

TRIBUTE

A. Vaidyanathan (1931–2020)

K. Nagaraj*

The immediate post-Independence period in India witnessed the establishment, or strengthening, of a number of institutions that played a central role in the process of planning and development in the country. One of them was the Planning Commission of the Government of India. Under the visionary leadership of people like P. C. Mahalanobis and Pitambar Pant, this institution built up, over an extended period, a formidable degree of expertise on various aspects of planning and development. These included the formulation of planning models, perspective planning, project appraisal, planning for agriculture and industry, and other matters of great import. Another landmark achievement of the period was to strengthen the centralised data system, with the creation of the National Sample Survey as an important component of that system. The National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) built expertise in India, and collected reliable data on various aspects of socio-economic development in the country – these signal contributions of the NSSO were perhaps unmatched in any other part of the less-developed world. Later, during the 1970s and the 1980s, centres for the study of development were established in different parts of the country under the aegis of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). These centres were expected to study the problems of development in general and at more disaggregated, including the State and district, levels.

It was perhaps A. Vaidyanathan's unique distinction among academics that he was associated with all three of these institutions. His association with each was from their formative years and he played a major part in moulding and building them up. After finishing his doctorate in Economics at Cornell University, and after a short stint at the National Council of Applied Economic Research in Delhi, Vaidyanathan joined the Perspective Planning Division of the Planning Commission and served as its Chief. Later, in the 1980s, he went back to the Planning Commission to serve as a Member. In the early 1970s he spent a few years at the World Bank and then came back to India to join the Centre for Development Studies at Thiruvananthapuram. This institution, which has grown into a major research centre on development

* Retired Professor, Madras Institute of Development Studies, karkadanagaraj49@gmail.com

studies today, was in its formative years when he joined it; Vaidyanathan played a major role in setting it up. Later, in the 1980s, he joined the Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS) in Chennai.

The development scene in the immediate post-Independence period in India was restless, dynamic: institutions such as the Planning Commission and NSSO were being established; countless committees on various aspects of development were set up (some of which produced outstanding reports); plan models were built; a number of new programmes and schemes for agricultural and industrial development and poverty alleviation were launched, and a number of academic institutions that were closely associated with these developments were abuzz with passionate discussions and debates on them. As one of the central actors in that scene, Vaidyanathan typified that spirit of restless enquiry.

Academic research for Vaidyanathan always had to have an interface with policy: every piece of research work done by him was motivated by some policy issue and had to feed into policy formulation. Consequently, he was closely associated with policy formulation at the Central as well as State levels. He served on a number of important expert committees set up by the Government of India and various State Governments, and he was on the governing boards of a number of important institutions, including the NSSO, Reserve Bank of India, and ICSSR. Since a large part of his work was on agriculture and the rural economy, he was associated with many institutions and committees relating to this sector. He was President of Indian Society of Agricultural Economics from 1995 to 2003.

The diversity of Vaidyanathan's interests was apparent in the choice of subjects and topics of his research work. Any important developmental issue would attract his attention and interest, and hence the number of different fields that he worked on was very large indeed. Among the areas to which he contributed were: basic needs and poverty; the database of the Indian economy; components and sources of agricultural growth; irrigation and water management and associated institutions; the cattle economy; decentralised planning; labour absorption in agriculture; non-farm employment; and village studies. His detailed data-based work on each of these fields brought forth important and interesting results. This vast body of work sometimes gave the impression of being somewhat discursive. Vaidyanathan seems to have recognised this, and in the last few years was attempting to knit them together into a few books based on his research. In the past year or so he had put together a coherent account of his intellectual development, which will, I hope, be published as a monograph.

A striking, and most interesting, aspect of Vaidyanathan's work – at least to me – was his relationship with data. He lived data. His knowledge of the database of the Indian economy was thorough: he knew the sources, the methodology employed, and the pitfalls, problems, and strengths of this database. Whenever I went to his room

in MIDS, I would find him poring over some data – mostly from the National Sample Survey, to which he had a special attachment – subjecting them to minute examination and analysis. And the analysis was always perceptive, using exploratory techniques, graphs, charts and scatter diagrams on graph sheets that he himself would draw in a corner of the page! – he would rarely use any advanced statistical technique if this analysis sufficed to bring out results. And he would insist – a rule for himself as well as for others – that every result be evidence-based. “Where is the evidence?” was a question one always encountered from him.

It is a sign of the times that all three major institutions – the Planning Commission, the National Sample Survey Organisation, and the Indian Council of Social Science Research – have either been dismantled or degraded by the present government. The Planning Commission does not exist anymore, its place taken by the NITI Aayog, a pale shadow, in terms of expertise and competence, of its predecessor. The National Sample Survey Organisation, which enjoyed a high degree of autonomy in its work, is now a department within the Ministry of Statistics. The Indian Council of Social Science Research is now packed with right-wing ideologues with little expertise in the social sciences. Vaidyanathan was extremely upset and concerned about these developments. In May 2019 – just a year before his death – he wrote an incisive article questioning the proposal to merge the National Sample Survey Organisation with the Central Statistical Organisation, a measure that he believed would result in the loss of the autonomy of the former.

Professor A. Vaidyanathan died on June 10 in Coimbatore. He was 88.