

## **In Remembrance**

### **G.S. Bhalla (1928-2013)**

Prof G.S.Bhalla, an eminent and progressive Indian economist, a pioneering contributor to our understanding of Punjab economy and especially its agriculture died on September 13, 2013. I was his student at Panjab University (PU), Chandigarh and wrote my first piece of research work 'Farm Size and Productivity: A crop wise study of Haryana' as an MA Honours School in Economics dissertation under his supervision in 1972. It has been a long association of over 40 years with him, during which the personal, political, intellectual and professional dimensions of our lives overlapped, intermeshed and, at rare occasions, even conflicted with each other. This tribute, therefore, reflects those intermeshing dimensions and may appear to be rather personal in some ways. When I heard the news of his death, I was in Moscow as a Visiting Professor at Moscow State University, and I felt miserable that there was no one there who knew him to whom I could talk about the emotional turmoil I was going through and share my sorrow and sense of loss. Writing this obituary is an experience of going through that turmoil again but with a difference that I have had ample opportunities now to talk to friends and colleagues who worked with him, and in that sense, it is also a therapeutic experience. Prof Bhalla, as my supervisor, taught me from scratch how to narrow down and frame a research question, how to read academic literature, how to report on and synthesise what is read, how to do econometric exercises on empirical data and how to analyse the econometric results and reach conclusions. He had my dissertation examined by another eminent economist Prof Y. K. Alagh and when it was awarded a first class/distinction mark, it was such a deep sense of satisfaction to find him looking even happier than I was. For a student, nothing is more satisfying than to realise that one's teacher is happy with one's efforts and performance.

Prof Bhalla and his wife Sheila Bhalla (a Canadian whom he met while they were PhD students at the London School of Economics) joined the economics faculty at PU, Chandigarh in 1969. Many of us, their students, were at that time drawn towards the Maoist/Naxalite movement. We organised a condolence meeting to pay homage to Ho Chi Minh in September 1969 and the only faculty members who joined this meeting were the Bhallas. Until that time, we students did not know about their left-wing intellectual and political orientation. In a very silent way, we felt greatly encouraged by their participation in the condolence meeting. We soon came to know that Prof Bhalla was sympathetic to the Communist Party of India (CPI), and as the pro-Moscow CPI was ideologically hostile to Maoism, we were not sure how the Bhallas would view us. However, they did not even once criticise any left wing activity we students undertook. There came to develop an unsaid understanding between us that since the Left in general was weak in the university, we needed to support each other irrespective

of the differences between us. Prof Bhalla remarkably followed this non-sectarian approach throughout his life.

In March 1971, a tragic development took place at the PU campus whose fallout resulted in Prof Bhalla becoming deeply involved in saving me from harm. A law student of the university, who happened to be a son of a senior police officer involved in committing many atrocities on Naxalite activists in Punjab and their family members, was murdered by a Naxalite group as a retaliatory attack. We were shocked and morally outraged by the murder of this totally innocent student. One of the assassins arrested whilst fleeing from the gruesome scene, under police torture, gave out my name as their sympathiser. I was taken into police custody for 'interrogation'. They did not believe me that I was not involved in the organisational set-up of any Naxalite group in Punjab or outside Punjab and tortured me for several hours to force me to confess to some larger involvement. On release after several hours of torture, when I came back to the university at midnight with visible signs of torture on my arms, my friend Bhagwan Josh told me that he had been instructed by Prof Bhalla to take me to his house immediately upon my return. Prof Bhalla was virtually in tears to see the torture marks on my arms, and next day, along with Dr S.B. Rangnekar, the Head of the Economics Department, put pressure on the university and the Chandigarh administration to save me from any more harassment. Professor Bhalla assured me that I would not be harassed any more, and that I should concentrate on preparing for my examinations and that after passing my undergraduate degree if I felt that I was not safe in Chandigarh, they would arrange for my admission to Delhi School of Economics for postgraduate education. It was chiefly due to the bold stand taken by Prof Rangnekar and Prof Bhalla against police high handedness that I could complete my undergraduate studies. After my examinations were finished, I was formally arrested on trumped up charges and there was a fear that I might be killed in a fake encounter. It was due to the wholehearted support Prof Bhalla gave to my family, in mobilising political, legal and administrative lobbying for me, that my life was eventually saved. He was not only my teacher; he turned out to be one of my saviours too.

