



TRIBUTE

Remembering Professor Sheila Bhalla (1933-2021)

Praveen Jha*

<https://doi.org/10.25003/RAS.11.02.0005>

Professor Sheila Bhalla, eminent economist and Professor Emerita, Jawaharlal Nehru University, died in Pondicherry on September 25. In her professional career, which spanned more than half a century, she distinguished herself as an outstanding scholar with a strong political economy orientation, especially in agrarian and labour studies pertaining to India. On a range of critical issues in these areas, her contributions set the tone and terms of academic discourse. In addition to her distinguished scholarship, Professor Sheila Bhalla was a remarkable teacher, much loved and respected by her students, and was committed to sustained engagement with a range of political struggles, particularly struggles of the peasants and workers of the country.

After her schooling and early education in Canada, the country of her birth, she went for higher studies at the London School of Economics (LSE). It was here that she met and married G. S. Bhalla. India thereafter became her home. The couple joined the economics faculty of Panjab University in 1969. Later, in the early 1970s, both of them shifted to the newly established Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). Sheila Bhalla was among the first faculty members at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning (CESP), which she served with remarkable dedication and distinction until her official retirement in 1992. The University and CESP also enjoyed the privilege of her continuing association as Professor Emerita.

My association with Professor Sheila Bhalla goes back to the early 1980s, when I joined the CESP for my Masters programme, an association that continued while I pursued my Ph.D. at the same Centre and later when I joined the faculty in the mid-1990s. I was privileged to be a beneficiary of sustained academic engagement with Professor Bhalla, and, in abundant measure, of her affection as well. In the last couple of years before she retired, I had the good fortune of sharing teaching responsibilities for the Masters level courses she had taught over the years. This opportunity provided me

* Professor of Economics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, praveenjha2005@gmail.com

an opportunity for much closer interaction with her as a senior teacher and scholar. It was a rich learning experience. She was a meticulous planner, and she paid attention to detail and the individual requirements of every person in the class. My nearly four-decade-long association with Professor Bhalla enriched me, and it is an association that I will treasure.

Professor Bhalla's legion of students will recall term papers and assignments in one of the core M.A. courses, Indian Economic Problems. Each student was given a separate topic, which typically required considerable data work. Her insistence that students acquire the skills necessary to sift through a range of secondary sources, including large-scale data systems pertaining to the Indian economy, always seemed a daunting task for students who had no previous exposure to such assignments. However, with careful and sustained guidance from Professor Bhalla, most students overcame their initial hesitancy and fear of handling large and seemingly complex data sets, with some of them becoming adept "number-crunchers." As a result of Professor Bhalla's mentoring, many of her students acquired the skills necessary for important and empirically-grounded research. It was not a crude positivism that students learnt from her, but rather a sophisticated grounding in how to read the numbers and make good use of data and empirics.

Students of Professor Bhalla, Masters students or research scholars, will also recall her amazing generosity in taking care of their individual needs, a quality that was a natural extension of her personality. She would always, and without any fuss, go the extra mile in giving valuable time and attention to the requirements of her students. Those who came from socially and economically vulnerable backgrounds – JNU's admission policy provided a great opportunity for their inclusion in the student body – found a wonderful and indefatigable mentor in Professor Bhalla. Her students, I know, have many fond stories and memories to relate of her.

As a scholar, her outstanding contributions to agrarian political economy, especially with respect to India, are very well-known. I will not dwell on the details of her academic contributions to areas such as agrarian and labour relations, economic transformation trajectories and their implications for the world of work, and others. Apart from a very substantive engagement with large-scale data systems, her work drew upon meticulous field surveys, conducted over decades. Most of them were done in Haryana, and in recent years in other States as well, for example, in Andhra Pradesh. Her work offers a creative and convincing fusion of insights from secondary data sources on the Indian economy and from her primary field-based work. This put her in a distinguished category of scholars on the Indian economy and society. These qualities and achievements of Professor Bhalla are well known. I must also here flag the fact that her academic quests were driven by a continuous search for a progressive economics and politics that kept India's poorest, the

overwhelming majority of its working people, at the centre of her academic endeavours.

Indeed, well before she embarked on her academic journey, Sheila Bhalla was already a committed and progressive activist who had been drawn to trade union activities from her teens. In the 1950s, she was active in trade union action in Canada, and for some time in France at a time when the unions confronted extreme hostility. In North America, the 1950s was the decade of McCarthyism. One may well imagine the challenges confronting Left activists in such circumstances; indeed, they may have played a role in Sheila Bhalla's move to LSE for higher studies.

However, true to the call of her convictions, Sheila Bhalla, even as she grew in stature as a scholar and academic, never gave up her left political engagement. The latter deeply influenced the former. In India, she valued her association with the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) and the All India Agricultural Workers Union, and engaged with their activities on a regular basis, including through active participation in their major conferences and meetings. In Delhi, she was a frequent visitor to the AIKS Centre, studying the organisation's research and political documents, and engaging with comrades almost till her last days. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, she visited (as recently as the closing months of 2020) protest sites on the borders of Delhi to support the peasants struggling against the recent farm laws.

Professor Bhalla was an academic stalwart, a socially engaged and committed activist, a great institution builder, and a wonderful person. It was inspiring to see her active almost till the end of her life. One of her last academic pieces was an article in a book published this year, *Labour Questions in the Global South*, of which I was fortunate to be one of the editors. A fitting tribute to Sheila Bhalla would be to carry forward her intellectual and political legacy to the best of our abilities. Hers was a life well lived, pushing the frontiers of the possible, and daring to dream and work for a better world.