

IN MEMORY

Professor Rabindra Nath Bhattacharya (15 November 1941 to 3 June 2022): A homage

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The year was 1998. In the second year of the master's programme at the Department of Economics at the University of Calcutta, we had various courses to choose from. For the first time, a course on natural resources and environmental economics was on offer. As students of economics, we were aware of the importance of the environment, especially after the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987, titled *Our Common Future*, which was written in response to the conflict between globalized economic growth and accelerating ecological degradation; it introduced the concept of “sustainable development”. We were also aware of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Rio Conference or the Earth Summit, organized by the United Nations in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, where the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was established. Some of us decided to opt for the natural resources and environmental economics course. The course had two papers, one on the economics of natural resources and the other on environmental policy. The first paper was taught by Professor Rabindra Nath Bhattacharya and the second by Professor Sarmila Banerjee. At that time, Professor Bhattacharya was teaching at the University of Kalyani in West Bengal and was a visiting professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Calcutta. It was Professor Sarmila Banerjee who had taken the initiative to introduce the course on environmental economics and involve Professor Bhattacharya.

As an experienced teacher of the subject, Professor Bhattacharya instantly attracted our attention with his simple explanations. He made dynamic optimization and optimal control theory in the extraction of exhaustible and

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renewable resources seem easy. He would ensure that every student understood what he spoke about. His beautiful oration on the subject engrossed students—I was among those who fell in love with the subject and held the man himself in high regard. Our relationship did not end with the conclusion of the course though. Rather, it became more intimate at Visva Bharati (A Central University)—I joined as an assistant professor in the Department of Economics in 2004, and Professor Bhattacharya joined as the Amiya Kumar Dasgupta Chair Professor¹ in the same department in 2006. Professor Bhattacharya offered to share the environmental economics course with me, which I taught at the postgraduate level. During his six-month stay in Santiniketan, we would walk back together from the department almost every day. During these long walks, he would share his life experiences of growing up, teaching, and research with me. I was the pupil and he the master.

Professor Bhattacharya’s family moved from Faridpur in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to Kolkata when he was seven years of age, after the Independence of India. He was admitted to the Hindu School opposite Presidency College on College Street in Kolkata, where a classmate of his was Amit Bhaduri, another future economist, who went on to become a professor of economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and a famous academician in his own right. Professor Bhattacharya vividly remembered his struggles as a child during those days. Living in poverty, his family had to share a home and toilet with other families. In those days, such an accommodation was called a *mess bari* (“shared house”). The partition of Bengal during Indian Independence would always haunt him. Professor Bhattacharya graduated in economics from Vidyasagar College, Kolkata, and later completed a master’s in economics at Jadavpur University, Kolkata. For a brief period, he taught at Vidyanagar College, which is affiliated with the University of Calcutta and located at South 24 Parganas. Among his colleagues here was Sri Pranab Mukherjee, who later became the president of India. Later, Professor Bhattacharya joined Dinabandhu Andrews College, Kolkata, as a full-time faculty member. In those days, the salary of a professor was one of the lowest. He once jokingly mentioned how, when meeting a woman for a potential marriage, he had to face questions from her father as to whether he would be able to take responsibility for this woman, given his meagre salary. In those days, parents who were arranging marriages would

¹ It is perhaps worth mentioning here that Professor Amiya Kumar Dasgupta (16 July 1903–14 January 1992), a famous economist, had a house in Santiniketan, which his daughter, Alakananda Patel, and son, famous economist, Sir Partha Dasgupta, dedicated to Visva Bharati. The house was renamed the AK Dasgupta Centre for Planning and Development, and its research works are financed by NITI Aayog.

rarely allow their daughters to marry teachers due to their low salaries. Ultimately, he did get married.

While teaching at Dinabandhu Andrews College, Professor Bhattacharya came in contact with Gopal Trivedi, who was teaching at Asutosh College, Kolkata. Professor Trivedi insisted that Professor Bhattacharya pursue a PhD in the US and contacted his friend Basudeb Biswas, who was then a faculty member at Utah State University. On the insistence of Gopal Trivedi, Professor Bhattacharya took leave from his college and went with his family to pursue a PhD at Utah State University. Although he initially wanted to do a PhD in finance, he eventually decided to study resource and environmental economics under the supervision of Professor Snyder. As a PhD scholar, Professor Bhattacharya won the “Outstanding Achievement Award”. His most-cited paper, “A More General Dynamic Economic Model of the Optimal Rotation of Multiple Use Forests”, was co-authored with his supervisor and published in the *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management* in 1990 (Snyder and Bhattacharya 1990).