To ensure that I could continue on the path to higher education, Prof Bhalla and Prof Rangnekar introduced me to Prof Krishna Bharadwaj who then became my MPhil supervisor at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi. After finishing my MPhil, I took up a lectureship at P.G. D.A.V College in Delhi University, and despite having been selected as a lecturer at PU, was still continuing with my job in Delhi. Prof Bhalla advised me that though he understood the attraction of Delhi for me but in the long run, teaching in a university department was better for academic development than teaching in a college. He told me that he too was advised thus, in the early stage of his teaching career, by Prof K.S. Gill when he was reluctant to move from a teaching job in Khalsa College, Delhi to Jaipur University. I followed his advice and joined PU. I remain indebted to him for guiding me in the right direction at the right time. My story is just one of the many of Prof Bhalla's decisive role in shaping the academic careers of many economists, first, in Punjab, and

subsequently, even beyond Punjab, after he moved to JNU in 1975 where he spent the rest of his academic life until retirement in 1993.

The major opportunity and breakthrough in Prof Bhalla's research career came with the award of a substantial research project grant by the Haryana government to study the Green Revolution development in the state. Prof Bhalla's first major publication *Changing Agrarian Structure in India: A Study of the Impact of Green Revolution in Haryana* (1974) resulted from this study. One important finding of the study was the inverse relationship between farm size and productivity i.e. when the farm size increased, the farm output per acre decreased. This farm size-productivity inverse relationship was a hotly debated topic in Indian agriculture at that time especially due to Amartya Sen's seminal paper on the subject published in *Economic Weekly* (the predecessor of *Economic and Political Weekly*). Sen's explanation of the higher productivity of small peasant farmer was that in contrast with a capitalist farmer who would employ labour up to a point where the marginal productivity of labour is equal to the marginal cost (wage rate) of labour, a small peasant would employ his family labour even beyond this point. As a result, the small farmer would be able to extract higher output per acre due to this higher labour intensity. The inverse relationship by showing that the smaller farmers were more productive (per unit of land) was used by supporters of land reforms in favour of land redistribution. Based on my literature survey, when I brought to Prof Bhalla's notice that Karl Kautsky and later Lenin had also noticed this inverse relationship in Europe and Russia and had tried to show the greater persistence of small farms in competition with large farms in comparison with the faster disintegration of small firms in competition with large firms due to over-exploitation of the small farms (use of family labour even when the return was less than the market wage rate) and under-consumption, Prof Bhalla half-jokingly said that Sen's contribution on the subject was not, therefore, original and he must have borrowed the idea of higher labour intensity on small farms from Lenin. Prof Bhalla asked me to use the project data to examine for my Masters' dissertation whether this inverse relationship at an aggregate level would hold for individual crops, and he was very excited when this individual crop wise study showed an inconsistent relationship. The traditional crops showed inverse relationship but the improved varieties showed a positive relationship, and Prof Bhalla endorsed my interpretation that suggested that modern capitalist farming had made differentiated inroads into Haryana in the domain of improved varieties. The technologically more advanced farming by relatively bigger sized capitalist farmers in the case of improved varieties was able to out-compete the higher labour use per acre comparative advantage of the small farmers while in the case of traditional varieties of crops, the comparative advantage of the small farmer still persisted.

Another publication of Prof Bhalla (with G.K. Chadha) that has attracted wide scholarly attention is *Green Revolution and Small Peasant: A Study of Income Distribution* (1982) in which they demonstrated that the small farmers had also benefitted economically from the Green Revolution although the gains of bigger farmers had been higher.

Prof Bhalla made important empirical contributions not only in the domain of agriculture economics but also in regional development. His study in collaboration with Y.K. Alagh and other colleagues on inter-district variations in development extended and enriched the field of regional variations in development in India.

In tune with his close affiliation with the CPI, his overall political approach can be characterised as one of moderate radicalism. This meant that although he was critical of Indian capitalism and, therefore, shunned participation in positions of administrative power (such as becoming a Vice Chancellor); he did not dissociate himself from participation in research and policy making institutions of the system. When he participated in such institutions (e.g. the Planning Commission or the Commission on Agriculture Costs and Prices), he tried to steer the use of such institutions for the welfare of under-privileged sections of Indian society. Though in terms of political sympathies, he was a communist; his theoretical approach was not one based on the Marxist analytical framework but was rooted in pragmatic-empiricism. In the last few years of his life after retirement, in conversations with me, he expressed the view that without adequate theoretical grounding, the full value of empirical investigations could not be realised. I felt that he was, perhaps, rethinking his admonishment of me for ‘abandoning’ mathematical orientation and ‘indulging’ in theoretical/conceptual exercises when I published a research paper on Gramsci’s concept of hegemony written after joining JNU.

