

Remembering  
**Dr. Isher Judge  
Ahluwalia**

ON HER

**75**

BIRTH  
ANNIVERSARY









**Nirupama Menon Rao**, निरुपमा राउ, بينظير @NMenonRao · Sep 26

Deeply grieved by the passing of a dear friend of many years, the brilliant [#IsherAhluwalia](#) after a brave battle with cancer. Isher, I shall miss your presence so much. Your life story is an inspiration to all women who dare to dream of a better world. RIP, dear friend. @ICRIER



**Tarun Das** @tarundas1939 · Sep 27

Isher Ahluwalia, woman of extraordinary courage, conviction, capability passes. I salute her.



**N. K. Singh** @NKSingh\_MP · Sep 26

Deeply saddened and grieved to hear about the demise of Isher Ahluwalia. I had known her for several decades. She was a rare academic, combining administrative skills with academic embellishments.



**Rajiv Kumar** @RajivKumar1 · Sep 26

My deepest & most sincere condolences to Montek, Pawan, Sarah Aman & Shilpa for this terrible loss. I first met Isher in 1984 as a colleague in ICRIER & then had the good fortune to work with her when she, as the Chairperson of ICRIER, appointed me as the CEO from 2006 to 2010.



**CMO Punjab** @CMOPb · Sep 26

Chief Minister @capt\_amarinder Singh mourned the death of leading economist Dr. Isher Judge Ahluwalia, who remained Chairperson Board of Governors, the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, and was the Director and Chief Executive from 1998 to 2002.



**Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw** @kiranshaw · Sep 26

Isher Ahluwalia, my dear dear friend and a brilliant remarkable intellectual economist passed away after a brave battle with cancer. My deepest condolences to Montek Singh Ahluwalia n his sons Pavan & Aman n the family. She will be hugely missed RIP. @ICRIER



**Jyotiraditya M. Scindia** @JM\_Scindia · Sep 26

Saddened by the passing away of Dr Isher Ahluwalia. We have lost a great mind today. Her seminal work in the fields of urban development and macro-economic reforms, and her life journey are an inspiration to many. Heartfelt condolences to Montek ji & the family.



**Rajdeep Sardesai** @sardesairajdeep · Sep 26

A woman of style and substance: Isher Judge Ahluwalia RIP



**P. Chidambaram** @PChidambaram\_IN · Sep 26

Deeply saddened and shaken by the passing away of Dr Isher Ahluwalia, a close friend for nearly 25 years.



**Jairam Ramesh** @Jairam\_Ramesh · Sep 26

Isher Ahluwalia who just passed away, was one of India's distinguished economists, a MIT PhD, and author of an influential book 'Industrial Growth in India'. She built up ICRIER, a fine economic think tank. She had her own distinctive identity apart from being Montek's wife.



**Tharman** @Tharman\_S · Sep 26

Isher led the outstanding life. From humble origins to a leading economist of her time, active to the end. Life partner to Montek, mother and granny. Her work esp on cities will be relevant for a long time.



**Dr Arvind Mayaram** ارؤند مایارام @MayaramArvind

A very sharp mind and a very warm heart, this is how I remember Dr Isher Ahluwalia. She had the rationality of economist and empathy and compassion of very evolved persona rare combination. She would be greatly missed... May she be one with the divine grace of Wahe Guru... 🙏🏻 -



**Ashok Gulati** @agulati115

@ICRIER Today Icrier family is in pain. Isher Judge Ahluwalia, an inspiration to most of us, left for her heavenly journey. She was passionate, ever smiling, n committed to quality research at Icrier. We owe her the most. Sincere condolences to Montek n family. RIP. Om Shanti!



**Kapish Mehra** @kapish\_mehra

A brilliant economist, an inspiring personality, a fantastic author and a very loveable human being .. RIP [#IsherJudgeAhluwalia](#) .. your spirit of 'Breaking Through' will continue to motivate all of us..





# Isher Judge Ahluwalia was inspired by issues of urbanisation and governance

Rajat Kathuria | Indian Express | September 29, 2020

For a scholar of her stature and with all the exceptional achievements to boot, she could well have rested on her laurels. There was nothing left to prove. But that was not Isher.



