

Abhijit Sen – A Great Economist with Rural, Agriculture Focus*

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Abhijit Sen, a renowned agriculture economist and former member of the Planning Commission, passed away on August 29. It is a great loss to the profession of economics in general, and to economists working on agriculture and the rural economy in particular, and to policy makers. I knew him for the last four decades. He has contributed a lot to teaching in economics, research and policy in varied fields such as agriculture, rural economy, poverty, inequality, employment and social protection programmes. It is difficult to cover all his achievements in a single piece. I will mention only a few of them.

First, I will discuss his contributions as a policy maker. He was chairman of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) and prepared excellent reports on kharif, rabi and other crops. He was thorough with the cost of cultivation data and always kept in mind the interests of farmers. When I was the chairman of the CACP, he was a member of the Planning Commission. I used to have interactions with him frequently. He advised me to keep in mind the welfare of farmers by giving remunerative prices using C2 costs. He also suggested that I take into account other factors apart from costs while fixing minimum support prices (MSPs) and at the same time maintain a balance between producers and consumers. The High-Level Committee of experts on Long Term Grain Policy chaired by him recommended universal Public Distribution System (PDS) although some others in the profession and the government wanted a targeting approach for PDS.

In the Planning Commission, his contributions to the 11th and 12th five-year plan reports on growth, inclusive growth and sustainability are well known. Abhijit was the brain behind the introduction of the agriculture scheme, Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY). When I visited different states as the CACP chairman, several governments appreciated the RKVY scheme suggested by Abhijit because of its flexibility. Apart from policies on agriculture and rural areas, his suggestions on macroeconomic policies and Centre-state relations were well appreciated in the Planning Commission. He was also a member of the 14th Finance Commission. Y V Reddy, the chairman of the 14th Finance Commission, told me that Abhijit's suggestions on Centre-state relations were very valuable while writing the report.

Second, I will mention a few of his contributions to research. He was a great teacher and liked by all the students at Jawaharlal Nehru University. His research papers are very analytical and well cited by researchers and policy makers in the fields of agriculture, rural economy and others in economics. When he was the chairman of the CACP, he wrote a paper with M S Bhatia, a member of the commission on "cost of cultivation and farm income in India". This is the first paper, which gives estimates of returns to farmers for several crops. Rural non-farm employment has been increasing in India in the last few decades. In the 1990s, many attributed this rise to agriculture growth and some other factors. But, Abhijit was the first to point out that public expenditure played an important role in the growth of the rural non-farm sector. He also played a vital role in the debate on poverty estimates and policies. His suggestions to various committees on poverty, including the Tendulkar Committee, were very useful. He was also the first to point out the problems in the 1999-2000

consumer expenditure data because of changes in the reference periods. Abhijit wrote a paper with Himanshu on estimating the size of PDS transfers and the impact of these transfers on poverty. This study showed that with PDS transfers, the total poverty ratio (Tendulkar methodology) was 30.68 per cent in 2009-10. Without PDS transfers, the poverty ratio was higher at 33.85 per cent in the same year.

In the last few decades, I have interacted with him when I was in the government and outside on various research and policy issues. I have benefited a lot from the interactions and his research papers on agriculture and rural areas. He did not bother too much about protocols when he was in government. When he was in the Planning Commission, he visited Hyderabad and stayed with us instead of staying in Raj Bhavan. Lastly, he was a wonderful human being and a down to earth person. He always tried to help others. He was an excellent analytical economist and his is a great loss to the profession of economics vis-a-vis research and policy. I will miss you, Abhijit.

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