

The Quintessential Government Economist: Rohini Nayyar (1944–2021)

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We recently lost a brilliant economist, Dr Rohini Nayyar, who passed away on 24 October 2021. Her death is indeed a huge personal loss to me. But her remarkable professional journey highlights an increasingly visible void that has resulted from a dwindling number of research economists in government. Dr Nayyar's myriad contributions to the academic literature, policymaking and institution building has greatly enriched our understanding of rural development in India.

Rohini Nayyar's career trajectory was undoubtedly impressive, albeit unusual. Excellence from very early on was its enduring hallmark. After her post-graduation from Delhi School of Economics, she had a short stint in Indian Administrative Service (IAS). Thereafter, she went to Oxford University for a B.Litt. and subsequently got her DPhil in Economics from University of Sussex. She then joined the Planning Commission of India—the country's apex development policy institution—in 1987, where she worked till 2005 in different capacities, including as Head of the Social Development and Rural Development Divisions, until she retired as Principal Advisor, Rural Development (in the rank of Secretary to Government). This extraordinary rise in the government system was a rare distinction for a lateral entrant. Her leadership on a wide range of policy issues during this tenure—spanning poverty alleviation, employment creation, Panchayati Raj, drought-prone areas, wasteland development, women and child development, nutrition, and rehabilitation of the handicapped—was equally extraordinary.

Salient Research Contributions

Dr Nayyar's research examined the dynamics of poverty, malnutrition and low living standards of the marginalised sections of the population. Her book *Rural Poverty in India: An Analysis of Interstate Differences*, published by Oxford University Press, was both original and pioneering. She was the first to measure poverty in terms of an inadequate intake of calories. In doing so, she estimated the calorie equivalent of the actual quantities of food items consumed and then constructed state-specific poverty lines in money terms. Using this systematic measurement of poverty in rural India during the 1970s and 1980s, she was also the first to study inter-state differences and how these related to malnutrition, disease and morbidity, the inadequacy of health and educational facilities. These dimensions of poverty had hardly received any attention from economists at the time. More than 30 years later, in a paper published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, she revisited the estimation of poverty in India. This thoughtful piece expertly articulated how the folly of using official poverty estimates based on an updated rupee value poverty line had resurfaced. Consumption baskets of households had changed considerably. For example, the share of cereals in household expenditure halved between 1993–1994 and 2011–2012. The share of non-food necessities too increased considerably over the same period.

Dr Nayyar's work on estimating district incomes was equally original and pioneering. Her book, *Estimating District Income in India*, with Vinod Vyasulu and Meenakshi Rajeev, which was published

by Macmillan in 2003, laid the foundation for going beyond national and state-level GDP numbers. In doing so, it established the data needs and methodology to standardise the estimation of district incomes, exploring important differences across sectors. With developmental interventions increasingly rooted at the district level, it is no surprise that Dr Nayyar's work was a forerunner in a large development economics literature that uses Indian districts as the unit of analysis.

These two seminal pieces of work on the estimation of poverty rates and district incomes in no way dwarf Dr Nayyar's rich body of work in the 1970s and 1980s. She published widely in reputed academic journals on topics that traversed the length and breadth of rural development in India. This included rural labour markets and poverty alleviation programmes; poverty and landlessness; planning for the development of backward areas; agricultural workers and their wages; female labour force participation in rural areas; and the role of the non-farm sector in India's rural transformation.

Policy Impact

Dr Nayyar's tenure at the Planning Commission spanning three decades included the conceptualisation, design and implementation of a wide range of government initiatives targeted at the alleviation of rural poverty. Three contributions particularly stand out.

First, she was instrumental in establishing the institutional arrangements and delivery systems for integrated rural development, especially through the Panchayati Raj system; special area programmes for drought-prone and desert districts; watershed and wasteland development; and minimum needs and basic minimum services.

Second, Dr Nayyar championed the idea and led the process of preparing the first ever *India Human Development Report*. But this watershed initiative was only the beginning. She subsequently instituted a series of *Human Development Reports* for most of the states in India. In doing so, she involved several reputed research institutes in different states to compile the state *Human Development Reports*. With her expertise and unique way of dealing with people and large teams, she successfully created a public good that has stood the test of time.

Last, but not least, Dr Nayyar was closely associated with the implementation and evaluation of several self-employment programmes like the Integrated Rural Development Program as well as rural wage employment programmes such as Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme, National Rural Employment Program, and Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, and public works programmes. She was a strong advocate of the consolidation of many such centrally sponsored schemes. The culmination of her endeavours in this area was the conception and design of the MNREGA at the Planning Commission during 2004 and 2005, where she played a pivotal role. This government flagship programme was then launched in 2006 and owed much to Dr Nayyar's vision.

Dr Nayyar's indelible contributions to policymaking in India benefited enormously from her consultations and collaboration with many global development institutes. This included her association with the Independent South Asia Commission on Poverty Alleviation, SAARC (1992); her Evaluation of United Nations Development Assistance Framework for India: 2008–2012; her participation in several Expert Group meetings at the ILO, UN-ESCAP and Commonwealth Secretariat, London; as well as her stint as Chairperson, Evaluation Committee, for the UNDP's India Country Programme, New Delhi, 2006. This experience provided her with a unique perspective on how India's rural development could benefit from what had worked and what had not worked in other parts of the globe.

Capacity Building

As a public policy practitioner, Dr Nayyar contribution to policymaking in India surpassed her own contributions to the academic literature and the implementation of government programmes. She helped nurture an ecosystem to further rural development in India. Dr Nayyar shaped the development of several prominent research institutes in India, such as the National Council of Applied Economic Research where she was on the governing body for a decade and the Institute of Human Development where she was a founder member. She also had long institutional affiliations with the Giri Institute of Development Studies and the National Institute of Rural Development.

More intangible was Dr Nayyar's support to young scholars, both in government and in academia. She was always encouraging and always accessible and empowered them to make a significant contribution. Importantly, as a confident, bold and outspoken person, she could convey her opinions and feedback without any hesitation. Such transparency was rare among government officials, but tremendously beneficial for the next generation to eventually don the mantle.

Dr Nayyar was well and truly the quintessential government economist—dedicated to public service, humble, and forever bridging the gap between research and policy. Rohini's amiable personality, charming sense of humour and the warmth she exuded made her a joy to work with. I will miss her. And so too will countless other colleagues and friends. But above all, she will be remembered by policymakers, academics and development practitioners alike. She worked tirelessly behind the scenes for over three decades and made a lasting development impact in rural India. She might not have been visible in the public domain, but she was incredibly influential in shaping public policy. That was Rohini Nayyar.

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