Dr. Isher Judge Ahluwalia, Chairperson Emeritus, ICRIER passes away at 74 after battling brain cancer

The ICRIER family is profoundly saddened at the passing away of Chairperson Emeritus Dr. Isher Judge Ahluwalia this morning. Isher, was Chairperson for 15 years and stepped down last month due to ill health. Prior to that, she was Director & Chief Executive from 1998 to 2002. Isher was an institution herself and built ours to where it is today. ICRIER owes her everything and more. It is quite literally the passing of an era.

No words can capture the pain of her parting. For someone who interacted with her very closely in the last 8 years, Rajat Kathuria, Director and Chief Executive said ‘I can say without an iota of doubt that ICRIER was in her DNA. The only persons who got precedence over ICRIER were her grandchildren. She was constantly thinking about ways to enhance the quality of research, attract new talent and raise more funds’. The Board of Governors had recently decided to name ICRIERs new building as ‘The Isher Building’ and had informed her of this while she was still alive. She ‘built’ it from start to finish. It is but a small tribute to her dedication to ICRIER.

As most people whose lives she touched would know, she was a person with extraordinary talents and exceptional ability. She set high standards for herself and for ICRIER and her uncompromising and unwavering stand towards good quality research is widely known and greatly appreciated. Many of the researchers she mentored swear by it. It is a legacy that ICRIER is proud to have and committed to maintain.

She was awarded the Padma Bhushan by the President of India in the year 2009 for her services in the field of education and literature. Her two books ‘Industrial Growth in India: Stagnation since the Mid-Sixties (1989, Oxford University Press) and Productivity and Growth in Indian Manufacturing (1991, Oxford University Press) are seminal contributions to the literature. About a decade ago, her interest in issues of urban economics and governance were ignited when she became Chairperson of the High Powered Expert Committee on Urban Infrastructure and Services during 2008-11. Subsequently, Isher made the urbanisation field her own and went on to publish two books on the subject.

ICRIER Chair Pramod Bhasin says ‘She was an example and lesson for all of us to live life to its fullest and with excellence, and compassion. Her remarkable memoir, Breaking Through, is an example of that spirit. Her commitment and tireless pursuit of excellence and what was good for our country will be hard to replicate’. 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. Geeta Gouri, former member Competition Commission of India says, ‘Isher was and will continue to be an icon for women economists. Often in public platforms Isher would proudly declare that ICRIER owes much of its success to the favourable gender balance. ICRIER has been around 70 percent women for much of its recent history.

In our minds in ICRIER, there is no doubt she was chosen and special. We will miss her presence in seminars and meetings, in brainstorming sessions and in dissemination events. We will also continue to celebrate her rich and complete life.

ICRIER is grateful to the outpouring of public support for the Ahluwalia’s and for ICRIER. We value your sentiments at this difficult time.