

Prof. Abhijit Sen, one of India's Foremost Experts on Agriculture and Rural Economy, is no more*

Chetananand Singh

One of the country's foremost experts on agriculture and rural economy, Prof. Abhijit Sen died on Monday night. The economist and former Planning Commission member suffered a heart attack. He was 72.

Sen's academic career spanned over four decades. A student of physics at St Stephen's College, New Delhi, he had a PhD from Cambridge University for his thesis titled 'The Agrarian Constraint to Economic Development: The Case of India'.

He taught economics at Sussex, Oxford, Cambridge and Essex before joining the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning (CESP) at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in 1985. He helped turn the department at JNU into a leading centre for development economics and the study of the Indian economy.

In 1997, the then United Front government made Sen the chairperson of the Commission on Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP). He advocated that while calculating the costs of farmers, the contribution made by family work should also be included.

Sen was a member of the Planning Commission from 2004 to 2014 during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. In the Planning Commission, he was the strongest votary for a universal Public Distribution System (PDS), an increase in public expenditure on agriculture and the importance of making agriculture remunerative.

Head of important bodies on foodgrain policy, rural credit, fertilizer policy, agricultural marketing etc., Sen was also a member of the 14th Finance Commission. The High-Level Committee of Experts on Long Term Grain Policy with Sen as its head recommended universal PDS for rice and wheat and for the CACP to be made a statutory body whose recommendations would be binding.

According to Sen, the cost of food subsidies to the exchequer is frequently overstated and the nation has enough financial leeway to afford both a universal PDS and a fair price for farmers' produce.

In 2010, Sen was awarded the Padma Bhushan for public service.

The All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) says that Sen contributed to its deliberations on many occasions and "helped in formulating our position on different issues as well as in framing our alternatives to the neoliberal economic policies." It adds, "In his passing away we have lost a friend of the peasantry."

Sen also was an adviser and consultant with international organisations, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), New York; International Labour Organization (ILO), Geneva; Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), Rome; OECD Development Centre, Paris; the UN University World Institute of Development Research, Helsinki; International Fund for Agricultural Development, Rome; Asian Development Bank (ADB), Manila.

Said Congress leader Jairam Ramesh in his tweet, “Over a period of almost 3 decades, I learned so much from him. A formidable scholar, he had strong ideological roots but also an open mind. He belonged to a species that is fast becoming extinct.”

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