

Good bye to a great teacher and a new friend

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“Call me when you come to Pune in June. You must come over for dinner along with your father. Here are my numbers”. He wrote his numbers down on the conference pad in his characteristic handwriting, which was still just as neat and clear, refusing to deteriorate with age. I kept that piece of paper amidst the set of conference papers and said good bye to Suresh Tendulkar. This was in Mumbai in March this year. I was looking forward to seeing him again in June and resuming a conversation I had started in Mumbai. Of course, that was not to be. The proverbial cruel hand of fate intervened and that turned out to be the last good bye. He was gone, all too soon, a victim of medical complications, leaving behind a sense of utter disbelief and shock, and a huge void for his family and for the community of professional economists.

Suresh Tendulkar was my teacher at the Delhi School of Economics and subsequently my colleague as I joined the faculty. Generations of students would remember his systematic and methodical lectures on “Economic Development and Planning in India”. Some of our professors were noteworthy for the meticulousness of their lectures and Suresh Tendulkar was certainly one of them. His lectures were remarkable for the amount of detail they covered, where every ‘i’ was dotted and every ‘t’ crossed; it was clear that he took teaching very seriously. Those were the pre-Powerpoint days, where each lecture was delivered the old-fashioned way: hand-written, on the blackboard. The blackboard at the end of a Tendulkar lecture was a sight to behold: filled from corner to corner with neat, short, clear points. As a student, to me it appeared like an ability that seemed to come with the job. As a teacher, I realise now how difficult it is to be so thorough, and I have finally reconciled to the fact that I will never learn to utilise the blackboard so well!

Even though I have personally known him since the mid 1980s, there were many schisms separating us such that until recently, the relationship remained at a formal but cordial level. The first was age and seniority (he was just a year younger than my father and was my teacher). We kept meeting at department meetings, social events, conferences and so forth. I was well aware of his important work on various government committees, especially his pioneering contributions to the measurement of poverty, and would occasionally contact him with specific questions about methodology. I was always struck by how lightly he wore his success, the complete absence of pomposity, lack of officiousness; in general, a genuine simplicity in tone, appearance and behaviour, which was like a breath of fresh air in Delhi, where one-upmanship and the desire to show off proximity to power is the defining culture of everyone, from the very elite to the hoi polloi.

The other schism was ideological. Even though he taught about planning in India, he was a consistent critic of the planning process and a firm believer in the superiority of market as an allocative mechanism. I remember questioning him rather brashly as a student, forcing him to talk about market failure and so forth. He answered all my questions patiently, but we remained on opposite sides of the divide, broadly speaking. Along with the schisms, there was one common factor. We were both fellow Maharashtrians; additionally he knew my parents well because my father was a very close friend of his brother, the iconoclastic playwright Vijay Tendulkar, who has now acquired iconic status. However, another of Suresh’s sterling qualities was that he was not parochial. While he always inquired about my parents very warmly, he never treated me differently due to our common linguistic and family connections, a rare trait once again.

Last year, both of us got invited as speakers to a conference in Michigan. We spent long hours together, talking both about work and about personal lives. I had always been curious about the very divergent life paths, not to mention world views, of the two brothers --- Suresh and Vijay. I gingerly asked him a few questions. And to my pleasant surprise, he was very forthcoming. When he heard my talk on labour market discrimination, he told me that he did not believe that markets would discriminate on the basis of social identity, but would be very curious to see the evidence. I sent him a set of papers, which he read very promptly. We continued the conversation in Delhi, and then during the Mumbai conference, where he again surprised me by recalling all the details of our previous conversations and offered me very specific help with data sources. As we were sipping tea together at the Delhi airport waiting for our flight to Mumbai in March, the thought struck me that after formally knowing him for over 25 years, I had actually just started to get to know Suresh Tendulkar. I was excited by this new friendship.

On the morning of June 21, as I was looking for some other papers, I came across that slip of paper with his phone numbers. I had not been able to see him in June but was hoping to meet him on my next visit to Pune. Little did I realise that at the very moment I was looking at the slip of paper, he had bid this world farewell and passed on.