Isher last public appearance on ICRIER's platform was in February this year at the launch of Montek Singh Ahluwalia's memoir, Backstage.

When the phone rang to inform me of the passing away of Isher Judge Ahluwalia, former chairperson of ICRIER and my former boss, the world stopped, if only for an instant, as if someone had pressed a pause button. The poignancy of the moment was accompanied by a flashback of memories of a smiling Isher with perfectly groomed salt and pepper hair, announcing with grace, dignity, poise, charm and brilliance, the start of another conference at ICRIER. Her public persona was larger than life. Behind the exterior, there was also an Isher who was compassionate, supportive, loyal and who possessed almost a childlike desire to learn about issues that drew her interest.

My close association with Isher began fittingly with a conference in April 2012. I was to take over as director and chief executive of ICRIER later that year. She decided to "induct" me at an ICRIER event in Vigyan Bhavan where the then Prime Minister [Manmohan Singh](#) was the chief guest. An updated edition of

the festschrift, *India's Economic Reforms and Development: Essays for Manmohan Singh*, co-edited by Isher was to be presented to him. She told me Dr Singh (she always called him that) had agreed to come to only listen but secretly hoped he would say a few words. She felt strongly that India's growth model needed new direction and that Singh could provide leadership as he had in 1991.

Over the years, I have shared platforms with stalwarts from government, academia and the private sector. When I questioned whether I belonged there, Isher insisted I did, and went on to supply the motivation and inspiration. What was abundantly clear to me was that ICRIER's vast reputation and standing was inextricably linked with Isher. On occasions, ICRIER was (embarrassingly for her) referred to as her institute. Her name opened doors and funding opportunities, and after having worked closely with her, I can say with complete conviction that ICRIER was in her DNA. She was constantly thinking about ways to enhance the quality of research, attract new talent and raise more funds and was successful in all three.

For a scholar of her stature and with all the exceptional achievements to boot, she could well have rested on her laurels. There was nothing left to prove. But that was not Isher. Thank God for that. Not only did she inspire but was herself inspired by issues of urbanisation and governance. That, she often proudly declared, was her second calling as an economist. She made the area her own and would delight in speaking on urban issues, an area in which, in less than a decade, she acquired complete command. We often spoke about these issues in her office and home. In one such interaction she told me with almost childlike pleasure she had attended a talk by the visiting Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore, Tharman Shanmughanathan and asked him the definition of a smart city. His response was the use of technology to provide efficient and affordable public services to citizens. Can Indian cities be smart without the basics of water, solid waste management, sanitation and public transport she asked rhetorically.

Her remarkable memoir, *Breaking Through*, was heroically completed during the time she was suffering from acute ill health and despite that she produced the most touching, readable and stirring memoir of an extraordinary life. She dedicated the book to her two daughters-in-law, reinforcing what she had done through her professional life — support women and women economists. She once told me that allowing women to work flexibly from home (much before COVID struck) would double their productivity for they will need to prove themselves through their work rather than visibility in the office. Often in public platforms Isher would proudly declare that ICRIER owes much of its

success to its favourable gender balance. ICRIER has had around 70 per cent women for much of its recent history.

Her last public appearance on ICRIER's platform was in February this year at the launch of Montek Singh Ahluwalia's memoir, *Backstage*. She worked tirelessly "backstage" to help him complete it, proof read drafts, check data sources and at the launch she basked in the adulation that he received. She broke down several times that evening, knowing what was in store, but was happy at another result. Singh who was the chief guest, spoke expansively and spontaneously on what was wrong with India's growth model. Her secret wish had been granted. She remained loyal to him throughout. It was destined perhaps that she breathed her last on Singh's 88th birthday. Some things are best accepted as god's will. At ICRIER, we will continue to celebrate her life. Iqbal's couplet sums her life rather well: "Khudi ko kar buland itna ki har taqdeer se pahle/khuda bande se khud puchhe bata teri raza kya hai."

