

IN MEMORY

Professor U. Sankar (5 June 1935 to 30 March 2025): A Tribute

G Mythili*

Professor Ulaganathan Sankar, former Director of Madras School of Economics, passed away at Chennai after a brief illness. His passing has created a void in the field of economics that cannot be easily filled. Renowned for his relentless pursuit of knowledge and an ever-expanding intellectual horizon, he nurtured a generation of economists through his unwavering mentorship, complemented by his tireless dedication to institution building.

Coming from a rural background and born into a humble family, Sankar rose to become an eminent econometrician, making significant contributions to environmental economics, agricultural economics, and public-sector economics.

After completing his postgraduate (PG) degree from Annamalai University in 1957, Sankar briefly worked as a lecturer in the same department before joining the Gandhian Institute of Studies, Varanasi. Here, he worked as a research associate under Jayaprakash Narayan, whose lasting influence on his thinking could be seen in the Gandhian life of simplicity that he led.

In 1963, he secured a fellowship to pursue his doctorate at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where he worked on his PhD thesis under the guidance of the distinguished Bayesian econometrician, Arnold Zellner, who encouraged him to hone his skills in quantitative methods. Despite having no formal background in mathematics or statistics, within a couple of years, he became very proficient in the subjects, and his PhD thesis using the Bayesian approach to production function analysis in the Indian

* Former Professor, Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, General Arun Kumar Vaidya Marg, Film City Rd, Goregaon, Mumbai, Maharashtra 400065. mythili06@gmail.com

Copyright © Mythili 2025. Released under Creative Commons Attribution © NonCommercial 4.0 International licence (CC BY-NC 4.0) by the author.

Published by Indian Society for Ecological Economics (INSEE), c/o Institute of Economic Growth, University Enclave, North Campus, Delhi 110007.

ISSN: 2581–6152 (print); 2581–6101 (web).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37773/ees.v8i2.1758>

manufacturing sector became a seminal work (Murty, 2021). Zellner and Sankar presented a paper titled “On Errors in Variables” at the Econometric Conference held in Berkeley in 1966 (Mythili et al., 2005). Sankar joined the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee as a faculty member in 1967, where he served for 11 years. In 1969, he co-authored a research paper with VK Chetty, a leading econometrician, on Bayesian Estimation of the Constant Elasticity of Substitution production function (Chetty et al. 1969).

However, despite his successful career in the United States, he desired to return to India and serve his country. Thus, when the then vice-chancellor of the University of Madras, Malcolm Adiseshaiah, invited Sankar to assist him in starting a new department, he gladly accepted the offer. Together with Nalla Gounden, he established the Department of Econometrics at the University of Madras in 1977. This was the first department in India dedicated exclusively to econometrics and set the scene for the application and use of advanced quantitative research in economics, spurring many colleges across the region to revise their economics curricula to incorporate econometrics as a core subject, thus strengthening the foundation for quantitative economic analysis in India.

Sankar went on to lead numerous projects focused on addressing some of India’s most pressing economic challenges, demonstrating a strong commitment to practical, empirical, and solution-driven research. His research interests were wide-ranging—beginning with agricultural economics and public-sector economics and gradually expanding into emerging domains such as environmental economics and space economics.

His exemplary research career apart, Sankar was a dedicated mentor and was also deeply committed to institution building. He played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Madras School of Economics (MSE) at Chennai in 1994, a prime example of his vision and perseverance.

The circumstances that led to the establishment of this institute constitute a curious chain of events. In 1992, Sankar went on a sabbatical to the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy (NIPFP), New Delhi, to collaborate with Sudipto Mundle and Shekhar Mehta on work involving pollution abatement costs and pollution control incentives. Their study was the first systematic attempt to estimate the marginal abatement cost of water pollution in Indian industries which was subsequently published as a book (Mehta, et al. 1997). During his tenure at the NIPFP, he interacted with its founder Raja Chelliah, who was appreciative of his work. In one such meeting, Chelliah expressed concerns about the state of the economics curriculum in Tamil Nadu and proposed establishing a new

institute to raise the standard of economics education and research in the region. Sankar gladly agreed to spearhead this new initiative. Although he was close to retirement, he worked tirelessly and, along with Chelliah, successfully laid the foundation for the MSE in 1993 at Chennai. This initiative received support from the former president of India, R Venkataraman, former Chief Secretary to the Government of Tamil Nadu, Finance Department, N Narayanan, leading industrialists AC Muthiah and A Sivasailam, economists C Rangarajan and Kaushik Basu, and the former vice chancellor of Anna University M Anandakrishnan, among others.

Sankar assumed charge as the founder-director of the MSE in 1995. Initially, the MSE offered a PG diploma programme, but soon introduced a PG degree programme in economics. Although it started modestly in a small space provided by the Centre for Biotechnology within Anna University, Chennai, Sankar's tireless commitment meant that within a span of three years, the MSE moved into its newly constructed premises. Students and faculty flocked to the institute, drawn by its environment that promoted advanced and rigorous learning and research.

As a faculty member of MSE, I fondly recall the early days after the establishment of the MSE, when it was functioning with very limited manpower. Sankar's willingness to share every task, despite a demanding schedule, spoke volumes of his dedication and enthusiasm. Thanks to that spirit and his unwavering commitment, the MSE soon expanded its faculty, administrative resources, and technical resources, and thereafter built an auditorium that marked the next phase of growth.

It should be emphasized here that even while he was discharging his duties as director of the MSE, overseeing both academic and administrative functions during a key phase in the institution's growth, he always remained committed to his teaching responsibilities.

