

V K Natraj (1939–2024)

JOS CHATHUKULAM

With the passing of Vudayagiri Krishnamurthi Natraj on 9 December 2024, India has lost not only an erudite scholar but also one of its most influential development economists, profound social scientists, and public intellectuals. On 8 December 2024, he was scheduled to attend a panel discussion organised by the Mysore Open Forum on the topic “Is Caste Census Necessary for Social Justice?” It was later cancelled following his hospitalisation.¹ As a social scientist, Natraj had often made it clear that the caste census could at best give a headcount of the various caste groups but would not capture the socio-economic and political complexities of caste in the country (Natraj 2003, 2010). He was of the opinion that the headcount must be supplemented by an independent and decentralised research study and its findings must be made transparent and accessible (Krishnakumar 2000). At a time when the possibility of a caste-based census presents a complex challenge with unpredictable consequences and implications for welfare policies and politics, Natraj’s take remains highly relevant.

A distinguished scholar in the field of development economics and social sciences, Natraj had a career spanning over three decades at the University of Mysore. He joined the university in 1970 and worked initially at the Institute of Correspondence Course and Continuing Education. In 1972, he joined the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Mysore and became a professor and head of the Department of Development Studies. He went on to become the director of the institute. From 2002 to 2005, Natraj served as the director of the Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS), Chennai. During this time, he was actively involved in dialogues between the farmers of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka on the Cauvery water dispute. He played an active role in the Cauvery Family, and as its coordinator, organised key

meetings in Chennai, Bengaluru, Thanjavur, and Mandya between 2002 and 2004. Natraj was also a member of the Board of Trustees of the Malcolm and Elizabeth Adiseshiah Trust.

Early Years and Education

Born on 6 October 1939, Natraj’s family migrated from Andhra Pradesh to Karnataka. His father was a prominent lawyer. He studied economics at the University of Mysore and the University of Oxford. He was also a recipient of the Rhodes Scholarship. Natraj has a Master of Letters (MLitt) in economics from Pembroke College, Oxford. He was a research fellow at the University of York and worked as a senior research officer at the National Institute for Training in Industrial Engineering, Mumbai. Natraj was a visiting faculty at several universities, including University of Sussex, United Kingdom and Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Though he adopted the Oxford pronunciation in his speech, Natraj remained loyal to his roots as a proud “Mysorean.”

Contributions

While serving as a visiting fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, he headed a research study titled “From Delegation to Devolution: A Comparative Study of Panchayats in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and West Bengal,” sponsored by the institute. From 1999 to 2005, Natraj was a member of the Indian Advisory Council of the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute. Panchayati raj institutions and decentralisation were areas close to his heart. He served on the expert committee on panchayat raj, chaired by P R Nayak for the Government of Karnataka in 1996. B S Bhargava was also a member of this committee. He was deeply influenced by the ideas of decentralisation envisioned by Ramakrishna Hegde, Abdul Nazir Sab, and E M S Namboodiripad. Their perspectives had a great impact on him

and shaped his own contributions to strengthening the Karnataka model of decentralisation through the “Hegde-Sab-Namboodiripad framework.”

He also had rich expertise as a planner and was instrumental in the preparation of the district development plan for Mysuru. Natraj understood that planning at the district level was possible only with a legal and organisational framework and appropriate institutions. He worked towards setting up the Mysore Zilla Parishad in the late 1980s. The District Plan of Mysore was a novel attempt in Karnataka, which took place against the backdrop of the Eighth Five Year Plan (Chathukulam and Joseph 2021). It was also one of the first attempts at scientific multi-level planning in India.

In 2002, Natraj chaired the working group on decentralisation in the Tamil Nadu State Planning Commission. He also authored several research articles and papers on decentralisation and related issues. Natraj wrote a monograph titled “Centralised Initiatives and Decentralised Responsibilities: A Study of Selected Indian States,” published by the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi. He argued that in a technocentric development framework, it is challenging to envision a decentralised governance structure, as the framework does not regard public participation as essential to the development process. It is more inclined to prioritise specialists in decision-making roles instead of local citizens (Natraj 2000). He also argued that devolution is, in essence, a philosophical concept and it is the conferment of powers and resources that enables the translation of this concept into reality (Natraj et al 2006).

The Many Roles of Natraj

Natraj was prominent in at least four different roles—as an academician, social scientist, institution builder, and public intellectual. He was a genuine social scientist. While he expressed concerns regarding the present status of social sciences both as a discipline and a practice, he was optimistic about its revival. Natraj argued that by re-rooting the social sciences in light of everyday experiences and by fostering interdisciplinary

communication, social science researchers could arrive at a meaningful dialogue with other disciplines (Natraj et al 2001a). He also observed that the curriculum and pedagogical methods in social science disciplines are seldom adjusted to meet the needs of the present world. The curriculum, he articulated, remains euro-centric, filled with imported theories and examples that are largely disconnected from current realities and experiences (Natraj et al 2001b). In other words, Natraj emphasised the need to decolonise social science disciplines to make it relevant to the current generation of scholars and students. Natraj was also a true democrat and humanist and firmly believed that the voice of dissent is important not only in bringing about social change but also for encouraging dialogue in a healthy society (Rajendran 2022). He also believed in people-focused research in the social sciences, one that honours the inherent diversity of society, and is required for the progress and advancement of scholarship. Natraj also often stressed that social scientists should refrain from positioning themselves as “creators of knowledge” and should instead understand their role as “transmitters of knowledge” (Natraj et al 2001a, 2001b).

He was also an institution builder. He devoted a great deal of time and energy to revitalising the social sciences as a discipline. Natraj was closely associated with the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). For several decades, various institutions involved in social science research and education have been operating under the ICSSR. Natraj introduced a pioneering initiative called the Annual Development Convention which led to the establishment of a new collaborative approach among institutions supported by the ICSSR in South India. This Annual Development Convention is hosted by institutions like the MIDS (Chennai), Centre for Development Studies (Thiruvananthapuram), Centre for Multidisciplinary Development Research (Dharwad), Centre for Economic and Social Studies (Hyderabad), and the Institute of Social and Economic Change (Bengaluru).² At MIDS, he

was instrumental in organising a three-day seminar on the “Future of Social Sciences: Search for New Perspectives,” which was conducted with the support of the Ministry of Human Resource and Development. His colleagues and fellow academicians remember him as a kind and peace-loving person who made a great deal of effort in initiating conflict resolution, often acting as a peacemaker between academics and social science research institutions. V K Natraj was an excellent public speaker and orator with a good sense of humour. He made his lectures and speeches more interactive and engaging by incorporating anecdotes, parables, and proverbs. All these innate talents refer to the quality of the public intellectual in him.

Jos Chathukulam (joschathukulam@gmail.com) is with the Centre for Rural Management, Kottayam.

NOTES

- 1 This information was shared by G S Ganesh Prasad, faculty at the Abdul Nasir Sab Institute of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, Mysuru during a conversation with the author on 12 December 2024.
- 2 The author of this obituary during his time as chair professor, Shri Ramakrishna Hegde

Chair on Decentralisation and Development at the Institute of Social and Economic Change, Bengaluru, between 2017 and 2020, had met Natraj on various occasions and shared a good rapport with him.

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