**Mahbub ul Haq**

**Mahbub ul Haq, a heretic among economists, died on July 16th, aged 64**

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WHEN Mahbub ul Haq was in what he called the “western citadels of learning” of Cambridge, Yale and Harvard in the 1950s, there was, he said, a “tacit assumption” in economics that the real purpose of development was to increase national income. To say otherwise was “heresy”. For the next 40 or so years Mr Haq was happy to be a heretic. A guidebook for economic heretics is the “Human Development Report”, started by him in 1990 and published each year since.

At its core is an index for human development devised by the ingenious Mr Haq which measures more subtly the attainments of nations than does gross national product, the familiar GNP. His index reflects national well-being: life expectancy, education and welfare, as well as wealth. Thus in the 1997 report Canada comes top, ahead of the United States, because, although Americans are wealthier, Canadians pick up points because they live longer and are judged to be better educated. But although the index conscientiously lists the merits and failings of 175 countries, Mr Haq was less interested in the rich ones than in the poor ones and what they could do to become less poor.

He was particularly concerned with the countries of South Asia; his own, Pakistan, and India. Both were well down in his index, below even Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. South Asia, he wrote in 1995, was sinking “into a quagmire of human deprivation and despair”. He was shocked that it had fallen behind sub-Saharan Africa, to become the most deprived region in the world. It was “tragically comic” that India and Pakistan, after “bleeding their economies” to pay for arms, “beg and submit to all sorts of conditionalities from international lending institutions”. Such painful observations did not endear him to the governments of the subcontinent. Mr Haq had been a government minister in Pakistan. How could he say such things about his homeland?

**Those with ambition**

But Mr Haq was outspoken as a minister. As finance minister in 1985-88 he tried (without success) to tax the 22 families which, he said, dominated the economy of Pakistan. Doing the will of General Zia ul Haq, Pakistan's then dictator, may not have been the happiest time in Mahbub ul Haq's career. It was probably too long, he said. But anyone with ambition had to accept the patronage of the army, which had ruled the country for most of its existence since independence in 1947. (These days, many Pakistanis look back to the general's ten-year rule as a golden age, topped off by the spectacular success of the country's cricketers under Imran Khan.)

Pakistan, though, was a small stage for Mr Haq. Getting at the tax-dodging landowners, tweaking their pride by calling them feudal, was a fairly unrewarding exercise. (And may not even have been fair: there is an argument that in wobbly Pakistan the big landowners are the only centre of stability in some areas.) As perhaps the most persuasive propagandist for the United Nations Development Programme, the publisher of his development reports, Mr Haq had a world audience.

Just as Lee Kuan Yew emerged from the confines of Singapore to become the seer of Asia, so Mr Haq became accepted as one of the visionaries of international development. He was at ease in America, both at the UN in New York and in Washington, where, earlier in his career, he had worked for the World Bank. Richard Jolly, a colleague of Mr Haq, recalled this week that “he would hold audiences spellbound, weaving together his proposals and vision in a subtle mixture of technical analysis, political cunning and with the tones and uncompromising principles of the true preacher.”

Has the preaching brought any benefit to the poor that Mr Haq clearly cared about? It may be too early to judge. More than 100 countries are said now to have their own “human development centres” producing annual reports; Pakistan's is in a distinctly modest building in Islamabad. But Mr Haq's central idea, concerned with the virtues of choice, is still incubating. Mr Haq liked to quote the example of Costa Rica, which, he said, chose to abolish its army and now spends a third of its national income on education and health, and is the only prosperous democracy in Central America. In contrast, India has the largest number of poor people in the world but is spending huge sums on arms. Armies were the biggest wasters of the resources of poor countries. Why, Mr Haq asked, were India and Pakistan spending $1m a day “to contest the frozen heights of Siachen”?

Mr Haq said he was not sure whether the countries of South Asia had the political will to cut their arms bills and finance their “essential human goals”. In what he called his “intellectual journey” he had moved from idea to idea. In his World Bank days he had on his desk a notice which said, “It is too late to agree with me: I've changed my mind.” Critics said it showed his lack of judgment; admirers praised his flexibility. It was probably just a sign of his charm.