P. N. Damry: A Servant of India, and the World

“Do you know what is the biggest problem that India faces?”

“Over-population?” I guessed.

“No, overpopulation is a problem, but it is not the big problem. The big problem is corruption.”

I was a young and impressionable undergrad, taking a break from doing some volunteering work to spend the afternoon with a family friend. At that point, all I knew about this elderly gentleman sitting across from me was that he had worked for World Bank for a number of years, and several people who knew of my interest in political economy were encouraging me to speak with him. He proceeded to explain in painstaking detail why corruption is such a large problem, how it first emerged in India in his opinion, how the public was going to stand up to the problem, and what would really need to be done to address it. I was amazed at some of the predictions and prescriptions this gentleman was making, and also why he was talking so passionately about corruption when India faced so many other problems. Indeed, the hour-long conversation with this elderly gentleman was so inspiring that I would subsequently take up the academic study of corruption.

This gentleman would pass away a few short years later, in 2007. It would be another three years before corruption became the daily headline for India, with calls for serious reform brought on by Anna Hazare and his Lokpal movement. Even today, I cannot help but feel that the perspectives that this gentleman, P.N. Damry, shared with me all those years ago were more sophisticated and insightful than 99% of the current discourse by scholars and policy-makers. He was indisputably ahead of his time.

But the emerging issue of corruption in India was not the first instance where Damry had predicted the political future. Indeed Damry had a gift that few possess and many envy: he typically recognized the fault lines of politics before others, and he was consequently much more prepared to address the fissures when they inevitably emerged. He was also unafraid to tell the truth, a rarity among government servants. It was precisely this combination of foresight and honesty that Robert McNamara recognized in Damry when in the Spring of 1973 he selected him to become the Secretary of the World Bank, the premier multilateral institution for promoting development. Shortly before hiring him, his soon-to-be boss made Damry promise that he would not hesitate to point out when McNamara went wrong. And for the next eight years – some of the most formative and important years in the Bank’s history – Damry did just that.

Damry’s came from relatively humble beginnings to rise to the top echelons of the international community. Like so many other Parsis, Damry was born to a family of bureaucrats. Damry’s father served in the British colonial government, and when Damry came of age in the 1930s, he was sent off to study in the United Kingdom. Damry would complete his studies with an MA from Cambridge University. Returning to India just before Indian Independence, Damry served as a Deputy Collector in Gujarat. As Indian Independence drew near following World War II, it became clear that the top echelons of the bureaucracy would need to be replaced with Indians as
the Anglo officers chose to return to England. Damry was one of the first officials admitted into
the prestigious Indian Administrative Service, the cadre of government officials who do the top-
level behind-the-scenes work that makes the Indian State function.

Following several postings as a Collector, Damry became more and more involved in policy-
making over the finance and banking sectors. He rose up through the ranks of the Reserve Bank
of India, becoming a Deputy Governor in 1967. Over the next six years until his appointment at
the World Bank, Damry chaired several important committees that would define co-operative
banking, a predecessor system to microfinance. In his typically prescient nature, this work came
at a critical time, as developing the agricultural economy would soon become recognized as one
of the biggest challenges facing a country battling poverty and starvation. And he laid some of
the necessary groundwork for India to launch itself into perhaps its most successful project of its
first fifty years, the Green Revolution, where the country achieved agricultural independence
from the rest of the world through a mixture of technological adaptations and policy overhauls.

By 1981, Damry was ready to retire to his wife Zareen’s home city of Pune. But even in
retirement, Damry displayed the characteristics of a true polymath. Friends report that he was
curious about everything. As easily as he could talk about high-level politics and other esoteric
topics such as high art and classical music, he was equally interested in talking to a farmer about
crops prices and weather conditions. Even if no one else was around, Damry was always reading
and thinking more.

For all of his praiseworthy accomplishments, Damry did not participate much in the Zarathushti
community. But our community is rather intimate. Everyone seems to know one another within
one or two, or at max three degrees of separation. This is a great boon for those youth amongst
us who aspire to work in or on the public sector. Just as important, people like Damry remind us
that Zarathushtis are not one-dimensional. We may be most well-known for our business
prowess, but we should also recognize that many in our community have risen to the top by
serving their countries’ governments, and by serving the world.