**This article first appeared in the print edition on September 29, 2020 under the title 'She Broke Through'. The writer is director & chief executive, ICRIER. Views are personal**





# Two Budgerigars

Fakir Syed Aijazuddin | DOWN | October 1, 2020

SOME marriages are made in heaven, others at the World Bank. Isher Judge and Montek Singh Ahluwalia met in 1970 when she (a brilliant student at MIT) interned at the IMF while he was already a risen star in the World Bank's bureaucracy. They were both Indian Sikhs, both economists. Fate saw to it that they would marry, which they did a year later. Their well-matched partnership — they were once dubbed 'two budgerigars' — lasted 49 years, ending a few days ago in New Delhi with Isher's final submission to cancer.

My wife Shahnaz and I knew little of Isher's background when we first met her and Montek in New Delhi at a dinner given in Hyderabad House in March 1997 by I.K. Gujral (then minister for external affairs) for Dr Henry Kissinger and his wife Nancy.

I met the Ahluwalias the next time by chance in the Lahore Museum. He and Isher were on their way back from Islamabad where he had been participating in a Saarc finance secretaries conference. I noticed them wandering in the Sikh Gallery. I arranged for them to see the more interesting paintings in the reserve collection. They assumed I must be a museum employee, until they learned of my professional career and books.

Over the years, we and our families met — in New Delhi, in Lahore, in Washington D.C. They saw fragments of our lives, we shared episodes in theirs. It is only after I read Isher's chronicle of her life — *Breaking Through* — that I appreciated more fully and deeply her unquenchable resolve, her determination to succeed, and the well-spring of her religious faith.

'One is roots and the other is wings.'

Isher's father took his brood of 11 children (10 daughters and one son) from their home in Lahore in 1940 to Indore and then to Kolkata. Isher studied there, moving upmarket for her MA at the Delhi School of Economics (where Amartya Sen taught), and for her PhD at MIT where her mentor was Prof Paul Samuelson. Both matured into Nobel Prize awardees.

While at MIT, Isher interned at the IMF. She had been given a list of eligible Indian bachelors she should cultivate in Washington. One of them — Montek

Singh Ahluwalia — called her. She liked him: he “carried his brilliance lightly, had a very good sense of humour and was a great conversationalist”.

After marriage, they surprised their cocooned IMF/World Bank colleagues by returning to India. Gradually, they inched up the greasy pole of New Delhi’s meritocracy until Montek at the enviably early age of 36 was asked to become economic adviser to the government of India. Isher maintained her professional career in parallel, becoming an increasingly renowned economist.

On their way up, they met Dr Manmohan Singh and his wife Gursharan Kaur. In an earlier age, they would have exchanged turbans. Instead, Manmohan Singh-ji and Montek shared the same blue colour for theirs. In 1991, Manmohan Singh as finance minister invited Montek to become his finance secretary. Isher supported and shared Montek’s success but never allowed herself to fall into the trap of becoming ‘Mrs Finance Secretary’. She remained, as she reminded anyone who asked for Dr Ahluwalia, “This is she”.

The secret of their frictionless compatibility lay, as she explained in her memoir, because “Montek and I have always kept a degree of separation when it comes to our work. We have never authored a paper together, for example, and while we are always happy to respond to the other’s request for feedback on a specific issue, we have been quite clear that our relationship is not defined by the fact that we both happen to be economists.”

To have seen Isher participate in seminars, particularly in her specialty of urban infrastructure, was to witness a force that at its best could influence government policy, always for the better. Her expertise, honed over years of research, made her an obvious and dependable choice for official boards and international bodies.

In 1997, she was offered the top job in ICRIER (Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations). She hesitated. Montek gave her the nudge she needed: “Montek assured me that having been chief executive of our household for three decades I had mastered the art of multitasking and I would certainly be able to manage ICRIER.”

Isher’s devotion to her religion never wavered: “Gurbani kirtan is hardwired into my mental system,” she wrote, “and, through my life, has been a tremendous source of strength in difficult times.” The Gurbani kirtan played at her bedside as Isher passed from this life into immortality. Her sons Pavan and Aman each held a hand. She had often told them: “There are two things we should give our children: one is roots and the other is wings.” One budgerigar of the pair has taken wing.