On completing his PhD, Professor Bhattacharya got an offer to teach at the University of New Mexico in the US but, at his daughter’s insistence, he decided to come back to India. He re-joined his old college in Kolkata. In fact, he decided to settle right opposite the college and bought a flat at New Garia, where he stayed until his death. A lot happened in between. He left Dinabandhu Andrews College and shifted to North Bengal University in Siliguri, West Bengal. Here, perhaps for the first time in India, in 1987, he introduced a course on natural resources and environmental economics at the postgraduate level. He taught at North Bengal University for 10 years before shifting to another university in West Bengal, the University of Kalyani, in 1995, from where he finally retired in 2004. During his tenure at the University of Kalyani, he introduced the subject of natural resources and environmental economics at the postgraduate level. He was also instrumental in introducing the course at the postgraduate level at the University of Calcutta, Jadavpur University, and the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI), Kolkata. During this time, he brought the subject to different universities and institutes in the country. He would often teach as a visiting faculty member at the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research (IGIDR), JNU, and various universities in the Northeast and Orissa. During this time, he also taught for one year at his alma mater, Utah State University.

During my visits to his flat in Garia, Kolkata, he took particular pride in showing me a group photo with the participants of the first World Bank–

aided, environmental management capacity-building technical assistance project, which was implemented by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) and executed by the Madras School of Economics (MSE), Chennai. Its first workshop was held in 2001, with the participation of many of the present academicians of environmental economics. Professor Bhattacharya was a resource person at this workshop and Professor Ulaganathan Sankar of the MSE was the coordinator. Professor Bhattacharya was also the resource person for the next few workshops conducted under the project, held mainly at the Institute of Economic Growth (IEG), New Delhi. However, the first workshop was perhaps the most satisfying to him.

The other prominent photograph on his bookshelf was of a group of participants in a workshop organized by the South Asian Network for Development and Environmental Economics (SANDEE) in Bangkok, in 2002, for which also he was a resource person. Present in the photograph, among others, were Sir Partha Dasgupta and the late Professor Karl Goran Maler. He would often tell stories about how Sir Dasgupta and Professor Maler would tease each other and how, given his own shy, gentlemanly nature, he would enjoy their banter from the side. This was, in essence, Professor Bhattacharya—a respectable Bengali *bhadralok* (gentleman) who was always in search of new areas of study. He was inquisitive about the work of students and scholars, and he was a great listener. Many scholars doing research with other supervisors would reach out to him for suggestions. He was a passionate teacher who loved his students and was always ready to help them. Sir Dasgupta, while reminiscing about his interactions with Professor Bhattacharya, whom he lovingly called *Rabi-da*, writes, “We discussed each other’s lectures, and we recounted our experiences in facing the pitfalls of working in a deep and difficult field. We also discovered our shared love of teaching” (Dasgupta 2023).

He supervised countless PhD scholars. Many of them are now faculty members at universities and research institutes. His gentle behaviour and almost fatherly attitude would draw students towards him. Seldom did anyone hear him raise his voice.

Although Professor Bhattacharya did his PhD in the economics of forest resources, in which he also published his most-cited papers, he did not limit his research to that field. Later, he worked in different areas of environmental economics. A search of his name on Google Scholar shows the diversity of his research work. He has researched energy; common property resources such as fishery and forestry; gender and environment; mining; environmental standards; groundwater markets; solid waste management; mangrove

conservation in the Sundarbans; wastewater treatment in the river Ganga; the health impact of coal mine workers; pond ecosystems; and alternative energy. As Professor Jeffrey R Vincent, the Korstian distinguished professor in forest economics and management at the Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences at Duke University, US, writes, “Professor Rabindra Nath Bhattacharya’s research in environmental economics ranges from the micro to the macro, from investigations of common property resource institutions on land and at sea to the interrelationships among economic growth, energy consumption, and climate change” (Acharyya 2023).

