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## Chakravarthi Raghavan: Journalist-Champion of the Global South

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*Tributes to Chakravarthi Raghavan (1925–2021) a journalist who made his mark on the global scene and who died in late September.*

Chakravarthi Raghavan (1925–2021) who died in late September, was a journalist who made his mark on the global scene. He began his career in journalism when, at a camp for Boy Scouts, he interviewed the visiting Mahatma Gandhi in 1940. From the mid-1940s, Raghavan worked first for Reuters/Associated Press of India and then for more than a quarter of a century at the Press Trust of India, working nationally and at the United Nations, until he finally became chief editor in 1971. He quit in 1976 because, he would say later, he could not adhere to the dictates of the Emergency.

Raghavan moved to Geneva in 1978 and began to work on offering a “South perspective” on global issues. This was the time of hopes for a 'New World Information Order'. Over the next three decades and more, he worked tirelessly and often alone to explain, dissect, and critique international economic issues being discussed in the UNCTAD, ILO and most of all at GATT/WTO. For many developing country governments, NGOs, and journalists, Raghavan as the chief editor of South North Development Monitor (SUNS), published from Geneva, was the sole source of independent news and opinion that had not been obfuscated by the agenda of the North. He was chief editor of SUNS for close to two decades from 1984 to 2005, and then editor emeritus until his death this year.

He also worked tirelessly for the rights of journalists in India and abroad. He was one of the early office bearers of the Indian Federation of Working Journalists and then in 1967, the president of the United Nations Correspondents Association.

Someone who left such a mark on the global media and policy scene has barely been remembered in India.

Four tributes from across the world — from members of the government sector, NGOs, media, and academia — to Chakravarthi Raghavan are published here. These are from a larger selection of 25+ tributes published by Third World Network at <https://twm.my/>

### One man alone can make a difference

*Rubens Ricupero (Secretary-General of UNCTAD, 1995–2004)*

Chakravarthi Raghavan was one of the few men who did make a difference in the world armed only with knowledge and the strength of his moral commitment.

“A typewriter in hand and an idea in mind” is an apt description of Raghavan: a man armed with the idea that development should be promoted through fairness, justice, and balance in economic relations.

When I first arrived in Geneva in November 1987 as the new Brazilian Ambassador to the GATT, I immediately found out that, printed in a golden yellow paper, Raghavan’s daily SUN’s column constituted the only source of honest and unbiased assessment of events free of the hegemonic intellectual dictatorship of triumphant globalization’s *pensée unique*.

It is hard to imagine in our days how isolated developing countries negotiators found themselves at the start and during most of the Uruguay Round duration. None of the myriad NGOs that now devote their activities to various aspects of trade negotiations existed at the time or if they had been in existence like OXFAM, they had not discovered trade’s central importance yet.

China was very distant from acceding to the GATT. Even the most important and active developing countries were far from mustering the intellectual resources that advanced nations negotiators received from the OECD and numerous think-tanks.

Prestigious Nobel Prize winners such as Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman had not yet seen the light in their Damascus’ roads. We were decades away from the moment when some in the Bretton Woods institutions would reluctantly and partially recognize what UNCTAD had been repeating from Raul Prebisch’s time in the early 1960s: that the multilateral trading system was imbalanced and unfair, that its rules and proceedings tended to perpetuate a situation detrimental to the trade interest of developing economies, and trade rounds had been procrastinating for more than thirty years the “unfinished business” of development-friendly negotiations.

Chakravarthi Raghavan set for himself the most demanding moral and ethical standards in his attitude as a citizen not only of his native India, but as a truly universal citizen of the South and of the world.

In other words, the asymmetry in economic and political power that already made a level playing field a hopeless proposition for developing countries had been further aggravated by the imbalance in the power modality that comes from information and knowledge.

Thus, the most pressing and fundamental need performed by Raghavan's writings was simply to demystify, to deconstruct the counterfeit stuff, laying bare the economic sectorial interests hidden behind apparently objective data and research. This he did superbly, through his masterful command of contemporary economic and international history, bringing to readers' attention the precedents in the discussions of similar problems or comparing OECD's arguments with independent researchers' findings.



