

T. N. Krishnan

The untimely death of Dr. T. N. Krishnan on September 7, 1996, at the age of 64, has been a great loss for Indian social science research. It has, to some extent, disrupted a unique effort of a multi-faceted personality to reinvigorate policy-relevant social science research in India. Consistent with the broad interests of the socially-concerned economist-scholar, the research programme has focussed on the Strategy of Human Development in India, covering Education, Health, Demographic Transition, Food security, Employment and Social Security.

In 1989, Krishnan had taken early retirement from the post of Director of the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) at Trivandrum, but he continued as an Honorary Fellow at the CDS. Three years later, he resumed hectic activity and devoted himself to the strenuous responsibilities of coordinating a large project financed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), sponsored by the Ministry of Finance, Government of India. With his transparent integrity and simple life style, Krishnan worked hard in an honorary capacity to support 60 research projects in different parts of the country. With the help of an Advisory Committee, Krishnan organised wide-ranging consultations to identify the gaps in research on selected themes and provided, after careful screening, the young promising scholars with adequate funds to undertake challenging research. He also took great pains to hold frequent consultative meetings of researchers working on the same broad theme and a collaborative exchange of ideas on methodological problems and on key findings.

Born in a village in Trichur district of Kerala on August 13, 1932, Krishnan had received his higher education in Trivandrum, Madras, and M.I.T.. He had a varied experience of working in diverse academic settings in different parts of the country: the austere Gokhale Institute in Pune, the IIM at Calcutta, Kerala University and the CDS at Trivandrum, and with the United Nations Secretariat as well as the UNFPA in New York. He remained deeply attached, however, to Kerala, and tried hard to draw lessons from its developmental experiences.

Krishnan's interest in and contribution to population research began with a perceptive paper written in 1976 on demographic transition in Kerala. He considered demographic transitions to be a vital dimension of development, which had to be understood in a historical perspective. After his association with the UNFPA during 1979-1985, he played a key role in launching a broad-based international training programme in population and development at the CDS. The training programme is designed largely for mid-career government officers with a role in policy-making; it has helped the CDS to attract young scholars, on the faculty.

Krishnan was a member of the Committee set up by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in the mid-1980s under the chairmanship of late Professor Moonis Raza to review the functioning of the Population Research Centres in the country. He was keen to give them adequate funds as well as autonomy in research activities, but with a broader social science perspective instead of the usual narrow statistical focus. Although the report of the Moonis Raza Committee has been gathering dust, Krishnan's interest in the issues continued as he initiated the UNDP project noted above. The large-scale National Family Health Survey (NFHS), conducted during 1992-93, obviated the need for another major effort to undertake expensive primary data collection projects; but he supported innovative efforts to use qualitative research methods to understand the unexpectedly rapid decline in fertility in Tamil Nadu during the past decade.

Among Krishnan's other central concerns was the need to understand the factors underlying the puzzling juxtaposition of reported high morbidity rates and a high life expectancy at birth in Kerala. As the relevant data of the National Sample Survey were analysed and the anomaly seemed to be less serious than anticipated, Krishnan turned his attention to the high economic burden of the cost of health care or medical treatment on the poor, particularly when the illnesses required hospitalisation. The concern with improving the health care for the poor led him to advocate a modicum of health insurance for hospital care in the country and he tried hard to influence the government policy on the subject. His interest in the subject made him accept the honorary Directorship of the Achutha Menon Centre for Health Science Studies at the Sri Chitra Tirunal Institute for Medical Sciences and Technology. He was certain that it would delay his retirement for dedication to the world of art and painting by only two or three years. Perhaps the added responsibility contributed to the stress and strain on his health, but he ignored it as only a passing phase.

I had first met Krishnan in 1965, when he had come to the University of Bombay for a seminar on the Indian Economy. However, our friendship and affection deepened during the 1980s, when he joined the CDS as Director. The most striking aspects of Krishnan's personality were his amazing zest for life, his loyalty to his friends and to the institutions with which he was associated, and his concern for fairness. He agonised over decisions relating to recruitment because of their long-term implications not only for the survival and growth of research institutions as centres of excellence but also for the morale and creativity of the researchers themselves. While he recognised the need for judicious compromises, his prime concern was to encourage excellence so that Indian social scientists could equal the best in the world. With this goal, he always welcomed and respected candid criticism and dissent from his friends. Also, he wanted to help promising young Indian social scientists to learn from and interact with best experts of the world, preferably in India but, whenever necessary, abroad as well.

At our last meeting two weeks before his death, Krishnan had expressed a desire that during his convalescence after the bypass surgery, he would review the papers and reports received under the UNDP project. He was advised against this because of the

likely mental strain. In any case, destiny was to keep his desire unfulfilled and his friends now have to shoulder the responsibility.

Particularly after his wife died of cancer in 1979, Krishnan had sought his fulfilment in work. A deeply religious man, he began his day early in the morning and kept a hectic schedule till about 11 p.m.. In the midst of his numerous preoccupations, he strove to fulfil his duties towards his aged parents who have had to bear the shock of his tragic death. His son Santosh has earned a Ph.D. degree in both Physics and Medicine from Yale University while his daughter Sunita is working on her Ph.D. dissertation in Epidemiology at the University of California, Berkeley. Their great loss is shared by the entire community of Indian social scientists and Krishnan's friends.

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