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IN MEMORY

Narpat S. Jodha: Forever Restless

Pranab Mukhopadhyay* and Rucha Ghate**

Pranab first met Narpatji in Kathmandu in a small 'Thakali' restaurant in 2004, as part of a meeting organized by Manik Duggar (the then Programme Manager of the South Asian Network for Development and Environmental Economics, SANDEE). Narpatji, Rucha, and Pranab were to edit a book together soon. So Priya Shyamsundar (Programme Director of SANDEE) suggested that we get to know each other. We (Rucha and Pranab) had, of course, heard of him and he, of course, had not heard of us. The first thing that struck us was that the man we saw seemed far removed from Narpatji's name and fame. He had no airs about himself; he appeared to be the quintessential common man. Since this first meeting, Rucha had the privilege of working with him as a colleague at the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) from 2013 to 2015.

Narpatji was easy to converse with. In fact, once he got started, one could sit back with a cup of tea while he happily narrated stories about his field insights, each one weaving into the next. His stories were utterly believable in the village context but challenged urban economic rational expectations.

Narpatji was sceptical of econometric studies that relied on complicated models with restrictive assumptions. He often spoke about his experience during his stint at the World Bank—he was a misfit and often disagreed with others there. He was primarily a “concept” researcher who believed in

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Rucha Ghate and Pranab Mukhopadhyay co-edited a book with Narpat Singh Jodha titled *Promise, Trust and Evolution: Managing the Commons of South Asia*, which was published by Oxford University Press, UK, in 2008. This is a note in memory of one of our mentors.

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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/eecs.v3i2.90>

making generalizations based on direct observations. He opined that the problem with econometricians was that they “tortured” the data until the latter “confessed” what the former wanted them to say.

Narpatji is probably the least known among the famous economists that graduated from the Delhi School of Economics (D School). One of the stories that he would tell everyone he met was about this struggle with English and, therefore, economics, while at D School. Indeed, he conducted many failed searches at the Ratan Tata Library for an economics book in Hindi. The average graduate student might have dropped out of D School under these circumstances. But not Narpatji. He used to say, “Keep trying; it will happen”, which was a lesson he had internalized in his long struggle through many professional challenges.



Narpat Singh Jodha at the Ninth Biennial of the International Society for Ecological Economics (ISEE), held at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi in December 2006. [Image courtesy: INSEE]

His work on livelihood dependence on common property resources (CPRs) in semi-arid regions was completely unfashionable for his time (1986). What made his work so unique was his ability to grasp what many of us routinely see but do not recognize. His was a skill that was impossible to pick up within the four walls of a classroom.

What also made him stand out was his relentless work ethic. We once spoke to him about the poverty debate between Utsa Patnaik, Jean Drèze, and Angus Deaton. At this, Narpatji reminded us that he had published a paper

as early as 1988 on the errors of conventional poverty measures. On another occasion, we were talking about climate change and the South Asian contribution to this domain of research. Here, he reminded us that he was one of the early contributors to this body of work (in 1989). His 2005 paper on mountain-specific poverty, which highlighted the limited accessibility, fragility, marginality, and diversity in mountainous regions that create specific circumstances, laid the foundation for poverty studies in ICIMOD in particular. While they were colleagues, he would sometimes share some of his writing with Rucha and ask for comments. He would likewise talk to freshers and young researchers with humility. He was a regular attendee of the guest lectures in ICIMOD, and almost always had a question that would prompt long conversations that continued over tea or lunch.

When we worked together on the edited *Commons* volume, we thought that he would take only a fleeting interest, given his age; however, he proved us wrong. He was very much present and systematically worked on the project, adding editorial comments for each paper. As his retirement from ICIMOD drew closer, his biggest worry was what to do with the books and documents that he had accumulated over time. After formally retiring from ICIMOD, he would often sit in the SANDEE library (which was then on the ICIMOD campus) and make himself available to anyone who wanted to pick his brain.

As the years went by, we were less frequently in touch. But we knew he was still active, writing and publishing as recently as 2019. It takes a lot to keep going, but that was Narpatji—forever restless.

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