

Kanta Ranadive: A Forgotten Indian Political Economist

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This post is part of a larger attempt to document and revive the economic ideas of the forgotten Indian political economists. Earlier, I had written introductory pieces on the economic ideas of [Krishna Bharadwaj](#) and [K. N. Raj](#). Like many other Indian economists who have been forgotten, so too has Kanta Ranadive. She is the author of *Income Distribution: The Unsolved Puzzle* (Oxford University Press, 1978) and *The Political Economy of Poverty* (Orient Longman, 1990). Besides these two books, she has published several articles in *Artha Vijnana*, *Bulletin of the Oxford University Institute of Economics and Statistics*, *Economic & Political Weekly*, and *Indian Economic Journal*.

Kanta Ranadive figures in passing in two recent newspaper articles; [the first article by Niranjan Rajadhyaksha](#) (July 28, 2020) contributes to the history of Indian economic thought by focusing on the education and educators at the Bombay School of Economics; [the second article by Kadambari Shah and Shreyas Narla](#) (March 30, 2022) provides a brief on India's women economists and policy makers.

Ranadive's 1978 book on income distribution is mentioned by Agnar Sandmo as one of the "more recent surveys" on income distribution in the *Handbook of Income Distribution, Volume 2* (2015), edited by Anthony Atkinson and François Bourguignon. A similar description of Ranadive's book—one of the "important surveys on income distribution"—is found in Scott Carter's chapter 'Heterodox theories of distribution' in *The Routledge Handbook of Heterodox Economics* (2017), edited by Tae-Hee Jo, Lynne Chester, and Carlo D'Ippoliti.

A brief life sketch

Ranadive spent most of her teaching career at the Department of Economics, University of Bombay. During 1976-7, she was Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum. In 1987, Ranadive gave the Kale Memorial Lecture at the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics (GIPE), which was published the same year in *Artha Vijnana* under the title 'Town and Country in Economy in Transition'. Ranadive was made an honorary fellow of the Asiatic Society of Bombay in 1991; she delivered a lecture there on 22nd November 1993, which was published in the following year under the title 'Market, Democracy and Unequal Relation' in the *Economic & Political Weekly*.

After her demise on 15th April 1996, Ashok Mitra and Prabhat Patnaik wrote obituaries in the *Economic & Political Weekly*, and Meghnad Desai in the *Times of India*. According to Mitra, "[h]er empirical findings led her to one or two important theorems on the nature of social exploitation and income inequalities which were close to standard Marxist

formulations. She, in other words, reached to her Marxism along her private route.” But Mitra does not tell us anything more about her “one or two important theorems”. Mitra informs us that Ranadive “was a fiercely private person.” Patnaik’s obituary is the form of a letter to the editor, which is in turn based on the resolution passed by the condolence meeting by the teachers of Jawaharlal Nehru University on April 22. “She”, Patnaik writes, “will be remembered for her pioneering research work on theoretical and empirical issues relating to income distribution.” Sadly, no such intellectual remembrance has been visible.

In his letter, Desai provides a personal account of his interactions with Ranadive, and therefore we get some insight into her persona. Desai, along with Vikas Chitre, belonged to the first batch of economics PhD students who were mentored by Ranadive, who had just joined University of Bombay (in 1960). Desai’s closing remarks are valuable in understanding the milieu in which Ranadive worked: “Not only was she a super teacher. But she was also a pioneering woman economist in the Indian context where even today in India as abroad very few women occupy the top echelon. It would not have been easy to survive in the male atmosphere of the department. She not only survived; she made her mark.” 1960 was also the year that Krishna Bharadwaj submitted her PhD thesis to the University of Bombay.

The Political Economy of Income Distribution

Ranadive’s 1978 book *Income Distribution* has its origins in the six lectures she gave on ‘Theories of Distribution’ at M. S. University, Baroda in 1968. It “is a survey of the economics of distribution”. As she writes in the preface, “[t]he size distribution of income involves, on the one hand, technical problems of concepts and measurement and, on the other, philosophical issues like justice and equity.” She acknowledges Maurice Dobb, the Marxist economist, for his comments on the chapter on ‘The Ricardo Problem’.

In this book, she critically engages with theories of personal and functional income distribution, reviews the economic ideas of Smith, Ricardo and Marx, presents the empirical behaviour of income shares, criticizes the marginalist production function and the elasticity of substitution, discusses market structure and degree of monopoly in relation to Kalecki’s of income distribution, and ends with a discussion on the investment-output ratio and savings propensities.

Not surprisingly, Ranadive favoured Kalecki’s theory and not the marginal productivity theory of income distribution because the former recognized structural power. As she concludes her critical discussion of Kalecki’s theory, “[t]hrough explicit recognition of the role of market imperfections, oligopoly agreements and relative bargaining strength of trade unions and employers in determining wages and profit margins, Kalecki’s model makes distribution a function of class conflict.”

Poverty: A Marxian Approach

Her 1990 book *The Political Economy of Poverty* was put together based on her 1987 R. C. Dutt Lectures on Political Economy. In the first chapter/lecture, Ranadive argues against the narrow approach to understanding poverty, and calls for a holistic approach to understand poverty. As she writes, “[t]he only way to understand the modality of both continuity and change is therefore to have the whole network of closely interrelated concepts, because social phenomena are inherently dynamic in the sense that they are parts of an overall social structure which needs reproduction for its continued existence” (p. 27). After all, as she argues, “[a] realistic appraisal of ‘necessaries’ cannot be made without taking into account the fact that spending habits are socially determined” (p. 9). According to me, such holistic approaches to economics are available in the works of the political economists such as Smith, Ricardo and Marx.

The second chapter/lecture ‘Poverty and Social Formation’ is an application of, in Ranadive’s own words, the “Marxian paradigm”. She employs the Marxian categories of property, production conditions, materialism, labour, among others to situate poverty as a structural characteristic of capitalist societies. In all this, she highlights the need to recognize the nature of power relations. Her references demonstrate engagement with a wide range of ideas; for instance, she cites the work of Braudel, Brenner, Hobsbawm, Kalecki, Kuznets, Leontief, Polanyi, and Titmuss. In this chapter, she critically reviews the economic ideas of the classical economists, especially Smith and Ricardo, and arrives at the conclusion that history “has no role even in classical economics as a closer scrutiny would indicate” (p. 33). Though I think that there is enough primary textual evidence to contest her claim, it does not seem appropriate for this introductory essay on Ranadive’s life and work.

The way forward

To conclude, the account of Kanta Ranadive as a “caring” and “demanding” (to borrow from Desai) teacher is an inspiring one, but also a difficult one to emulate because our universities have succumbed to managerialism. Second, there is much to be done in the history of Indian economic thought. A review article on Ranadive’s 1978 book, which contextualises the questions around the theories and empirics of income distribution would be insightful. Finally, her work offers a social approach to understanding income distribution and poverty, in the tradition of Marxian political economy; consequently, her work ought to be included in courses on Development Economics, Labour Economics, and Marxian Economics.

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