Even after retiring from Kalyani University in 2004, Professor Bhattacharya did not stop researching or teaching. He worked as a visiting professor at the University of Calcutta, Jadavpur University, and IGIDR. Before his death in June 2022, he was also associated with the School of Oceanographic Studies of Jadavpur University as an honorary professor; he contributed as an economist to a project on the Anthropocene impact on the deltas in India and Bangladesh.

His edited book with Oxford University Press, *Environmental Economics: An Indian Perspective*, published in 2001, is one of the most popular textbooks on environmental economics in the country. Presently, the book is on its 28th impression and is still in high demand (Bhattacharya 2001). His papers have been published in some of the topmost journals on environmental economics, such as the *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management*, *Energy Economics*, *The Journal of Development Studies*, *Environment and Development Economics*, *Resources Policy*, and *Resource and Energy Economics*. He has also contributed several articles to *Economic & Political Weekly*, the *Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics*, and the *Indian Economic Review*.

Professor Bhattacharya was deeply involved with the two institutional networks for environmental economics in South Asia—SANDEE and the Indian Society for Ecological Economics (INSEE). To both these institutions he contributed as a resource person. He was a member of the executive committee of INSEE from 2012 to 2014. As another member of the same executive committee, Professor Pranab Mukhopadhyay from Goa University writes about Professor Bhattacharya: “He would attend all the meetings and always had valuable suggestions on how INSEE could enhance its activities. He was a regular at many INSEE training workshops” (Mukhopadhyay 2022).

Professor Bhattacharya loved to mix and interact with people and perhaps this was one reason, other than academics, that he enjoyed being a part of INSEE and SANDEE. His love for people was also reflected in his daily lifestyle. He was a frequent visitor at the Coffee House near Jadavpur University in Kolkata. Every Sunday, he would enter promptly at 10 in the morning, when it opened, and stay till 1 pm, when it closed. Many professors, intellectuals, and scholars from different parts of the country assembled there, and students like me would go to listen to their discussions on economic and political issues. Table No. 5 was always reserved for him and his comrades. From the discussions that took place, I understood that he was more of a socialist and believed that socialism was the best path to governance. He believed in the role of institutions for the development of an economy. He would often talk about the health system of Cuba and was elated when Cuban doctors went to Italy to help patients during the COVID-19 crisis (Acosta 2020). Many of these Cuban doctors had also previously helped patients affected by the Ebola virus in Africa.

It was at this Coffee House one day in early 2019 that I expressed a wish to edit a book in his honour. He was extremely shy and would not allow me to do so. But I requested him to give me a chance and he finally agreed. I later approached several academicians who knew him. Almost everyone I contacted agreed to contribute to the volume in his honour. Sir Dasgupta agreed to write the foreword and Professor Vincent agreed to write an introduction about Professor Bhattacharya. Finally, with contributions from 35 authors, the book took shape between 2019 and 2022.

Unfortunately, in May 2022, Professor Bhattacharya fell ill and had to be admitted to a nursing home in Kolkata. I visited him in the hospital fairly often. He never spoke about his health. Even in bed, he enquired about my research. On 3 June 2022, I heard that Professor Bhattacharya had passed away in the early morning.

On 10 June 2022, a condolence meeting was organized by his students at Jadavpur University, and many people from academia and well-wishers attended. It became clear how popular Professor Bhattacharya had been, not only in the academic world but in society at large.

My edited book in his honour, *Environmental Economics in Developing Countries: Issues and Challenges* (Acharyya 2023), was published by Routledge and Taylor and Francis in early 2023. Unfortunately, Professor Bhattacharya did not live to read the book. The book is my *gurudakshina* (acknowledgement to a spiritual guide) to him. To me, he will always remain a person who, like

Mahatma Gandhi, believed in simplicity and this reflected in his daily life. He would travel using public transport with a cloth bag on his shoulder (popularly known as *jhola* in Bengali). Liberalization of the economy and mass consumption could not change the Bengali *bhadralok* in him. He was much like a tree—he gave life and shelter to his students, who, I strongly believe, will carry his legacy forward.

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