

THE HINDU

Eminent economist and caring friend



[Raghav Gaiha](#)

NOVEMBER 14, 2021 01:00 IST

SHARE ARTICLE



Rohini Nayyar was passionate about inclusive rural development

Rohini Nayyar, an eminent economist, a committed policy adviser passionate about inclusive rural development and the eradication of rural poverty, and a warm and affectionate friend, passed away on October 24, after a protracted illness.

I first met Rohini when she was Head, Social Development Division of the Planning Commission in the late 1980s. I was then working on rural institutions and poverty eradication. I had earlier seen her only at a distance in St. Stephens College, where I was a student, in the company of Deepak Nayyar, her future husband.

Vast experience

When I walked into her Planning Commission office, she greeted me warmly, and I felt we had known each other for long years. She said she was familiar with some of my research, and listened intently when I elaborated on my ongoing work, offering extremely useful suggestions based on her vast experience in rural development challenges. She then asked if she could help in any way. I hesitantly mentioned that for my fieldwork I needed at least 15 letters for the District Magistrates in my field sites. Immediately summoning her secretary, she dictated and signed the 15 letters which were despatched within an hour!

She had a lively sense of humour. She had nominated me to an expert committee on decentralised rural development but I often missed the meetings due to my frequent travels. Finally, she phoned me and after a polite rebuke, said good-humouredly that I should at least show up to sign the final report. Relieved, I did so.

Rohini had a brilliant academic record. After graduating in economics from the University of Delhi, she received a B.Litt. from Oxford and a D.Phil. from the University of Sussex. She was selected for the IAS and served with distinction from 1969 to 1975. However, she yearned for more challenging work, which she found as adviser to high-level UN agencies on issues such as institutions, poverty, landlessness, women empowerment, and social safety nets. She brought to her work sharp analytical skills, deep dedication and rich field-experience.

In 2004, she was appointed Principal Adviser in the Planning Commission (the rank of Secretary to the Government of India). She was responsible for designing MGNREGA, which was launched in 2006. She and I had animated debates on the stipulated minimum wage under this scheme. I argued that it would ration out jobs with the added risk that the better-off would crowd out the poor. She responded emphatically that this was the least the Government could do for the poor and that I should not lean so heavily on my econometric evidence.

Grounded in reality

Her reasons were grounded in reality and a sound intuition. She continued in her advisory role by setting up committees on a wide range of subjects, including rural poverty,

employment, and women empowerment with a deep conviction that none of these programmes would succeed without a strong institutional delivery system for integrated rural development, especially Panchayati Raj. If she were alive and active today, she would have vigorously supported these initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic, and their effective implementation would have saved countless lives.

Rohini also made important contributions to development economics, including a classic article, “Rural poverty in Bihar: 1961-62 to 1971-72”, published in the *Journal of Development Studies*, 1979. Her findings were striking: while inequality in the distribution of consumption expenditure changed rather little over this period, all segments of the rural population suffered a reduction in per capita expenditure. Moreover, rural poverty rose. The “trickle-down” hypothesis was seriously challenged.

Another important and pioneering contribution is her book, *Rural Poverty in India: An Analysis of Interstate Differences* (Oxford University Press, 1991). The novelty of this analysis lies in the construction of a poverty line taking into account under-nutrition. This was a sharp departure from the practice of using a poverty line that adjusts a minimum consumption basket for price changes. The comparisons between her estimates of rural poverty and those based on the conventional approach are striking. As I (with two collaborators) had published a paper on poverty-nutrition trap, following Partha Dasgupta’s (1993) seminal contribution, I concur that the policy challenges take on a different dimension. In other words, while income deprivation cannot be overlooked, it is perhaps equally (if not more) important to raise the nutrition of children, women and labourers.

I regret not having visited Rohini before she passed away, though I thought of doing so many times. I was held back partly by COVID-19 but mostly by an overwhelming reluctance to see in pain someone who had been so vibrant.

(Raghav Gaiha is (Hon.) Professorial Research Fellow, Global Development Institute, University of Manchester, U.K. and Research Affiliate, Population Aging Research Centre, University of Pennsylvania, U.S.)

rgaiha@sas.upenn.edu