

In Remembrance**Life and Contributions of Professor Autar Singh Dhesi****Professor B. S. Ghuman***Former Vice Chancellor, Punjabi University, Patiala*

This commemorative essay, in honour of Professor Autar Singh Dhesi, delineates his life, education and the remarkable contributions he made to academia and well-being of society. Professor Autar Singh Dhesi - a renowned economist- was a hardworking and inspiring teacher, a compassionate mentor, an austere disciplinarian, an able administrator, a policy advisor and a researcher par excellence. He undertook quality research in the cutting-edge areas of human capital, economic development and planning, public policy, governance, sustainable development, social capital, community development, rural development, education, social exclusion, social actions, social entrepreneurs, water resources, and non-profit organisations. His work is highly cited in reputed journals of Economics and social sciences. Recognising the seminal work of Professor Dhesi, a number of institutions have bestowed upon him awards as well as honours. Professor Dhesi was not only a scholar of exceptional intellect but also a social activist committed to the upliftment of society, particularly the rural areas of Punjab that nurtured his early life. He facilitated the village development projects undertaken by NRIs including lobbying Punjab Government to release its matching share of grants.

**(1936 - 2024)**

Early Life and Education

Born to Sardar Milkha Singh Dhesi and Sardarni Bakhshis Kaur Dhesi on July 9, 1936 at his village Kahna Dhesian, district Jaladhar, Prof. Dhesi completed his primary education at his native village school and matriculation from Khalsa High School, Bundala, district Jalandhar in 1953. In 1955, he completed his F.Sc. from Ramgarhia College, Phagwara, followed by a B.Sc. in Natural Science from Government College, Hoshiarpur, Panjab University in 1957.

Education, Work Experience and Social Engagement in the United Kingdom

Professor Dhesi's insatiable quest for knowledge motivated him to migrate to the United Kingdom in 1958 for pursuing higher education. In the mid-Sixties he began his academic pursuit in the UK, which led him to complete a post graduate diploma in Development Administration from Leeds University in 1966, and an M.Sc. degree in International Economics from Surrey University in 1968. He was awarded the Masters' degree in Social Sciences by the University of Birmingham in 1971 wherein he was also a holder of the prestigious Economic and Social Science Research Council Scholarship. In 1974, from the same university, he successfully completed his Ph.D. degree in Economics on the thesis entitled 'Human Capital Formation and Its Utilization', which was subsequently published by Sterling Publisher, New Delhi in 1979. Given the importance of the topic, reviews of this book appeared in many professional journals, including in the prestigious *Economic Journal*, published by the Royal Economic Society, Cambridge and *Kyklos*, the International Review for Social Sciences, published by John Wiley & Sons on behalf of the University of Basel, Switzerland. The book is cited internationally even today.

Being an active scholar, Professor Dhesi was elected as a member of the Faculty Board, Faculty Development Committee and Senate of the University of Birmingham. He also taught at Coventry University, UK for a while. As a token of gratitude to his Alma Mater – the University of Birmingham - Professor Autar Dhesi made a generous donation to create an endowed fund which will support an annual Professor Autar Dhesi Lecture in the area of social capital and community building. The inaugural lecture was held on Tuesday 17th June 2025, with Professor Mario Small (Columbia University, USA) as the first guest speaker. Professor Small's lecture was entitled '*How Neighborhoods Shape Perceptions: Local Organizations, Racial Inequality*' and the University is planning to make the lecture available online.

In the UK, Professor Dhesi was not only active academically but also got deeply involved in community affairs. He was amongst the founder members of the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD), was active in the local Race Relations Council in west London, writing several articles on community relations and also acted as Secretary of the Southall Indian Workers' Association for a while. He also worked on behalf for India while in the UK and was joint

secretary of the National India Defence Fund Committee which worked to raise voluntary funds for defence of India.

