

Rohini Nayyar (1944–2021)

The Gentle Colossus

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The illustrious contributions of Rohini Nayyar to Human Development Resources in India are elaborated. With a lively personality and zest for life, Nayyar left indelible impressions on whatever she undertook and whoever she met.

In the passing away of Rohini Nayyar, on 24 October 2021 the economist who strode the rural development scenario like a colossus for several decades, we have lost a policymaker par excellence, and I have personally lost a friend and colleague of several decades.

My first meeting with Nayyar was in 1994 in a hotel at the Hague, where we were put up for a workshop organised by the Government of Netherlands. The introduction at that time by Indira Hirway led to a lifetime bond of friendship, thanks to Nayyar's people-centric and easy-going nature, tremendous sense of humour, and generosity.

Being then based at the University of Bombay, I would visit New Delhi occasionally, and invariably paid a visit to Nayyar at her office at the Planning Commission where for long she was Head, Rural Development Division, and subsequently principal adviser in the rank of secretary to Government of India. Despite her very busy schedule, she made time for me and we always enjoyed having a cup of coffee together, ordered from the outlet of the Indian Coffee House on the premises. Every time I met her, I came back richer—both on account of the warmth of her friendship and the several documents that she would

generously share with me—a precious treasure in those pre-internet days.

As I transited from the secure surroundings of the University of Bombay to the unknown world of New Delhi as Head of the newly created Human Development Resource Centre, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in 2000, I found great solace from the fact that Nayyar was the government counterpart of the Government of India—UNDP joint project on “Capacity Building for Preparation of State Human Development Reports.” We collaborated successfully for many years, jointly supporting the state governments in their preparation of State Human Development Reports (HDRs), which became a landmark achievement that won several accolades. The project led to the most significant number of subnational HDRs prepared by any country globally and tread new pathways that were unique and bold for their times. I vividly recollect five significant achievements (among several others) that benefited from Nayyar's sharp insights and her passion for furthering development in the country.

Preparation of State HDRs

First, the state HDRs' preparation process deviated from the established mode of the UNDP preparing the reports and recommending them to the government. In a never-before model, Nayyar was instrumental in ushering in the preparation process that combined state government ownership with editorial independence and widespread people's participation in India. There were several doubts raised

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at that time about the quality of these government-owned reports as they were expected to be self-laudatory and not analytical enough. In reality, the seemingly irreconcilable principles worked well in most instances despite tensions, thanks to the strong leadership and the wise counsel to the state governments provided by Nayyar. It was, therefore, a matter of great pride and delight that two of the state HDRs—that of Chhattisgarh and West Bengal—won global awards for excellence in the process of preparation of HDRs and excellence in quality of analysis respectively, effectively silencing the critics and demonstrating to the world that in a robust functional democracy, state ownership and people's participation were strengths to be harnessed for policy purposes.

Second, Nayyar was a strong believer in the leadership of state governments in the preparation of their respective HDRs and encouraged them to involve relevant state-level resource institutions and experts in the process. As a result of this focus, many new and young researchers were brought within the fold of human development research and were introduced for the first time to this powerful alternative development paradigm. It also ensured wider ownership of the HDR and yielded rich results in policy and practice. Many of the researchers associated with the effort have subsequently introduced modules/courses on human development in their teaching programmes and also have been undertaking research on the subject on an ongoing basis. As the movement spread across the country with 26 state governments preparing their HDRs, a large community of academics/experts with conviction in the relevance of the human development paradigm came to be created, with deep and long-term implications for both analysis and policy.

Mainstreaming Human Development Approach

Third, Nayyar was instrumental in mainstreaming the human development approach in government policies both at the national and state levels in many direct and indirect ways. She firmly believed that the preparation of HDRs was only a

means to identify gaps and possible pathways for improving the situation and hence insisted on integrating the recommendations of state HDRs into policy. With her deep insight into rural development issues across the country, she persuaded state governments to pay greater attention to social sectors in their respective state plans. It is reported that several chief ministers cited from the state HDRs at the National Development Council meetings that were chaired by the Prime Minister, so as to justify their demands for higher fiscal devolution from the centre to their states in order to further human development. These factors led a global independent evaluation of the project to comment that “the Indian experience with HDRs has been positive, influential and important” (Riskin and Saxena 2005).

Fourth, an important contribution of Nayyar was her leadership for the preparation of India's first National Human Development Report, 2001, which provided official state-level rankings on the Human Development Index and related indicators. Once again, Nayyar insisted that the preparation of the report would be an entirely national effort led by the experts within the Planning Commission as, unlike in some other countries, the Indian Planning Commission had both the necessary technical expertise and the capacity to prepare the HDR on its own. National pride and confidence in national capacity that she displayed were unparalleled and yielded rich dividends. The national HDR was greatly appreciated for its critical insights, and earned much respect from international agencies.

Fifth, realising that the database for the preparation of the HDRs was weak and needed strengthening, she supported efforts to devise and standardise methodologies for estimating district income. Working together with Vinod Vyasulu and Meenakshi Rajeev as co-authors, she published a book, *Estimating District Income in India*, that provided specific guidance to the state statistical bureaus and all those interested in estimating district income.

Nayyar had a winning combination of courteousness and friendliness with an adequate measure of firmness thrown in when required, to ensure that the

independence of the Planning Commission was maintained and its contributions recognised.

Nayyar worked in the true spirit of a “karma yogi” and never spoke about her many giant-sized accomplishments and successes. She was happier basking in the glory that the achievements of her illustrious spouse, Deepak Nayyar and those of their sons, Dhiraj and Gaurav brought home.

Nayyar was a generous friend, both with her time and gifts. We both shared a passion for good food and clothes and often met at her favourite restaurants for lunch long after our official association ended. I cherish the sarees that she has gifted me and they are indeed a reminder of her ever-smiling face and her love for all things artistic and beautiful. Nayyar's zest for life was infectious. It was therefore a matter of deep regret and pain that she had in the past few years numerous setbacks to her health, limiting her mobility and ability to travel. It is to her credit that she bore all the vicissitudes that life brought forth stoically, without a murmur of complaint.

It was a privilege to have been Nayyar's friend and colleague. I will miss her greatly.

Au revoir, my friend—rest in peace!

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