## Isher Judge Ahluwalia, a razor-sharp intellect & a natural leader

[Indira Rajaraman | Economic Times | September 28, 2020](#)

In later years, she wrote extensively on urban infrastructure issues. She commuted easily between the world of work, and the power world she inhabited with her husband and former Planning Commission deputy chairman Montek Singh Ahluwalia, and leaves behind many friends in both.



She has written about her life story in an autobiography, *Breaking Through: A Memoir*.

A few months before her untimely death on September 26, Isher Judge Ahluwalia demitted office as chairperson of the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), a post she had held since 2005. In the past, she had served a term as ICRIER director. It is unusual in India for women to be elevated to leadership positions. Ahluwalia was a natural leader



I had an opportunity to see that at close quarters on a trip to China in September 1993 as part of a group of social scientists put together by the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), where Ahluwalia was on the faculty and I was teaching at Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Bangalore at that time. Soon after we reached Beijing, the leader of the group returned to India due to a family bereavement, so Ahluwalia assumed charge. I was impressed by the way she protected our interests and finances, and did not allow our hosts to dictate to us. Her protection was so complete that when we exited a taxi, she would cast a quick look inside and invariably find something one of us had left behind.

Our principal host in China was the China Institute of Contemporary Economic Relations (CICIR). Their team spoke one at a time in a rigidly hierarchical order. Right at the end of the series, there would be a woman or two. One of them said she had submitted a paper for internal approval a year back and had not received a response. How could they publish anything when approval for submission was never given? I noticed one of the senior men looking at her with a smirk while she spoke. You can imagine how disconcerted the male power structure was to find a woman leader in our team, and an articulate and forceful woman at that.

Later, we were allowed to interact informally with members of CICIR, whose assigned jurisdiction was the study of India. They showed us a large room where there were neat piles of Indian newspapers in every language, and we were each matched individually to the appropriate language expert. I was introduced to a kindly old man who spoke a language he called Tamil. We smiled and nodded at each other through a fog of mutual incomprehension. Ahluwalia had a similar experience with their Punjabi language expert.

In 1997, Ahluwalia edited a volume of papers with Ian Little of Oxford University, to be presented at a two-day festschrift to mark a milestone birthday of Manmohan Singh. Normally, at such an event, the papers are presented in draft form, and the bound volume put together several months thereafter. Ahluwalia, in her usual efficient way, had the printed volume ready for the occasion, although she confided in me that it had been a struggle to enforce deadlines on some of the more distinguished contributors.

She has written about her life story in an autobiography, *Breaking Through: A Memoir*. Isher Judge started her remarkable journey from a childhood in Kolkata where 11 children were raised on a family business that, she told me, 'was not doing very well'. An undergraduate education in Presidency College, Calcutta, and a master's degree from the Delhi School of Economics set her on

her way. Her achievements are a tribute to her intellect and hard work, and a reminder of the importance of institutions like those.

Ahluwalia did her early work on estimating the Solow residual — portion of an economy's output growth that can't be attributed to the accumulation of capital and labour, the factors of production — for the Indian economy, appropriately for someone with a PhD from the economics department of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It generated a lively debate on the pages of the Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) for years afterwards on the appropriate price deflator to use for an exercise like that.

In later years, she wrote extensively on urban infrastructure issues. She commuted easily between the world of work, and the power world she inhabited with her husband and former Planning Commission deputy chairman Montek Singh Ahluwalia, and leaves behind many friends in both.

**The writer is former member, 13th Finance Commission**





# Remembering the individual behind renowned economist Isher Judge Ahluwalia

Bibek Debroy | LiveMint | September 28, 2020

Isher's network and charm were so pervasive that she personally knew every economist in India and abroad



When I first read her work, I used to think someone in Isher Judge Ahluwalia's lineage had been a Judge. That reflected my ignorance about Sikh surnames. "My family name 'Judge', which I retained as my middle name after marriage, has nothing to do with a legal or judicial lineage. It is simply an Anglicization of the Punjabi name 'Jaj'." That quote is from her recently-published autobiography, **Breaking Through**, published almost back-to-back with Montek Singh Ahluwalia's autobiography, **Backstage**.

