

TRIBUTE

In Memory of Abhijit Sen, 1950-2022

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Abhijit Sen was a rare combination of teacher, academic researcher, and policy maker. For him, these were not different roles but constituent parts of a quest for better policy to improve the lives of the masses of the poor in India.

Abhijit Sen was a teacher at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) for more than three decades, continuing to teach even when working in senior Government of India positions. His teaching and research were guided by a concern for developing better policies to remove poverty and increase the incomes of the people, particularly those working in agriculture and in rural areas. His untimely death on August 29, 2022, is a big loss to the academic community, scores of policymakers who looked to him for advice, and a large community of grassroot activists, farmers, and journalists.

For almost his entire academic career, from his PhD thesis submitted to Cambridge University and until his last published journal article in *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW) (Sen 2016), agriculture was Abhijit Sen's area of research. An understanding of agriculture for him formed the core of any understanding of the Indian economy. His PhD thesis, titled *The Agrarian Constraint to Economic Development: The Case of India*, argued that the agrarian constraint was the primary reason for slow growth in India in the first three decades after Independence.¹ The thesis was based on careful empirical analysis of data on the Indian economy and agriculture in particular until the mid-1970s. It identified agriculture as the primary constraint to growth, arguing against the existing consensus that the savings and foreign exchange constraints were the primary constraints. Later analysis extending the empirical analysis to the mid-1980s further confirmed the dominance of the agrarian constraint (Sen 1986). The policy lessons from the thesis and subsequent analysis have resonance even today, with the

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¹ While the thesis was unpublished, major arguments of the thesis were published in two parts in the *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, See Sen (1981a) and Sen (1981b).

intensification of the agrarian crisis in the last three decades of economic reforms. The thesis argued that the real problem with agriculture was the existence of surplus labour combined with unequal distribution of assets. Solutions that depended solely on technology, such as mechanisation, were unlikely to address the problem of employment and incomes without public investment and redistribution. Given the structure of production in agriculture, the thesis argued for the necessity of state intervention.

Abhijit Sen's work on the role of non-farm diversification in the 1980s further underlined the role of state intervention not just in accelerating the pace of poverty reduction but also in enhancing agricultural growth and farmers' incomes (Sen 1996). His work on rural non-farm diversification during the 1980s was influential in pointing out the role of public expenditure in expanding non-farm employment in rural areas, and in reducing poverty. Most researchers had studied non-farm diversification in the 1980s through the role of push and pull factors originating in and outside of agriculture. Sen's work provided the first empirical verification of the important role of public expenditure, particularly in rural areas, in generating non-farm employment. This paper was also influential in pointing out the role of non-farm diversification in poverty alleviation at a time when the existing consensus was that changes in rural poverty depended mostly on agricultural growth and changes in relative prices of food.

His ability to make sense of large-scale data, particularly nationally representative data, was unique. For Abhijit Sen, working with data was not a mechanical exercise but an important means of understanding the working of various theories. His ability to use data to identify economic trends and patterns came from a deep understanding of how the economy functioned. It did not matter if the underlying trends did not conform to the existing consensus or the dominant theory of the time. This principle of "facts first" also allowed him to seek and find new explanations without getting caught in existing frameworks of analysis.

It was his deep familiarity with and understanding of the underlying trends in the data, particularly with respect to National Sample Survey (NSS) data, that allowed him to realise the problem of "data contamination" in the poverty estimates from the 55th round of NSS consumption survey (Sen 2000). Preliminary results from the survey of consumption expenditure in the 55th round suggested a sharp drop in poverty – of 10 percentage points – between the 50th round in 1993-94 and the 55th round in 1999-2000. Given that these were the first results on poverty after the economic reforms of 1991, they acquired a special significance. They were used by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) as a vindication of the strategy of neo-liberal reforms, the NDA having continued the reform process with more vigour than the Congress government that initiated the reforms. Abhijit Sen's subsequent follow-up analysis, in a two-part article, of the trends in poverty and inequality after the economic reforms forced the NDA government to drop the

estimates from the 55th Round from official poverty calculations (Sen and Himanshu 2004a, 2004b).

Abhijit Sen's 2000 paper in the *Economic and Political Weekly* did not just raise issues regarding the methodology of estimating consumption expenditure, but also was truly the paper that started the "Great Indian Poverty Debate."² It led to the establishment by the Government of a committee under the chairpersonship of Suresh Tendulkar to define the poverty line. Abhijit Sen, then a member of the Planning Commission, was an important contributor to the discussions of the committee. The decision by the Tendulkar Committee to shift to the use of the Mixed Recall Period (MRP) for estimating poverty from data on consumption expenditure was guided by his detailed analysis of the issues of comparability of estimates of consumption expenditure based on different recall periods.

