

# IDEAS FOR INDIA

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Miscellany

## Prof. Bharat Ramaswami remembers Prof. Ashok Kotwal

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Perspectives



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*Prof Bharat Ramaswami pens a heartfelt tribute to our founder Editor-in-Chief Prof. Ashok Kotwal.*

The passing away of Ashok Yeshwant Kotwal is an immense loss to scholarship on development economics. Ashok's passionate interest in the big questions of development drove him in many ways. One that is immediately visible to us was his stewardship of Ideas for India. Starting from scratch, a small team with Ashok at its helm have gifted us a thriving accessible 'journal'. Fully aware that quality articles and readership go hand in hand, Ashok consulted widely, worked unreasonably long hours (despite failing health in recent years), and pursued the project tenaciously. From the beginning, Ashok was intent on keeping the journal open to diverse contributors. While the initial objectives were to make economic research accessible especially to policymakers, Ashok's goals were bigger – he thought it was imperative for economists to listen as well to other voices. While it

is not unusual for economists to be exhorted to be sensitive to the issues faced by policymakers and the government, Ashok believed that there was also much to learn from activists in development. He thought of them as researchers in the field, and that their wisdom was indispensable to fruitful conversation, and indeed, research.

Unlike some other celebrated academics, Ashok never exalted a life of the mind. He thought it was only one of the many ways of living productively. Indeed, in some private moments, he would wonder if academic work, with its relentless emphasis on novelty and differentiation, was too obsessed with itself and not engaged enough with its purpose in the wider world. He applied these doubts most to his own work. Did his research lead him to think any better? Was he now more certain of some things? Was the work fundamentally mistaken? While many of us may entertain these anxieties, Ashok took them very seriously. The result was a restless energy, forever curious, and probing. Intellectually, he was open and welcoming to ideas from a variety of people – whether in economics or other fields, whether in academics or outside.

While Ashok did not carry the hubris of a successful academic, his innate modesty should not blind us to his stellar research contributions. After this Ph.D. – for the first decade and half or so – Ashok together with Mukesh Eswaran published papers that many of us have taught and continue to teach in our classrooms. In a series of papers from the mid to late 1980s, they analysed the organisation of traditional agriculture. Using agency theory, they showed us how credit constraints and supervision costs can explain tenancy, long-term labour contracts, and agrarian class structure. Most remarkably, risk and risk-aversion were not necessary elements in their analysis. Deeply embedded in historical and sociological narratives, these papers are profoundly satisfying even today. They also apply to contexts outside traditional agriculture. Share-cropping as a response to double-sided moral hazard extrapolates to other kinds of partnerships. My personal favourite is their paper on why hired labour on farms also consists of a few better paid ‘permanent’ workers. As an effective means of outsourcing supervision costs, it remains relevant in understanding the structure of labour markets everywhere.

In the late 1980s, Ashok and Mukesh turned to addressing macro questions in development. The work that continues to speak to me is “A Theory of Real Wage

Growth in LDCs". It contains a two-sector general equilibrium model of a land constrained economy with non-homothetic preferences. Agents could be either workers (no rental income) or landlords (wage plus rental income). The question was, how did sectoral productivity growth (agriculture or industry) affect wages and thus, the welfare of workers? The answer depended on whether the economy was closed or open to trade. The analysis is powerfully suggestive and kills many birds with one stone. It is a paper on structural transformation and its determinants. Equally, it is also a model of the effects of growth (productivity increase) on poverty (that is, worker wages). It's the latter that Ashok emphasised and became an enduring theme driving his research in the years to come. I was fortunate to work with him in this phase. Gradually, his questions became mine conferring much-needed meaning and coherence to my academic enterprise.

Ashok the person was no different from Ashok the academic. Warm, generous, and forgiving, Ashok built no walls around himself. That was the only way he knew. There was no neat partition between professional work and household chores. Long conversations at his kitchen table or while walking his dog were his preferred modes of collaboration. The energy poured into work was also energy poured into his co-authors. None of this changed even when it was evident that the end was near. There was work to be done and there were questions to be answered. Ashok would, no doubt, flinch to be described as a seeker. There was no bone in his body, he would retort, that answered to a higher calling. His concerns, he would say, were of this world alone as he knew no other.