All of us are destined to die. But how do you react when that certain destiny is a short distance away? How do you react when death is not sudden, but makes you wait, as cancer does? It is not easy to handle that with grace and dignity. Isher did just that and was the driving force, the will and the determination behind both books being published.

Now that a noted economist and a Padma Bhushan awardee has left, what will we remember her for? Her work on industrial growth and productivity and urban infrastructure? For all economists, that kind of work has limited shelf-life and is eventually relegated to bibliographies in academic papers, unless you happen to be (post Nobel vintage) a Paul Samuelson, Kenneth Arrow or Milton Friedman. Isher's abiding legacy, unless successors make a hash of it, is the building of the institution known as ICRIER or the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (as director and chairperson), at a time when older research institutions had gone into relative decline.

Other economist couples have existed, but none as powerful and influential as Isher and Montek. I named Isher first, because despite Montek being the person he was, Isher was never eclipsed. (Early on in her career, she consciously chose to remain outside government, because Montek was already in government and she didn't want a rank inferior to his.) Especially during the UPA years—and their proximity to Dr Manmohan Singh was no secret—they featured in every power list that any newspaper or magazine brought out.

So vast was Isher's network and so pervasive her charm, that she personally knew every economist you might name, in India and abroad.

Now that the inevitable has happened, I have non-professional memories to treasure. I forget what the occasion was: Montek was speaking and was seated on the dais. Isher was seated in the first row. My wife and I were in the audience. Some inconvenient question had been asked. After the event was over, my wife remarked, "Did you notice Montek glance at Isher when the question was asked? Only happens between a husband and wife."

During the UPA years, they had invited us to a reception at their house, where there was a large crowd. Having recently resigned from Rajiv Gandhi Institute, I felt a slight awkwardness and strain. If the tension, real or imagined, was eased, it was because of Isher's welcoming words and smile.

When Montek's book was launched (by then her malady was known), Isher requested me to be a panellist. Agreeing to speak at that event was like being thrown into a den of lions. The one to ask being Isher, it was impossible to refuse.

It was the first time I met her after cancer struck and the deterioration was evident. Irrespective of their own individual professional contributions—and they are significant, including in influencing policy—it is impossible to think of Montek without Isher. That kind of blending and resonance does occur between husband and wife, but not invariably. My abiding memory will remain



that of Isher's charm and grace, aging gracefully even before the illness struck. Economics is a profession and transcending the profession, there is the individual. This comes across partially in the two memoirs, in Isher's more than in Montek's.

No doubt Montek, Aman and Pavan and ICRIER will do things in her memory. But those will probably be about Isher as an economist and head of ICRIER. I will also remember the individual.

**Bibek Debroy is chairman, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister.**



# Isher Judge Ahluwalia will be missed as independent academic and institution-builder

N K Singh | Indian Express | September 28, 2020

Isher will be sorely missed. In multiple ways, she has lived up to every expectation she had of herself of not being described as Mrs Finance Secretary.



Isher was also a great believer in enhancing academic understanding between India and major global economic players.

The demise of Isher Judge Ahluwalia, Isher to her friends, has left a deep void in many lives, including mine. I had known Isher for decades. Her warmth, affection and appropriateness on every occasion were, to say the least, overwhelming. It would be fair to say that the academic and research communities have lost a brilliant economist and an institution builder.

I have known her husband Montek Singh Ahluwalia for much longer, having studied with him at St Stephen's College and thereafter as he pursued his career with the World Bank. I came in closer contact with Isher after Montek's return to India when he was an important Joint Secretary during the tenure of the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Thereafter, my interactions with Isher spanned over several facets of my career.



During the critical years of India's balance of payments crisis, she was an informal, but very mature advisor to what the Delhi circles often pejoratively described as the Singh Darbar (this meant Manmohan Singh, Montek and, perhaps, me). She never intruded, in any way, with the decision-making process, but her congenital reform instincts greatly contributed in enabling the policy leadership to adopt the changes which liberated India's economy. She played this informal advisory role with great equanimity and rectitude. Rectitude was also a guiding factor both in her personal and official life.