Passion to serve his Motherland: Academic Trajectory at Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU), Amritsar

Passion to serve his beloved country, India and Punjab State, brought him back to India in 1975, leaving behind a lucrative academic career. On his return, he joined, Punjab School of Economics, Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU), Amritsar, as Reader (Associate Professor) in Economics. Professor Dhesi's illustrious academic career spanning decades of dedicated service and remarkable achievements has a clear imprint of expertise and skills he acquired in the UK. His teaching pedagogy, approach to mentoring MPhil and PhD students and style of academic writing was distinctly different mainly because he adapted the UK model of generation and dissemination of knowledge. Keeping in view Professor Dhesi's professional training in the UK, he was appointed Advisor, International Students by GNDU.

Professor Dhesi got a breakthrough in his career in 1982 when he was appointed as consultant to World Bank, Washington DC, which was rare honour to a teacher of only 7 years of standing. The GNDU, Amritsar, recognised expanding frontiers of his talent and promoted him as Professor in 1983. Subsequently he was appointed Head, Punjab School of Economics in 1984. During his headship, he undertook many initiatives including starting of a new course, namely, M.Sc. in Industrial Economics, founding a new journal, the *Indian Journal of Quantitative Economics*, in addition to revisiting curricula in tune with societal and market needs. He also mentored the Departments of Economics of the colleges affiliated to GNDU. He served as Dean, Faculty of Economics and Business at GNDU. He was also a member of the Senate and Syndicate of GNDU, Amritsar.

Services Rendered to Government and Society

Professor Dhesi's expertise was extensively utilized by both the Government of India and Punjab. He was Member of Punjab State Planning Board, besides being consultant to the Bureau of Industrial Costs and Prices, Government of India and the Central Water Commission, and was on the Panel of Industrial Economics, Planning Commission of India. Professor Dhesi was very actively involved in the development of Punjab, especially in its rural sector. In addition to his contribution in this regard as member the Punjab State Planning Board, and in the form of extensive writings in print media, he set up the Punjab Development Society (PDS) in 1997 with a mandate to promote scientific, economic, social and cultural development of North-west India with special focus on Punjab. Under the umbrella of PDS, he organised several seminars, conferences, and special lectures and utilized this platform for communicating with the media, civil society and policy makers. Along with PDS as a formal think

tank, Professor Dhesi motivated several NRI intellectuals having roots in Punjab to contribute for the well-being of Punjabi community, which they did through research on Punjab, policy advice, and lectures. Prominent intellectuals include Professor Gian Singh Sahota (USA), Professor Raghbir Singh Bassi (USA), Dr. Gurdev Singh Gill (Canada), Dr. Samsher Singh (USA), Professor Darshan Singh Tatla (UK), and Professor Shinder Singh Thandi (UK). Professor Dhesi played the role of a local coordinator of the group. This group of diasporan Punjabis, in addition to academic contribution, also undertook rural development projects by mobilising resources from NRIs and grants from the Punjab Government. They established the Village Life Improvement Foundation (VLIF) which undertook its first project to modernise Kharaudi village in the Hoshiarpur district of Punjab. The VLIF equipped the village with concrete roads, parks, a library, streetlights running on solar cells and a septic tank to treat village's sewage. This successful experiment of transforming a village with town-like facilities was not only the first of its kind in Punjab but also in India. The then President of India Dr A. P. J. Abdul Kalam in 2003 visited Kharaudi village and was so impressed by the participatory model of rural development that he suggested the model needed to be emulated in the rest of India. The Kharaudi village model was replicated in several villages in Punjab. Professor Dhesi played a pivotal role in the launching of this participatory model of rural development and its extension to other villages, including getting grant money released from the Punjab Government.

Professor Dhesi's upbringing in the rural environment had greatly influenced his thinking, actions and commitment towards rural people. His indirect involvement and funding of a new infrastructure building in his own village, active participation with village life improvement programmes; undertaking research on the role of Punjabi diaspora in the development of rural Punjab, advice and guidance to rural colleges for starting job-oriented courses and getting grants from the Central and State government funding agencies and mentoring of rural students irrespective of caste, creed and religion, amply demonstrated his deep commitment and sense of obligation to help fellow members of society.