Around this time, Sankar became deeply interested in environmental economics. In 1998, he was appointed as the national coordinator of the World Bank-aided Environmental Management Capacity Building programme implemented by the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF), Government of India, which was executed by the MSE. Three other core Institutions—Indira Gandhi Institute of Development and Research, Mumbai (IGIDR), Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi (IEG), and the NIPFP—were associated with this programme. He was in charge of four key sub-components, Research, Curriculum, Training and Overseas fellowship. This programme supported many institutes, colleges, and university departments all over India by providing expertise to strengthen their teaching and research curriculum in environmental economics. It also

offered financial support for the procurement of library books and other related materials in environmental economics. Additionally, many faculty members of colleges and universities underwent specific capacity-building training programmes here. This training was extended to government officials handling pollution control too. Several distinguished environmental economists—Karl Goran Maler, Partha Dasgupta, Charles Perrings, and Carton Brandon, among others—were invited to give lectures. Thus, this programme was instrumental in advancing the field of environmental economics and producing many experts in this field.

Sankar's edited book on Environmental Economics has been widely quoted (Sankar, 2001). His vision to establish an advanced centre in environmental economics was accomplished under his able leadership at the MSE. Following the successful completion of the World Bank programme in 2002, the MoEF awarded the MSE a Centre of Excellence (CoE) in Environmental Economics under its CoE scheme. Furthermore, the MSE was established as an ENVIS (Environment Information System) centre under one of the MoEF's schemes.

Other than environmental economics, Sankar was also involved in the techno-economic analysis of India's space programme, which demanded a rigorous integration of scientific and technical knowledge with economic principles. Given the interdisciplinary nature of these fields, he invested substantial time and effort in mastering new concepts across domains. His work on the cost–benefit analysis of the space programme drew wide appreciation (Sankar, U, 2007).

Sankar's wide range of publications are a testimony to the diversity of fields he worked in. He contributed to the field of environmental economics not only through academic research, but also through his roles as a key member of and adviser to various committees. He was national coordinator of the World Bank Capacity Building programme; an adviser to the MoEF on the development of economic instruments for pollution control, eco-taxes on polluting inputs and outputs, biodiversity, and sustainable development; a member of the National Biodiversity Authority; and a part of the Government of India delegation to the UN Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 2012. He also served as a member of many committees of the Planning Commission, University Grants Commission (UGC), and Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR).

He received many awards and honours, some of which are listed here: the UGC National Swami Pranavananda Saraswati Award in Economics, 2006; Fellow, South Asian Network for Development and Environmental

Economics (SANDEE), 2009. National Fellow, ICSSR, 2003, 2004; President, The Indian Econometric Society, 1993–1994; Postdoctoral Fellow in Public Utility Economics, AT&T, 1971–1972; Ford Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Fellow, 1966–1967.

Sankar led many projects sponsored by leading national and international agencies. Some of the key projects undertaken by him at the MSE were the following: (a) Fiscal Reforms for Sustainable Development jointly with NIPFP, funded by World Resources Institute, Washington 1995–1997; (b) Economic Analysis of Environmental Damages by Tanneries and Textile Dyeing Industries and Suggestions for Policy Action, funded by UNDP—Project LARGE, 1996; (c) Accelerating Growth through Globalization of Indian Agriculture, a joint project with the Australian National University, 1996–1999; (d) A Techno-Economic Analysis of the Indian Space Programme, Indian Space Research Organisation, 2000–2003; (e) Trade and Environment: Environmental Requirements and India's Exports of Leather and Leather Products, funded by the MoEF, 2002–2005; (f) Insulating Public Utility Pricing from Policy Fluctuations for Sustainable Growth: Power and State Road Transport, for the 14th Finance Commission, 2013.

My association with Sankar began in 1979 when I joined the Department of Econometrics for my PG programme. His commitment to teaching was truly unmatched, and I gained a strong foundation in quantitative economics through his classes. Later, I had the opportunity to work on a project he led—sponsored by the Ministry of Agriculture—which proved to be a turning point in my career. During this period, I witnessed not only his academic brilliance, but also his remarkable administrative acumen. I was especially struck by his empathy and deep social concern, which added a distinct dimension to his professional persona. Another noteworthy aspect was his quiet, but consistent, insistence on challenging gender stereotypes in professional roles, whenever his advice was sought. He believed that women possess the transformative capacity to rise to challenges and firmly advocated for expanding their opportunities.

Later, I enrolled in the PhD programme under his guidance and found great fulfilment in continuing my academic association with him. What set his mentoring apart was that it transcended the mere transmission of knowledge. While offering guidance, he created space for students to think independently, thus preparing them to confidently take on future challenges. Over the course of his career, he guided 14 PhD scholars in their research, including 2 during his tenure in the United States.

Behind all his success stood his wife, Thilagavathy, who has been a source of strength and moral support. Until the very end, Sankar remained committed to his roles as honorary professor and member of the governing council of the MSE. He has left behind an enduring legacy—one that will be carried forward by all who benefitted from his wisdom.

REFERENCES

- Chetty, V.K. and U. Sankar. 1969. “Bayesian Estimation of the CES Production Function”, *The Review of economic Studies*, 36(3): 289-294.
- Mehta, S. Mundle, S. and U. Sankar 1997. *Controlling Pollution: Incentives and Regulations*, Sage.
- Murty, GRK. 2021. “An Interview with Professor U Sankar.” *IUP Journal of Applied Economics* 20 (1): 85–110.
- Mythili, G. and R. Hema. 2005. *Topics in Applied Economics: A Festschrift Volume for Prof. U. Sankar*. Gurgaon, India: Academic Foundation.
- Sankar, Ulaganathan, ed. 2001. *Environmental Economics*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.
- . 2007. *The Economics of India's Space Programme: An Exploratory Analysis*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press