted by geographical hazards including monsoons and ocean storms. The vulnerability index he pioneered took account of such factors, laying the ground for future schemes for third-world debt relief.

Bishnodat Persaud, known always as Vishnu, was born in Berbice, British Guiana in 1933, the grandson of an immigrant from India. His father, a shopkeeper, became the first miller to export rice from British Guiana to the Caribbean. They were the first family in the region to own a telephone. Yet when Persaud was 13 his father died and he retained thereafter a strong sense of responsibility towards his seven sisters, mother and brother.

Persaud encouraged original thinking by asking his children to discuss current affairs each night

At the age of 21, he moved to London, working at first in the ticket offices of the Underground. Swapping timetables for reading books, he took a first-class degree in economics at Queen's University, Belfast. There he met Lakshmi (née Seeteram), his future wife, a Trinidadian. Their first meeting was not propitious. Persaud, a keen cricketer since boyhood, had arrived late for a match for the university West Indian team. He was the captain and Lakshmi, as secretary of the university's West Indian Society, ticked him off. Spotting her afterwards, Persaud would swiftly cross the road to avoid her, so she approached him one day, dropping her books to the ground. When he picked them up, she invited him to coffee. Their marriage was happy — rare was the conversation with Persaud that did not mention Lakshmi or her prize-winning novels. Equally proud of his offspring, he devised small rituals to make time for each one including scheduled Sunday chats on topics such as, "What makes a good book?" or, "Why do we need banks?" He would giggle infectiously at television comedies, chuckling over *Porridge* or *The Two Ronnies* on rare breaks from his desk, where long into the night he would re-draft reports for the Commonwealth Secretariat.

There he worked alongside a fellow Guianese, Sir Shridath Ramphal, who in 1975 became the secretary-general. They formed a formidable duo — the ebullient "Sonny" and the quieter Persaud leading the fight for economic sanctions against South Africa. A key thinker in reports for UN commissions devised to spark fresh ideas about global issues on international development and the environment, Persaud offered piercing insight about how the rapid industrialising of the developing world was harming the environment. In 1990 he helped set-up the Iwokrama programme to sustain the world's rainforests. In retirement, he was appointed professor of sustainable development at the University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica, where he relished discussing the world's woes sitting on a veranda, deep into the long and balmy night.

Much in demand as an adviser to the UN, he created insurance schemes to help those states regularly threatened by natural hazards such as storms, hurricanes and typhoons. In 2013 he was named a Companion of Honour in the honours list of Barbados. No such glory was bestowed by his native Guyana. Jealousy played its part, he speculated, over leisurely lunches held with fellow Guyanese at the RAC club in London. A congenial companion, Persaud would remark that he had not lived with sufficient boldness. Those who blossomed under his gentle guidance disagreed.

**Professor the Honourable Bishnodat Persaud CHB, economist, was born on August 22, 1933. He died of cancer on July 24, 2016, aged 82**