Looking at Isher's independent career as a professional economist, there could be no better description than the one she has used in her autobiography titled *Breaking Through*. In the chapter "The Battleground", she describes a critical phase in India's economic reforms when Montek was the Finance Secretary: "He was entering what would become the most exciting phase of his career, with the longest tenure as Finance Secretary. I had reasons to be satisfied that my work contributed to the change in thinking. My challenge now was to avoid becoming Mrs Finance Secretary!"

Her independence of thinking and contribution to institution building has been summed up in this sentence. While providing perfect companionship to Montek and mentorship to her sons Pawan and Aman, she never compromised on her integrity and identity as an academic and serious researcher.

It was during this period that both of us were members of the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), which, at that time, was in its formative stage. The late K B Lall had set up this institution and had drawn some people whom he had mentored in the past including Amar Nath Verma, Montek, Isher and myself. When Isher became the director of ICRIER, she soon realised that autonomy of research organisations must be paramount. No research entity would have credibility unless it is independent of governmental interference. At that stage, ICRIER was dependent, in no small measure, on the financial support received from the Ministry of Finance. She felt uncomfortable and embarked on the challenging trajectory of making ICRIER financially independent. She was relentless in her pursuit, seeking endowments and creating a corpus, which did enable ICRIER to become a fully independent and, in the truest sense of the term, autonomous research organisation.

In these complex endeavours, she never allowed the highest quality of research at ICRIER to be compromised. Her eye for the best talent was ever-roving to secure academics and researchers who could contribute to high-quality research. It is no surprise that ICRIER has been rated among the leading

independent think-tank institutions, even by the daunting international standards. Institution-building and their long-term financial viability in this country are never easy. Isher realised this challenge first as ICRIER's director and, subsequently, as the chairperson emeritus of the Board of Governors for the last 15 years. Given her passion, I remained a member of the Board until giving up this responsibility to accept my current office.

Isher was also a great believer in enhancing academic understanding between India and major global economic players. In no small measure, her support was critical to the continuation of the Neemrana Conference where ICRIER became a co-partner with the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), and at the annual conference of the Stanford University Centre for International Development. Her presence was catalytic in securing an interaction between key US and Indian academics, policy-makers and leading corporates on emerging global challenges. The seeds of many economic reforms were sowed during these conferences. Her legacy in other international institutions as the chairperson of the board of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the chairperson of the High-Powered Expert Committee on Urban Infrastructure Services is invaluable.

Isher will be sorely missed. In multiple ways, she has lived up to every expectation she had of herself of not being described as Mrs Finance Secretary. Of her legacy, it will be apt to quote the American philosopher William James, who has said: "The great use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it." I have no doubt that ICRIER will fulfil this quest.

**The writer is chairman, 15th Finance Commission**





## The respect Isher commanded in the economics world was striking

Isher was a whole person, always ready to enjoy life, whether it was a wedding or something else.

Kiran Mazumdar Shaw | Indian Express | September 27, 2020



Isher last public appearance on ICRIER's platform was in February this year at the launch of Montek Singh Ahluwalia's memoir, *Backstage*.

Isher Ahluwalia was an amazing woman — and you'd know that if you read the book (**Breaking Through**) that she wrote at the end of her life. She was very keen that she wrote it before she passed away. She was a self-made woman. She came from a middle-class upbringing, a Hindi-medium background and yet she scaled such enormous heights because of her intellectual appetite and capability. She was one of the most brilliant and inspiring minds I have met.

(Isher Judge Ahluwalia, 74, economist, urban infrastructure expert and former chairperson of the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), passed away in New Delhi on Saturday. A contributing editor with The Indian Express, Isher Ahluwalia wrote the column 'Cities At Crossroads' for the newspaper. She is survived by her husband Montek Singh Ahluwalia and sons Pavan and Aman.)

I met Isher about 15 years ago at a seminar in Delhi. I was a successful entrepreneur and she was a renowned economist. The moment we met, we hit it off. She became one of my dearest friends. I learnt a lot from her. I respected her for her understanding of urbanisation and the economy. Every time I went to Delhi, I would meet her for a cup of coffee. Every time she came to Bengaluru, we would have dinner together. We travelled together to many countries. She was also a close friend of the (N Narayana and Sudha) Murthys and we spent a lot of time together.