Although Professor Sen contributed greatly to issues of measurement and analysis of trends in poverty, his concern with the subject went beyond his statistical contributions. It was his firm belief that the primary objective of state policy was to transform the living conditions of those at the lower ends of income distribution. His analysis of the living conditions of the unorganised sector workers is an excellent example of an examination of the role of employment in alleviating poverty (Sen 1988). The issue of employment resonated in his work, from his PhD thesis and during his years as a policy maker, particularly as a member of the Planning Commission in 2004-2014. His strong support for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was not just limited to providing empirical support for the argument for its universalisation (against the initial proposal that it be restricted to persons below the poverty line), but also in following its subsequent implementation (although he was not directly involved in its implementation).³

It was with respect to agriculture that Abhijit Sen's contribution was most evident. During the decade that Abhijit Sen spent at the Planning Commission, he was responsible for the agriculture division, an area in which he had direct experience as a policy maker, as Chairperson of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP), and as a scholar and teacher.

He joined the Planning Commission at a time when the agricultural sector was going through its first major crisis after economic liberalisation. The crisis in agriculture in the 1997-2003 period was not just a crisis of production, but a result of macroeconomic mismanagement and of neglect of the agricultural sector. He had close experience of the problems facing the agricultural sector as this was also the period when he was Chairperson of the CACP. The only book that he ever wrote

² The term was later used as the title of the book compiling all the major contributions of the debate. See Deaton and Kozel (2005).

³ Among his many unpublished papers is a simulation exercise for internal discussion at the Planning Commission on the likely cost of the NREGA if it was kept universal and not targeted.

used CACP data on costs and prices to examine price policy and trends in farm business incomes (Sen and Bhatia 2006).

While several factors contributed to the subsequent recovery in the agriculture sector, which then witnessed one of the fastest growth rates after Independence, it was also a period that witnessed several changes in the way agricultural policy operated. Among these changes were policies to improve access to credit and increase agricultural investment. This period of agricultural growth was accompanied by rising incomes for farmers, which in turn was partly responsible for the sharp reduction in poverty between 2004-05 and 2011-12.

Although Abhijit Sen's interventions were clear in several programmes for agricultural revival, special mention must be made of his contribution to the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY). His strong belief in States being the primary stakeholder in agricultural revival meant that the RKVY was designed truly in the spirit of the federal arrangement envisaged in the Constitution. He believed in the greater decentralisation of government policy, and most schemes had an arrangement for devolution built into them. He maintained that position with regard to federalism when appointed a Member of the 14th Finance Commission.

Another area in which Abhijit Sen's contribution was clearly visible was in the linkage of agriculture and food security. As Chairperson of the High-Level Committee on Long-Term Grain Policy he understood the role of the Public Distribution System (PDS) not just in ensuring food security but also as an important component part of the agriculture-food interlinkage. The Committee recommended universalisation of the PDS, a policy that Abhijit Sen continued to argue for during the discussions on the National Food Security Act (NFSA). While the final outcome was not full universalisation but a quasi-universal NFSA, it did retain the PDS as the primary instrument of ensuring food security.

One of the reasons he was successful in prevailing on fellow policy makers was his ability to engage with a range of stakeholders, from academics to administrators and grass-root activists. He was open to views from the ground and was willing to change his opinion when presented with fresh evidence. While he believed in the sanctity of evidence, he was careful in making sense of data from diverse sources.

A fact less known is his curiosity with regard to primary data and his respect for those who were engaged in primary data collection. He was among those who helped establish the Foundation for Agrarian Studies (FAS), which has been a pioneer in studies based on village surveys. He took keen interest in the village surveys of the FAS and encouraged researchers and students to undertake primary surveys. He was a member of the editorial advisory board of the *Review of Agrarian Studies* from its inception until his death. He was a constant participant in a group (of which I was a part) that discussed results from surveys in the village of Palanpur in

Uttar Pradesh, and would read and comment on the various papers and reports that came out of it. He would always compare notes with village surveys of the FAS or with secondary data sources. He had the unique ability to reconcile various data sources to develop a coherent and comprehensive picture of the issue of interest (although he was less successful in his endeavour to understand the behaviour of Indian electorate from the large database of elections and opinion polls that he loved analysing).

He had great respect for the Indian statistical system, for which he would fight many battles within the government and outside of it. He fought against diluting the role of statistical institutions and research institutions. When he was in Government, he fought to ensure that the Agro-Economic Research Centres (AERC) would retain their place in the agricultural research system. This concern extended to research associations and societies promoting research on labour and agriculture. He was an active member of the Indian Society of Labour Economics (ISLE) and was President of the Indian Society of Agricultural Economics (ISAE). Even though he was unwell, he participated keenly in the ISAE conference of 2021. ISLE and ISAE were, for him, institutions that were crucial for a better understanding of issues in employment and agriculture.

His death comes at a time when the Indian economy is at its worst and the agrarian crisis back at the centre of the agenda. Poverty has increased and unemployment remains the biggest challenge that the Indian economy is facing. A bigger loss is the loss of credibility of the statistical system of the country, owing to government interference in the release of valuable data. Abhijit Sen's scholarship and insights on what ails the Indian economy will certainly be missed, and he will be missed for his prescriptions for what can be done to revive agriculture, reduce poverty, and generate employment.

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