

## A TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR SURESH TENDULKAR



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The unexpected and premature death of Prof. Suresh Tendulkar on 21<sup>st</sup> June 2011 has come as a great shock to the economics profession. His contributions to economics were far ranging and he also left a big impact on policy making in India. In recognition of his contributions to the profession, the Indian Econometric Society (TIES) elected him as President for the year 2011-12. The editors of the Journal of Quantitative Economics deeply mourn the passing away of this eminent scholar.

- Editors

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I started my career as a research student of Professor Tendulkar three decades ago. He was more of a '**Guru**' in a traditional sense and inspiring in every way – knowledge, dedication, simplicity, compassion and caring, qualities that had become a great 'guruthwakarshan' for me and I continued to associate with him till the end. Written below is my understanding of what Professor Tendulkar was.

Professor Tendulkar remained true to himself all through his life and strictly followed '*Manasa, Vacha, Karmana*' by doing what he spoke and speaking what he thought. As such he maintained a scrupulous professional integrity throughout his career without any compromise. He was a perfect blend of intellect and humaneness. I believe it was his intellectual bent of mind that chose academics as a profession since it allows learning on a continuous basis, while his humane nature was responsible for his single-minded focus on poverty and related issues in the Indian context. He was a committed teacher and a dedicated researcher. He was strongly positive in attitude and optimistic in outlook.

### **As A Researcher**

He took research as a means to understand real issues so as to find solutions for the same. Hence, he focused on empirical research and tried to have an objective view of reality. As

such he paid utmost attention to – data, economic theory and the context (socio-political and economic environment).

His interest in truth-seeking was as strong as his interest in the real issue, which prompted him to focus on data. He states in one of his papers<sup>1</sup> “... in understanding a problem ready availability of quantitative or qualitative official data becomes indispensable”. He not only took data limitations seriously into account in interpreting the reality but also took interest in the data collecting agencies such as NSSO and tried to improve the quality and adequacy of data. He refused to write anything without the support of hard facts revealed by data. For instance, Global Development Network (GDN) that sponsored the project on “Understanding Reforms” wanted us to work on political economy of reforms.<sup>2</sup> Initially, Tendulkar was reluctant as political economy involves complex processes for which hardly any factual information was readily available. When we had to go with their request as project agreement was signed,<sup>3</sup> we had to put in lot of efforts to obtain information not only on the economy front but also on the political processes so as to explain reality meaningfully.

He was well aware of the fact that reality is too complex to be captured by one data set or, theoretical model. So, he was always for *eclectic* approach by integrating different but relevant data sets or models to have a meaningful idea about the reality. For example, he argued, in one of his papers,<sup>4</sup> for integrating large scale surveys such as NSS Consumer Expenditure Survey data with the small scale surveys covering households located in homogeneous socio-economic environment so as to “intelligently analyse and explain complex reality. The conceptualisation of reality on this basis (through integration of large and small scale surveys) could form a proper basis for meaningful theorising.” (Tendulkar 1989, p.216. Parentheses added).

Despite the fact that he was trained in mathematics and econometrics, he was parsimonious in using sophisticated models as these not only require refined data, which is scanty in India but also because coefficients in these models do not directly correspond to economic concepts. By using simple statistics such as mean and standard deviation, and organising them intelligently, he used to explain the reality sensibly.

Regarding theoretical framework, he was always for the one that is more appropriate for the context and painstakingly selects the same. If the conceptualisation of reality demands a combination of existing theories, he preferred to do that. For instance, in the absence of appropriate theoretical framework, we had to work hard to develop one by combining North Douglas’ institutional framework and Baumol’ analysis of entrepreneurship for the ‘Understanding Reforms’ book.

He knew that understanding reality is an iterative process moving back and forth from the context, theory and data. As such he never finalized the structure, contents and arguments of his writings (especially if these were in new areas) before hand. These were developed through open

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<sup>1</sup> Tendulkar (2009), p.6.

<sup>2</sup> This book is the outcome of the work done under this project.

<sup>3</sup> When I came across GDN’ Advertisement for their Global Research Project on Understanding Reforms, it was my interest that I try and work on that along with Tendulkar. When I requested Tendulkar, he agreed despite his tight schedules. However, we submitted our proposal under different theme. GDN sanctioned the project but insisted on political economy theme.

<sup>4</sup> Tendulkar (1989)

minded learning process. For instance, we were not sure almost till the end how our 'Understanding Reforms' report takes shape.