And then, she invited me to be on the board of ICRIER. She said, "I need you to come on board and bring fresh thinking into our work." She was the driving force behind ICRIER. Single-handedly almost, she rebuilt and steered it into becoming a leading policy think-tank. The respect she commanded in the entire economics world was striking. She was always thinking of new ideas and looking at issues in a new way. She was engaged with the challenges that a country like ours had. Her mentor was (former Prime Minister) Dr Manmohan Singh. So, it is very sad that it is his birthday today. She admired him immensely and they would often have very interesting discussions. She didn't agree with everything he said, or anyone said. She had a mind of her own.

Isher was a whole person, always ready to enjoy life, whether it was a wedding or something else. She was the life and soul of gatherings. I remember especially the sangeet of Mr Murthy's daughter (Akshata), which was held at my house. She was marrying a Punjabi (Rishi Sunak), and I still remember how much Isher regaled us with beautiful Punjabi songs.

I admired her for her brilliance, but also for her elegance. She was always dressed beautifully. She loved shopping for saris and crafts. If I asked her what she wanted on her birthday, she would say buy me a Kanjeevaram. She was very close to her husband. It was a very warm and a close-knit family — a decent, high-integrity family.

I was abroad last December, when I got a call from her. "I need to talk to you urgently," she said. She had been feeling pins and needles in her hands, and found she couldn't hold a pen properly. She had had a scan done, which showed a lesion in her brain. It turned out to be a malignant glioblastoma. I knew it was going to be very bad, and she herself knew it. Unfortunately, doctors couldn't do much or operate on it because of its location. In January, I went to Delhi to meet her. She told me, "Right now, I can still do many things. And I have so much to do before I start becoming incapacitated." She knew she had limited time.

But look at what she did with that time! First and foremost, she made sure that Montek (Singh Ahluwalia)'s book (Backstage) was finished. I went for the book launch in February, and that was the last time I saw her. That day, I spent time with her at home. I saw she had slowed down. But she could still speak and move around, though she felt unsteady on her feet. "I have to finish the book," she told me again. She worked furiously on it. I think she wanted to show in the book that someone from a humble middle-class background could actually rise to great heights. That you can be a self-made whole woman. You don't have to give up this or that. It is not about making sacrifices but about choosing your priorities. Because of those priorities, she could grow intellectually and as a person, as an economist, as a mother, as a wife. She is showing us that way.

I really feel blessed that I knew her and that I shared some special times with her, especially during these nine months of her illness. She knew that her life was coming to an end. "I feel so terrible that I have so much more to do, but I don't have enough time," she said.

I feel devastated even though I knew she was going to go. I spoke to her 10 days ago because she wanted to hear my voice. She was trying to say something but I couldn't make out what it was.

**Shaw is the chairperson and managing director of Biocon Ltd**





# Isher Judge Ahluwalia: Leaving a Legacy Behind

Indira Jaising | [www.theleaflet.in](http://www.theleaflet.in) | September 27, 2020

## Isher Judge Ahluwalia: Leaving a Legacy Behind

writes INDIRA JAISING



The demise of acclaimed economist Isher Judge Ahluwalia has kindled numerous memories of her contribution to India's civil society. The Padma Bhushan awardee achieved numerous accolades for her work and contribution to the field of Indian economic policy. Having completed her Ph.D. in economics from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, she began her career at the International Monetary Fund.

She went on to become the Chairperson Emeritus, Board of Governors at the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations. She worked closely with the government and many International Organisations such as the Asian Development Bank. A widely published author and academician, her recent book "Breaking Through" describes her breaking many glass ceilings through the course of her career in economics and public policy.

I first got to know the renowned economist, Isher Judge Ahluwalia when I was working with her son, Aman Ahluwalia, during the time when I was the Additional Solicitor General. He was marked on several briefs along with me and it was a real pleasure to work with him.

