

Abhijit Sen (1950-2022)

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Our colleague, Professor Abhijit Sen, who taught at the Centre of Economics and Planning, passed away due to cardiac arrest, late on August 29, 2022. His health had never fully recovered after his asthmatic lungs which took a further battering after a prolonged struggle with Covid-19. I was not able to meet him over the past two and a half years. But till yesterday, that had seemed to be a temporary phase in passing.

He, like his contemporary Arun Kumar, did his under-graduation in Physics, before switching over to Economics. He went on to do his Ph.D. from Cambridge, and then did stints at Cambridge, Oxford, Sussex, and Essex before joining the faculty in JNU in 1985.

I came to know him at Cambridge, through Jayati (Prof. Jayati Ghosh) who was doing her Ph.D. there. He was then teaching at Essex University. While at Cambridge, I had the opportunity to go through the unpublished theses of a number of Indian economists, including Amartya Sen, Amiya Bagchi, Pranab Bardhan, Ashwani Saith, Ajit Ghose, and of course Abhijit Sen. Abhijit's thesis on **Agrarian Constraint to Economic Development**, was a masterly piece of analytical work, in an applied economic theory tradition. However he did not revert to these techniques in his later work in public policy analysis.

He preferred to ruminate and reflect rather than write academic papers. Yet every paper he wrote – on rural poverty, inequality impact of the public distribution system, analysis of the farm economy created a new academic benchmark, marking out public policy and intervention as a major driver of pro-poor growth. His book, with M.S. Bhatia on “Cost of Cultivation” and Farm Income” carried out a brilliant analysis of microsurvey data gathered by the CACP to throw light on several important and vexed agrarian debates.

He headed the Commission in Agricultural Costs and Prices and was a member of the Planning Commission for two terms, and also a member of the 14 th Finance Commission. and chaired a number of committees. His report on long term Grain Policy, where he made a case for nondifferentiated and universal PDS and a Minimum Support Price to be recommended by a Statutory CACP. But the MSP and procurement policy was to be based on lower costs in states which had better water and natural resources for the production of crops, especially paddy, so that the area under paddy could gradually be shifted to these areas, rather than Punjab and Haryana. Although he essentially focused on rural development, rural poverty and agricultural development, he had an outstanding grasp of Indian Federalism and Macro policy. He eschewed a straitjacketed framework, remained open to all shades of opinion but drew his own conclusions based on evidence and data.

Through the extended phase in government institutions, he remained a quintessential teacher and researcher, kept his teaching commitments on week-ends, and continued to guide students. We were neighbours after I joined JNU, first in Purvanchal, then when we resided in Dakshinapuram and Uttarakhand respectively. I spent many extremely pleasant evenings with him over a drink, discussing random things. Whenever Jayati, who is also a great host, was around she would light up the evenings

with her analyses and repartees. We debated and discussed, differed on a few things and agreed on most.

When I was writing a report on Marginal and Small farmers for the NCEUS, and he was the policy framer for agriculture and rural development in the Planning Commission, we debated vigorously on what I thought was his endorsement of the notion of an undifferentiated Indian peasantry.

His geniality, academic honesty and humility, and the effortless with which he bore all his achievements endeared him to his students colleagues, friends and acquaintances alike. Jayati, Janhvi, while all of us grieve over our loss and will miss his Rasputin presence, we celebrate his many contributions to public policy.