

Professor Joseph J. Spengler —A Personal Tribute

AS a student of Economics, I was familiar with some of the writings of J.J. Spengler. Little did I know at that time that I would have the opportunity of working with Spengler as a junior colleague. I was invited by Duke University (Durham, USA) on a short faculty assignment in 1969. I was introduced to Spengler soon after I joined the University and I at once took a fancy for him. More than his profound scholarship, I liked his sense of humour and his zest for good food. Duke University is an exclusive private University with affluent students and faculty members. There were frequent parties, private as well as official. Visiting professors and other guests were often invited to fancy restaurants for official dinners. I enjoyed these parties and the opportunity they provided me to be with Spengler. He always talked sense. I attended some of his lectures, always marked by high scholarship. I remember, in particular, a special lecture he gave on "What is wrong with American Economy?" His analysis was candid and devastating; it certainly made the audience sit up. Looking back on the course of events since then, I feel that Spengler's analysis was indeed prophetic.

When I visited Spengler's house, I was received by his gracious wife, Dorothy who has a fascination for roses, a hobby I share with her. She showed me round her spacious rose garden. Roses need a lot of care and the only help she could get was from a part-time (non-white) gardener who was deeply attached to the Spengler family. I told her that I was rather lucky in this respect; I could get any number of gardeners to help me out in pruning roses and laying out new beds, etc. and the wages I paid were ridiculously low by American standards. Professor Spengler was amazed when I told him that I was used to a chauffeur-driven staff car and I could always get a part-time driver for my car. He enquired whether I was a millionaire! Spengler was getting on in

years, his eye-sight was failing and driving at night was becoming a problem for him. "How I wish I had a driver!" he lamented.

When I entered his Study, I could see why he was so productive. It was a huge room strewn all over with books and journals. He had a comfortable reclining leather chair and as he sat there looking out at the beautiful garden outside through a large window, he looked every inch a profound thinker! He has no children : his life is centered round his wife and his books. His wife is truly his lifelong companion and has contributed more than her share to his enormous scholarly output.

I was in the United States in 1986 for a brief visit. I spent a week-end with my good friends Mahadev and Judit Apte at Duke University. The first thing I did was to call on the Spenglers. A long time—about 17 years—had elapsed since I had met them. We were all older. He had retired. He was too old to drive his car. His wife was not keeping too well—she could hardly cook or do the housekeeping. The garden was not the same as before. "Our *helper* (the same gardener I had met in 1969) is now too old to work in the garden but he has not deserted us—he still looks after us." Dorothy told me with a sigh. I was delighted, however, to see Spengler's study the same as before—his cosy leather chair, the beautiful look through the large window, the books and journals all around, even on the floor. But I felt so sad to see the helplessness of this elderly couple. As an Indian, I started thinking about the Indian family context. Spenglers have no children or grand-children to take care of them in old age; there is no domestic help available and one can hardly survive unless one shifts to an old people's home (or whatever one calls it). Judit Apte who drove me to the Spenglers asked Dorothy Spengler if she needed any help. There was an awkward silence. Dorothy told her that some volunteers got them lunch under the scheme of 'Meals on Wheels' and a neighbour sometimes helped her with shopping. Judy and I returned with a heavy heart. What an utterly helpless environment in which the Spenglers have to spend their old age!

Before I left them Joe and Dorothy very graciously presented a copy of his book on *Indian Economic Thought* (Duke University Press, Durham, N. C. 1971). In big childlike letters Dorothy wrote on the first page and with his trembling hand Joe signed : "For Dr. Ashish Bose with happy memories of the Spring of 1969 at Duke University—Joseph J. Spengler & Dorothy May 1st 1986." With his characteristic modesty, Joe has put a sub-title to the book : "*A Preface to its History.*" The book would impress any Indian scholar by virtue of the author's encyclopaedic knowledge of Indian source material. Joseph makes it clear in his Preface that "much more remains to be done on the economic and educational history of the subcontinent before a definitive study can be completed—perhaps by a group of Indian and Western scholars with sufficient funding for (say) a ten-year organized inquiry into the growth of Indian society and the history of the interaction of thought and economic life in India. Such funding would not put much of a strain on the resources of

foundations in a nation boasting of its entry into an Age of Opulence and a World of Unpeopled Space".

Undoubtedly, Spengler's autographed book would remain for me a priceless collection in my personal library. When I said this to him, he responded that he had received a similar gift from his guru—Professor A.B. Wolfe of Ohio University who first introduced him to population studies in the early decades of this century. Wolfe's autographed book would have brought a fortune to Joe but he had just donated this rare book to the library of Duke University. Incidentally, Joe published his first book *France Faces Depopulation* in 1938.

I invited Joe to visit India. With a sad nod, he said : "I am too old to travel".

As I bade goodbye to the venerable couple, I talked about flowers to cheer them up. In the Preface of the book which Joe presented to me, he says : ". . . had it not been for the encouragement of my wife, Dorothy, her continuous facilitation of my research, and her surrounding me with flowers of the Orient, I could not have completed this inquiry."

This is an age of consultants, not scholars. I do not think Spengler ever spent his time on consultancy, unlike most American professors. What impressed me most about him was his deep concentration in his scholarly pursuits, the depth of his vision and the wide range of *his* interests. He is truly a rishi in the old Indian tradition.

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