I regularly read her column, Cities at Crossroads, in the Indian Express with great interest. It was full of interesting ideas and what we all could do to create

better cities and sustainable lifestyles. Every piece was inspiring. She was such a treasure trove of information.

We began corresponding from 2009 onwards. I admired her commitment to cleaning up the environment and she worked closely with most of us on the field.

I often met Aman at random events. I didn't know his family very well but admired his contribution to child-rearing and I often discussed this with him. He shared housework and duties of child-rearing equally with his wife.

I was convinced that this was due to his upbringing.

Isher must have definitely played a big role in Aman's approach towards child care and sharing domestic responsibilities. Initially, this is what fascinated me about his mother. I realised that Isher had inculcated the importance of ensuring equality of women in her two sons. Aman believed that it was the call of the times and said he believed in taking equal responsibility for child care. Be that as it may, my own interest in Isher grew from there.

**I was impressed because, having never been able to write a book on my journey in the world of law, I was fascinated with the amount of time she spent on her desk.**

I was very happy when she often invited me to coffee. We had great conversations and we struck a good friendship. She was gracious enough to invite me and my partner to a lavish meal at her residence, where I met her husband, Montek Singh Ahluwalia.

Her library and place of work were the centre of her home. I was impressed because, having never been able to write a book on my journey in the world of law, I was fascinated with the amount of time she spent on her desk. Her colourful life was documented in her last piece of work, *Breaking Through*.

A keen environmentalist, she solicited my support in trying to end pollution in Delhi. If the air we breathe today is better and cleaner than it was, it is partly due to her role in convincing authorities to introduce waste management in all residential colonies.

In her own words, she had so much to do, so much to work on and so much to give.

She went away a bit too soon.



We would all have benefited from her experience and commitment.

She leaves behind a legacy with her intellectual inputs to India's economy.

I will always miss her.

(Indira Jaising is Senior Advocate at Supreme Court of India and human rights activist.)



# Isher Judge Ahluwalia - A silent but strong force in India's liberalisation reforms

Latha Venkatesh | CNBCTV18 | September 26, 2020

Her first major work was *Industrial Growth in India: Stagnation Since the Mid Sixties*, which was published in 1989.

Ahluwalia has a Ph.D. from the Massachusetts University, while her post-graduation was from Delhi School of Economics and graduation from Presidency College, Kolkata.

Isher Judge Ahluwalia, one of India's first women economists died on Saturday morning. She was battling brain cancer. She is survived by her husband, the former deputy chairman of the Planning Commission Montek Ahluwalia.

Ahluwalia had resigned last month as chairperson of the ICRIER (The Indian Council For Research on International Economic Relations). Ahluwalia has a Ph.D. from the Massachusetts University, while her post-graduation was from Delhi School of Economics and graduation from Presidency College, Kolkata.

She was one of the first Indian women to make the name as a first-rate economist. Her research focused on urban development, industrial development, macro-economic reforms, and social sector development issues in India.

Her first major work was **Industrial Growth in India: Stagnation Since the Mid Sixties**, which was published in 1989. It remains one of the first thoroughly empirical work that explained the economic stagnation in India because of the socialistic policies since the sixties. The book was an important influence on the liberalization reforms announced by the Congress government in 1991, with Manmohan Singh as finance minister

Ahluwalia served in several key policymaking positions: She was chairperson of the High Powered Expert Committee on Urban Infrastructure and Services by the ministry of urban development in 2008. She was chairperson, Board of Trustees of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Washington D.C. from 2003 to 2006, she was a member of the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) which prepared a report



on the role of the Asian Development Bank in 2006. She was vice-chairperson of the Punjab State Planning Board from 2005 to 2007.

On a personal note, Ahluwalia's first book "**Stagnation Since the Mid-Sixties**" was the first economics book I ever read. Its empirical thoroughness is amazing. It fashioned my career decisions and is the most quoted reference work in my own Ph.D. Tho I have never met her, she is in a way my first and best teacher. I almost memorized that book of hers. I can't shake off the feeling that I have lost someone close.

*“Isher was a force of nature. In ICRIER we will continue to celebrate her life and be inspired by her achievements.”*

*- Pramod Bhasin, Chairman, ICRIER*

