

Suryadevara Mahendra Dev

We were all lucky to have been at Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research (IGIDR) Mumbai, established by RBI, during its formative years that were also our formative years. Conceptualized by Dr. C. Rangarajan, the then Deputy Governor RBI, IGIDR quickly emerged as a leading centre for the analysis of economic policy under the leadership of Dr. Kirit Parikh, its founding director. Rangarajan and Parikh served the country with neutrality and integrity under different governments, while providing public policy with rigorous theoretical and empirical foundations, which became deeply ingrained in all of us. Suryadevara Mahendra Dev, who was one of the first to join as a faculty, already had many of these traits which only got stronger during the decade he taught at IGIDR.

Mahendra Dev came to IGIDR from the Delhi School of Economics where he worked on industrial productivity and agricultural development as part of his MPhil and doctoral dissertations with legends such as K. L. Krishna and K. Sundaram, respectively. His early work focused on labor market and agricultural policy. It took a natural progression towards employment and poverty, which figured prominently in his academic and popular writings all through his career. Food security was a hotly debated issue in the 1990s and with experts divided on the way forward. We used to be proud that we had three different views on food security arising out of the research of IGIDR faculty, including that of Mahendra Dev. There were those who supported free market pricing in agriculture and advocated the replacement of PDS with food coupons/income transfer. Another view called for the retention of Minimum Support Price (MSP) and, in fact, an expansion of its ambit to protect small and marginal farmers. This view took note of the fact that a limited risk-taking ability in the absence of effective crop insurance would mean that such farmers cannot benefit from free markets, even as they would become more vulnerable to exploitation due to their limited bargaining power. A third view wanted PDS to continue, as income transfer was not feasible given the low bank coverage in rural areas. Moreover, the possibility of men misusing income transfers for alcohol consumption, meant that provision of foodgrains through PDS would ensure food safety, particularly, women and children.

Leadership and team skills were as important at IGIDR as one's academic achievements. Mahendra Dev was the first to lead the rest of us to assume leadership roles. He moved to Hyderabad when he was 42 to head the Center for Economic and Social Studies (CESS) in 1999, at the invitation of another legend C. H. Hanumantha Rao who was then CESS Chairman. He spent the next decade there as the Director and shaped the CESS as a major centre for public policy. From Hyderabad he moved to Delhi to assume the Chairmanship of the Commission of Agricultural Costs and Prices of the union government. He returned to IGIDR as its Director from 2010 to 2022, to complete his academic career as an economist.

He chaired and held membership of several important government bodies. His work with Dr. C. Rangarajan as part of the Expert Group to Review the Methodology for Measurement of Poverty received great attention and formed the basis for many of their co-authored papers and op-eds. He has also been associated with several international organizations including the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), FAO, UNDP, UNICEF, OECD, and World Bank. The author of over twenty books and

hundreds of papers, he has been a member of the editorial boards of several journals. Most recently, in 2023, he took over the editorship of the unique, one of its kind journal Economic and Political Weekly, and has given it a new direction and energy, reflecting his own balanced view of public policy.

He is the son of the legendary Suryadevara Sanjiva Dev. His father, a much-adored painter, photographer, writer in both Telugu and English, influenced by the likes of Annie Besant, Aurobindo, Nicholas Roerich and Tagore, never went to college but was honored by Andhra University with a D.Litt. The family hailed from Tummapudi in Guntur district. Mahendra Dev studied at the nearby Telugu-medium Zilla Parishad school, and went to Nagarjuna University for Bachelors and Masters in Economics, where he stood first. Decades later, Nagarjuna University conferred an honorary D.Litt., and his alma mater Delhi School of Economics conferred the Distinguished Alumnus award on Mahendra Dev.

Despite a busy schedule, he cared for his students and colleagues. When we asked for help at Vidyashilp University, he readily agreed to be our Ombudsperson. During his years at IGIDR as a faculty, his apartment used to be the festival focal point with his wife Sahiti being the most generous host. They brought the community together through joint celebrations of all the important events and festivals. I sincerely hope that such a spirit, understanding, balance, drive, inherent goodness and the versatility will grow now once more in his vital role as the Chairman of PM's Economic Advisory Council.

P. G. Babu is currently the Vice-Chancellor of Vidyashilp University at Bengaluru. Prior to that he taught at IGIDR Mumbai for more than three decades, except for four years when he was the Director of MIDS Chennai.