

Pranlal Sheth: Curtain falls on one of Kenya's unsung heroes

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Daily Nation on the Web, Kenya

Mr Pranlal Purshottam Sheth, advisor to Kenya's Lancaster delegation.

The Grim Reaper has taken Mr Pranlal Purshottam Sheth, one of Kenya's forgotten patriots. He died of cancer of the kidney on June 30, aged 78 in London.

Mr Sheth had lived the last 37 years of his life in exile, away from his motherland. In 1966, he was stripped of his Kenyan citizenship, refused judicial appeal and deported to India by the Kenyatta government.

Being a close ally of Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, he had become a victim of the rift between Mzee Kenyatta and Mr Odinga. The latter, as minister for Home Affairs, had in 1964, had Mr Ian Henderson deported, probably after his cruelty to Mau Mau freedom fighters. Most probably Mr Sheth's deportation was a tit-for-tat rejoinder.

Mr Sheth was a campaigner for equal rights in Kenya and later in the UK. Born on December 24, 1924, he was the son of an Asian businessman. He studied at the Nairobi Indian High School. In his final year at the school, he organised a strike and sent out a letter to parents when the European headmaster tore down a portrait of Indian political leader Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

After leaving school, Mr Sheth became a journalist starting as a sub-editor at the Colonial Times from 1946 to 1951. He went on to edit the Daily Chronicle. Both papers were Asian-owned and stridently anti-colonial. The journalists called for the total independence of the colony under majority African rule.

Mr Sheth's journalist colleagues were Mr Pio Gama Pinto, Mr D.K. Sharda, Mr Chanan Singh, Mr Piyo Rattansi and Mr Haroon Ahmed. Refusing to compromise on their principled stand, they set up the Chronicle in 1947. There were continuous police raids on their offices and by 1950, the paper and its editors and publishers faced more than 50 charges of sedition against the British Crown.

Mr Sheth was one of a small group of young Indian socialists who were also members of the Kenya Indian Congress. Led by Mr Pinto, they strove to reverse the timid trend of the more conservative leaders of the Indian Congress. They also upheld the centrality of workers to the struggle for freedom and ensuring that that freedom would be for the masses of Kenya. Some members of this group planned to establish a self-help commune and had even acquired land in Ruaraka, Nairobi.

In 1950, Mr Sheth was charged with sedition against the British Crown. That was the year when the East African Trades Union Congress, which he had founded a year earlier with Mr Makhan Singh and Mr Fred Kubai, was banned.

The colonial government became extremely jittery and maintained that it was "communist-inspired". Mr Singh was detained, Kenya's limited press freedom was extinguished and a period of severe repression began.

Realising that there was no future in journalism, Mr Sheth moved to law where he qualified as a

barrister at Lincoln's Inn in 1962. The same year, he started his practice as an advocate in Kisumu and that is where his close association with Mr Odinga blossomed. The lawyer took part in the negotiations for Independence and was a much-respected advisor to the Kenyan delegation at the Lancaster House Conference.

In 1963 when Mzee Kenyatta became President and Mr Odinga the Vice-President, Mr Sheth's services were in great demand. He helped to draft the new Constitution and served on public bodies such as the Central Agricultural Board, the Economic Planning and Development Council, the Commission on the future of Broadcasting Services and the Sugar Advisory Board.

He also chaired the Commission of Inquiry into Tribal Riots in Western Kenya and produced a well-thought out report whose recommendations were implemented by the then new Kenyatta government.

At one time, Mr Odinga described Mr Sheth as the "fire that cooks the food". The lawyer was also a close associate of Mr Makhan Singh and in those early exhilarating days of Independence, together with the likes of Mr Fitz De Sousa, Mr Ambu and Mr Lila Patel, Mr K.P. Shah, Mr Chanan Singh and their African colleagues Odinga, Kubai, John Keen, Achieng' Oneko and Joseph Murumbi, Kenya's future seemed unassailable.

However, that was not to be and at least in the case of Mr Sheth, Kenya's loss became Britain's gain.

Soon after his deportation to India, Mr Sheth was able to move to London where he was joined by his family.

In the almost 37 years that he spent in his adopted country, Mr Sheth served with distinction in many positions ranging from race-related issues to immigration, insurance and broadcasting.

His business and legal acumen were recognised by organisations such as Oxfam, Shelter, One-World International Foundation, Notting Hill Housing Trust, Find Your Feet, International Centre for Child Studies and Multi-cultural Arts Centre. In Womankind Worldwide and Sense UK, he strove to promote the rights of the disadvantaged.

Probably the highest ranking Asian in London in the 1980s, Mr Sheth chaired Asian Business Initiatives and was a role model to young aspiring Asian entrepreneurs.

In Project Fullemploy and Victim Support, he concerned himself with social justice.

He never wavered in his values and convictions; his realism never degenerated into cynicism. To him, opponents were not enemies to be smitten hip and thigh, but fellow labourers to be helped when they stumble in serving a common endeavour.

In 1994, in recognition of his contributions to public service, a C.B.E. was conferred on him.

At his death, lengthy laudatory obituaries were published by the Times of London, Guardian and Independent newspapers.

He is survived by his wife, Indumati, a son and a daughter and four grandchildren. His brothers and their families live in Kenya and to all these family members, we send our condolences.

Mr Sheth was truly an illustrious and patriotic son of Kenya.

(Confirmation of this event also recollected by Dr. Brij Sood Calgary Canada posted in the Commentary section. Suniti Mohindra Class of 1957)