Post-Retirement Activism

Retirement from active service in 1996 did not dampen Professor Dhesi's commitment to serving society. He continued with his active involvement in the form of regular communication with policy makers concerning development and social issues of Punjab. For instance, in November 1997, he, along with four academics, wrote a letter to Sh. Inder Kumar Gujaral the then Prime Minister of India to revive the shelved Chandigarh-Ludhiana rail project which finally saw the light of the day in 2013, with the commencement of rail service between Chandigarh and Ludhiana. Also, on June 30, 1998, he chalked out an agenda for the all the

prospective Members of Parliament from Punjab, seeking their commitment for preserving Punjab's rich heritage and culture, promotion of social harmony, national integration, expanding economic opportunities in industry and other sectors, improving quality of education and revamping of railway infrastructure in the state which is relevant even today.

Professor Autar Singh Dhesi was appointed as the University Grants Commission Visiting Professor of Economics from October 1998 - October 2000 at Punjabi University, Patiala. Recognising his seminal contribution, he was awarded the Honoris Causa Degree by the University of Surrey in 2011. He was also Honorary Visiting Research Fellow at Coventry Business School, Coventry University, England for three years. He was also appointed as member of Senate of Punjabi University. He published extensively, even after superannuation, in professional and popular journals and weeklies. *Ambedkar Times*, a weekly published from California, the USA, created a file on its website to highlight his pioneering contribution to the fields of social sciences in general and Economics in particular.

Publications

He published four books and research reports, over 100 research papers and reviews in peer-reviewed national and international journals, more than 100 articles in print media and delivered many invited lectures covering a wide array of areas. These included human capital; economic development and planning; regional economy with special reference to Punjab; poverty; public policy; governance; education; sustainable development; social capital; Punjabi diaspora; public finance; community development; rural development; caste, class synergies and discrimination; social exclusion; social actions, social entrepreneurs; political sociology; water resources and NGOs.

In keeping with his interest in rural development and his growing distress at seeing the successful Punjab model of development faltering, he, along with an economist colleague from Punjab University, Professor Gurmail Singh, edited a comprehensive book entitled *Rural Development in Punjab: A Success Story Going Astray*, published by Routledge in 2007. The idea behind this book was to offer academics, policymakers and intellectuals in Punjab and India, critical insights into what had gone wrong in Punjab, explain why and offer ways forward.

His works are cited extensively in professional journals including in American Economic Review; Journal of Economic Perspectives; American Journal of Economics and Sociology; Australian Journal of Social Issues; International Journal of Social Issues; Review of Social Economy; Non-Profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly; European Sociological Review; Eastern Economic Journal; European Journal of Social Sciences; Community Development Journal (Oxford); Policy Research ; Environment and Planning; Third World Quarterly; International Journal of Economic Policy in Emerging Economies; Public Administration Quarterly; and many more

including in research publications of World Bank, ILO, UNESCO, and World Dams Commission.

Three Inter-related Strands of Professor Dhesi's Academic Journey

A perusal of Professor Dhesi's published work, research projects and public discourses suggest three inter-related strands of his academic journey. First, from his initial academic career till its peak, he had a deep passion for the application of quantitative models in both teaching and research. Most of his doctoral students have also used advanced quantitative models, regression analysis being the minimum. It is his love for the utmost significance of quantitative research approach that during his headship he started a journal, namely, the Indian Journal of Quantitative Economics, dedicated to analyses of economic phenomena by making use of mathematical and statistical models especially econometrics.

The second strand, which became more visible after his superannuation, relates to the growing use of qualitative methods along with quantitative methods in research. This blending model of quantitative and qualitative approaches also known as triangulation helped him immensely to improve upon the quality and relevance of his research findings particularly from policy and societal perspectives.

