

Abhijit Sen carved out a Unique Space of his Own*

Poornima Varma

Abhijit Sen, eminent economist, passed away on August 29 at the age of 71. He retired as Professor at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning (CESP), Jawaharlal Nehru University, in 2015. During his association with the university, which spanned a period of more than three decades, Prof. Sen made remarkable contributions to the rural and agricultural sector of the country in various capacities and carved his own space through his clarity of thought, ideas and conviction. As an economist, a teacher and a policy-maker, he was able to successfully straddle the theory of agriculture and rural development with empirics and policy-making with remarkable expertise and ease.

Prof. Sen was not a policy-maker or a theorist who was disconnected from the ground-level realities; he had a thorough understanding of the grass-root level problems embedded in the rural and agricultural sector. His deep understanding of the functioning of the rural and agricultural sector with sharp data analytical skills manifested in the form of unique policy insights and recommendations. For instance, he believed and argued that government intervention was not only desirable, but also often necessary. According to him, government intervention was essential to arrive at solutions to several pertinent issues that the sector was encountering, such as poor agricultural productivity.

Although he had unique perspectives stemming from his strong convictions with respect to the agrarian sector and associated data, he was very open-minded and his inputs were accepted and respected by scholars even from diverse ideological perspectives. In addition to his distinguished scholarship, he was a remarkable teacher, much loved and respected by his students.

Prof. Sen held various positions. He served as the chairperson of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP), was a member of various commissions such as the Planning Commission, the 14th Finance Commission, was a member of State planning boards of West Bengal and Tripura. He also headed several committees such as the High-Level Committee on Long Term Grain Policy, and on futures trading, to name a few. Prof. Sen also headed several committees in charge of evaluating and strengthening various institutions in the field of agro-economic research in the country. For instance, during his stint at the Planning Commission, he headed the technical advisory committee constituted by the Commission on the evaluation of agricultural economic research centres and units in the country. The committee made several recommendations for strengthening and reviving the agricultural economic research centres and units.

Advocate of universal PDS

Three years later after becoming the chairperson of CACP, Prof. Sen headed an expert panel on long term grain policy, from 2000 to 2002, and recommended the implementation of a universal public distribution system (UPDS) for rice and wheat. He was a strong advocate of the UPDS as the most feasible way to ensure the nation's food security. He was sceptical about the targeted public distribution system and its impact on reducing food insecurity, hunger and poverty. He believed that the UPDS

would be more helpful in reducing leakages, and that food security could not be improved without addressing the issues of food grain availability, distribution and management of grain stock. When the World Bank made a suggestion to shrink India's PDS by providing cash transfers to beneficiaries, Prof. Sen held the view that the shrinking of the PDS by increasing cash transfers would result in adverse outcomes.

As a member of the Planning Commission for almost a decade (2004-2014), he made several recommendations through a Commission study on the extension of the MSP (minimum support price) and its welfare implications; the study noted that procurement of food grains at MSP was carried out by the Food Corporation of India in select States and districts with surplus in the production of wheat and rice, and farmers in other States were deprived of the benefits of MSP. The study recommended increasing the coverage and thereby a more decentralised procurement of food grains in Indian States so that the benefits of MSP could be uniformly distributed and public distribution costs could be reduced. The committee further pointed out that the skewed procurement of food grains led to additional transportation costs for distribution, and that extending the coverage of the procurement would lead to equal gain for both consumers and producers.

Prof. Sen was very sceptical about the gradual shift in policies such as price support to income support to farmers. According to him, such income transfers tended to exclude a large chunk of population who are landless farmers, and would have adverse consequences on India's agricultural productivity. Despite being the largest producer of several agricultural commodities produced in the world, India's crop yield is among the lowest in the world. Prof. Sen firmly believed that any sort of income transfers to farmers that were not tied with the production and investment in agricultural land would have long-term implications on agricultural productivity.

Teacher and mentor

Even when Prof. Sen was away from the campus to contribute to policy-making in various capacities, he was passionately involved in teaching and supervising students. As a teacher he never imposed his views or ideas; he always gave his students the space to dissent and to develop independent thinking. While expressing his views with convictions, he had an open mind for the ideas of students and young scholars. He has had a lasting impact not only on the rural and agricultural sector of the country, but also on the minds of his students in terms of their thinking.

(Poornima Varma is a faculty at the Centre for Management in Agriculture, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. She was a student of Abhijit Sen.)

* This article was originally published in [The Hindu](#) on September 3, 2022.