He took deep interest in his students’ intellectual evolution and felt a sense of identification with their achievements. After my first book *Punjabi Identity in a Global Context* (OUP, 1999) co-edited with Shinder Thandi was published, I wanted to personally present him a copy but due to my India trip being very short, I left a copy with Bhagwan Josh and requested him to present a copy to Prof Bhalla. Bhagwan later on told me that Prof Bhalla was immensely pleased to receive the copy.

I wanted Prof Bhalla to visit Oxford at least once, which, sadly, will remain an unfulfilled desire. On one occasion, both Shinder Thandi and I invited him over to the UK to participate in one of the bi-annual conferences of the Punjab Research Group, but his visit could not materialise due to time constraints of his prior commitments.

Prof Bhalla had a long experience of participation in the student movement and, later on, in the higher education teachers’ unions. His first major venture in the university teachers’ union politics was at PU. The management of PU, for a very long time, has been controlled by pro-Arya Samaj right wing groups supported both by the Congress Party and the Jan Sangh, and later Bhartiya Janata Party. Three left wing teachers who took the bold and farsighted step of challenging this dominance were: Prof Bhalla, Prof Dharam Vir of the Chemical Engineering department (a man of remarkable intellect and moral stature who was a life long friend of Prof Bhalla and died almost within a month of Prof Bhalla’s death) and Gurbaksh Singh Soch of the English department (who died young, about 20 years ago). They built Panjab University Teachers Association (PUTA) from an organisation of virtually no importance to one that became a

stakeholder of critical significance in the governance of PU. Prof Bhalla challenged and defeated a heavy weight pro-Congress faculty member Prof V. N. Tiwari to the office of president of PUTA. Many left wing teachers such as D.N. Jauhar, Pritam Singh, Manjit Singh and Ronki Ram later on became presidents of PUTA but the foundation of that leftwing organisational ascendancy was laid by Prof Bhalla and Prof Vir. Whenever the history of PUTA is written, their names will figure as guiding stars.

Prof Bhalla must be one of the few top academics in India who associated closely with working class movements. He was not only generous in providing the much needed financial assistance to working class organisations which many academic sympathisers of working class movements appreciably do but also took keen interest in their organisational activities and programme formulations. I once travelled with him in his old car all the way from Delhi to Moga to attend the annual conference of Punjab CPI's wing dealing with agricultural workers. All the leading activists of the organisation interacted with him on equal/comradely terms despite knowing very well that he was one of the leading agricultural economists and policy makers in the country. He participated in the conference proceedings in Punjabi as an ordinary delegate and did not seek any special attention. My respect for him further grew. I felt that he was at home there in a double sense - ideologically as well as biographically. He was born in Badhni Kalan village near Moga and his initial left-wing political formation had origins in Moga.

Prof Bhalla had many dimensional relationships with his Sikh family background. Though he was not religious, he was aware that his name Gurdarshan (Guru's vision) had deep religious significance in the Sikh tradition and he was proud of his Bhalla lineage connection with the Sikh gurus (the third guru Guru Amar Das was a Bhalla). One colleague of his told me that when he (the colleague) decided, out of shallow secular considerations in my view, not to give Singh surname to his sons, Prof Bhalla criticised him and insisted that it was wrong to forget one's cultural heritage.

Prof Bhalla's contribution to radicalising research orientation in economic studies on Punjab is immense. It would not be an exaggeration to say that almost all the left leaning economists Punjab has produced in the last few decades were all students of Prof Bhalla in one way or another. He was justifiably proud of this legacy too.

Prof Bhalla is survived by his wife Prof Sheila Bhalla, daughter Sharan Rastogi, sons Upinder Singh Bhalla, Ravinder Singh Bhalla (all three are doctorates in their respective disciplines and live in India), Yoginder Singh Bhalla (living in Canada), and eight grandchildren.

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