The third strand relates to Professor Dhesi's academic path from pure economist to social scientist. The seeds of this strand were sown in 1971 when he completed his Masters' degree in Social Sciences from the University of Birmingham. He made optimal use of the knowledge acquired during this degree when he worked on the intersection between Economics and other social sciences such as sustainable development; social capital; Punjabi diaspora; community development; rural development; caste, class synergies and discrimination; social actions; social entrepreneurs; water resources; and NGOs. His venturing into the jurisdiction of other social sciences also motivated him to learn and use their research methodological tools. He interacted closely with faculty members of history, sociology, political science, psychology, literature, particularly Punjabi literature, and education. In the process, his horizon widened, and he graduated from being an economist to a social scientist. Citation of his papers in journals relating to the social sciences sphere suggests recognition of his research credentials as a social scientist.

Membership of Professional Societies

Professor Dhesi was member of Royal Economic Society, Society for International Development, Indian Economic Association, Indian Econometric Society, Development Studies Association and Punjab Development Society.

Students

Professor Dhesi was a popular but strict teacher. He was a beacon of valuable human qualities like hard work, fairness, accountability, transparency, compassion and impeccable integrity which shaped the lives of his students for the betterment of society along with building and strengthening their knowledge base. During his long teaching career Professor Dhesi mentored hundreds of students who have excelled in various walks of life. A select number of his students have risen to the positions such as that of Ambassador; Vice-Chancellor; Deans; Director of Research Institute; Registrar of a university; Senior Civil Servants; Advisor; Secretary to National Commission for Women, India; Professors in Indian and foreign universities; and Principals of reputed colleges.

I have had the honour of being his MPhil. student in 1977 and subsequently completing a PhD in 1985 under his supervision at GNDU, Amritsar and thereafter remained in touch with him till his last days. Amongst his students, I have the longest association with him. He honed my academic credentials so meticulously that straight way I got selected as lecturer at Panjab University – one of the top universities of India and later throughout my academic career his continuous mentorship paid me rich dividends including Dean, Arts Faculty at Panjab University, Chandigarh, Vice Chancellor, Punjabi University (a public university), Patiala, and Chief Finance and Economic Advisor to Government of Punjab. I am indeed hugely indebted to him and in spite of my best efforts I could not pay back him *Guru Dakshina* (the Indian tradition of repaying to one's teacher) befitting to his phenomenal contribution in my academic pursuits.

Concluding Observations

Professor A.S. Dhesi transcended the intellectual arena. He was a firm believer of blending theory and practice, advocating that whatever we teach in the universities should be applied in one form or the other to solve societal problems as well. He was also a champion of policy research, focusing on bridging the dichotomy between intellectuals and policy makers. While serving as a member of the Punjab State Planning Board, he tried to bridge this gap. He had a passion for the development of Punjab especially rural development which he pursued through the activities of PDS, networking with Punjabi Diaspora intellectuals and writing popular articles in print media, in addition to his numerous quality research publications relating to the potential role of Punjabi diaspora in rural development. During his teaching tenure, his endeavour was not only to make students employable but also to educate them to eradicate economic and social evils including drug menace from Punjab.

Professor A S Dhesi was laid to rest on April 29, 2024, at his native village Kahna Dhesian, district Jalandhar. The Bhog and Antim Ardas (last rituals) ceremony was held at his native village on May 3, 2024, and was graced by family members, natives of his village, students, noted scholars and admirers. A few of them formally paid homage to Professor AS Dhesi and shared their experiences of interaction with him. Each of them reminisced on their

lively engagement with Professor Dhesi and collectively opined that he was a moving encyclopaedia of economic and social knowledge; a popular but strict teacher; conscientious researcher with a sharp focus on socially relevant high-quality research; a thorough gentleman of impeccable integrity; secular in his vision and approach; and always keen to see Punjab back to its previous position of economic supremacy in India; bridging the gap between rural and urban areas; and putting Punjabi youth on the right track by helping them to get high quality skill education and decent jobs.

His students, including myself, inspired by his high intellectual credentials, ethical values, dedication and commitment to the social causes, will make sincere efforts to take forward his legacy for pursuing excellence in teaching and undertaking socially relevant research, including in the area of public policy and rural development.