His thirst for knowledge was unbounded. He used to read the literature on a continuous basis and updates himself with the latest developments – theoretical, empirical, data and methodological, in his subject area and incorporates this knowledge in his research/ teaching.

While he viewed that ideological commitment provides a sense of direction and at times helps in setting the objectives, he did not believe in stretching ideology to means nor was he dogmatic about ideology. He was of the view that the specified ideology should be changed if it does not work in a given socio-political environment.<sup>5</sup> He once told me, regarding the Communist Parties' antagonism to economic policy reforms, "Had Marx been around, he himself would have changed his ideology". With reference to the economic planning in India, he states<sup>6</sup> that successful planning requires effective regulation, which further depends on the interaction between the institutional framework and regulatory mechanism. Central planners in India were unable to control production and distribution according to the plan because of inconsistent institutional set up in which centralised restrictions were counteracted by market prices and private ownership of means of production. So, he felt that radical changes in the regulatory regime were inevitable and advocated new economic policy reforms. If he is convinced that something requires a change with the changing contexts, he advocated those changes irrespective of his earlier stand like in the case of the recent poverty estimates that involved definitional and methodological change.

### **As A Research Supervisor**

He was of a firm belief that knowledge is not something to be given and taken but to be learnt. He used to say that "learning is individual-specific". He played perfectly his role of teacher by facilitating the student's learning process. As such he never imposed his views on others including his students and used to say "I don't believe in singing my own raga". He always encouraged his research students to speak out their interests and discuss their ideas, work plans, etc. and facilitated their learning by putting questions, giving comments on the drafts, engaging them in discussions and at times thinking aloud. Through all these means, I believe, he tried to bring clarity of thought to the students about what they want to know and pushing them to seek answers for the same. He used to emphasise that "putting right question is the most important" in the acquisition of knowledge.

His discussions with students (or anyone) are free and frank. Whether discussions or comments on draft, I observed him using objective reasoning almost computer-like. I felt that every interaction with him was intellectually stimulating and challenging the other person 'to convince him or get convinced'.

He always encouraged his students to think openly without restricting themselves to the existing standardised interpretations especially when the results demand so. For instance, I had estimated elasticity of substitution, for my doctoral thesis, among three inputs – capital, labour and materials, using the Translog production function with reference to the Indian small scale

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<sup>5</sup> Tendulkar (1993).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

industrial units. Empirical results showed, contrary to the existing evidence, complementarity between capital and labour. Whomsoever I talked of my results, the response was that it was not possible. When I told Tendulkar of my results, the very first thing he said was to make sure that the results were correct and there were no estimation errors. Once I made sure of that, he asked me whether I could justify to which I said 'yes' and talked about the vague idea I had at that time. He encouraged me to work on the idea and develop full argument. Thanks to his support, I did develop an alternative argument by posing choice of technique problem in terms of capital and materials as against the existing capital – labour choice as Indian small units have easy access to cheap labour, and explained the results convincingly.

### **As A Teacher**

He was a committed teacher and took his classes so seriously that he never missed a class not even tutorial class, even when he was busy with high level committees/ commissions. Rather, he accepted government assignments keeping his teaching responsibility in mind. He taught a subject called Economic Development and Planning in India (EDPI), which mainly draws on empirical research, for which he together with professor Sundaram prepared almost 100 tables manually and used to update them every year. Any new developments in the literature were incorporated immediately. I attended this course, to have a comprehensive idea about the Indian economy, in the 1990s two times with a gap of few years and I found changes in the structure and contents of the course reflecting the improvements in his understanding. He was methodical and used to take his students step by step through the “description of the problem, conceptualization of the problem, searching an appropriate analytical framework and discussing its empirical relevance, and finally discussing the relevant policies”.

### **Chairman/ Member of Important Official Committees**

He never saw positions as symbols of greatness or, sources of power. Rather he considered them as responsibility and took all the pains to deliver his responsibility in the best possible way. I still remember, after he had become a member of the Disinvestment Commission, he called me many times to get him material on balance sheet terms, financial ratios and corporate governance as his position demanded knowledge about the workings of a company and its financial health. Similarly, he used to read thoroughly all the voluminous RBI reports sent to him (as Member, Central Board of Directors, RBI), which can be seen from his scribbles on the sides, and if any doubts about methodology used etc. he used to call me or, some others whom he thinks might be having an idea about it and discuss the same. Neither had he used his positions for personal benefits.

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