Chakravarthi Raghavan on becoming the president of the UN Correspondents Association (1967). Used with permission of Artie Raghavan.

In an age when no major project or work can be financed by the World Bank without a previous environmental impact assessment, it is really astonishing that commercial negotiations that deeply overturned countries' employment prospects had to be conducted with no evaluation of their likely social and economic consequences for the people concerned.

Raghavan tried to fill the information gap as completely as he could. At the release of the major reports of international organizations, voluminous studies of hundreds of pages that overworked negotiators had no chance of reading, he would have ready for dissemination clear, remarkably precise, and concise summings-up of what was being circulated. From time to time, there would be special articles on the subjects under negotiation and interviews with independent experts. SUNS became a permanent platform for the expression of alternate views from the dominant and suffocating orthodoxy.

To the despair of official spokesmen intent in making sure that the press corps would quietly swallow the conventional truths, Raghavan was always present at the press conferences at the GATT...

But what proved crucial in his contribution was the exacting, meticulous chronicle-cum-analysis of daily negotiations during the Uruguay Round. For most of the duration of the Round, that is, until 1991, there had been no less than 15 different negotiating groups on the most diverse and complex subjects.

It was almost impossible, except for developed countries delegations to follow each and all of these groups. That was the moment when Raghavan's SUNS saved the day for most of us. To this day I do not know how he was able to perform such a miracle of accuracy and comprehensiveness in covering negotiations where he could not enter the room!

To the despair of official spokesmen intent in making sure that the press corps would quietly swallow the conventional truths, Raghavan was always present at the press conferences at the GATT or at the Palais des Nations. It was not without trepidation that the audience would impatiently wait for the conclusion of the introductory remarks just to hear the first and biting question from the SUNS' representative.

He set for himself the most demanding moral and ethical standards in his attitude as a citizen not only of his native India, but as a truly universal citizen of the South and of the world. To be a journalist is by no means to be neutral in relation to moral values, to stay indifferent in face of the violation of justice, fairness, freedom.

Despite this disproportionate imbalance in human and material resources, Raghavan did ultimately prevail. Not in the sense that he succeeded in changing the dynamics of negotiations, a goal that has always been much beyond his reach or the reach of any disarmed prophet. Negotiations of any kind are in all cases a game of power, of power defined in terms of interests.

A journalist's victory should be defined in terms of being right in finding out the facts, in telling things as they are and extracting the correct conclusions from the facts. In other words, journalists are the historians of the present time, of contemporary life. Their vindication should come in the form of history confirming their perceptions and informed predictions.

Raghavan's reward lies in the gratitude, admiration, and esteem of those, among whom I count myself, who owe him the gift of recovering "the knowledge we had lost in information and the wisdom we had lost in knowledge".

### **Reporting to understand the world ... and change it!**

*Roberto Bissio (Uruguayan journalist, coordinator of the Social Watch network of civil society organizations)*

When I introduced myself to Chakravarthi Raghavan back in 1986 he was already reprimanding me before ending the handshake: "Why did you ask that question in the press conference?" he asked me with more severity in his expression than usual...which is to say, a lot.

"Because I wanted to know..."

"You NEVER ask a question if you don't know the answer!"

We were in the press room of the San Rafael hotel in Punta del Este, where a ministerial meeting of the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) was about to launch the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations that paved the way for neoliberal globalization.

As a Uruguayan journalist not very experienced in international negotiations, I was happy that after a decade of dictatorship my country was gaining international recognition and hopeful that the damaging (for us) agricultural subsidies of the rich countries would be reduced, giving our exports a chance to compete in global markets.

Raghavan was already one of the most influential journalists from the Global South, recognized as a key actor of the New World Information and Communication Order, to which he contributed practically as editor of SUNS, a daily newsletter on global decision-making, published by Third World Network. Always a challenger of the domination of international news by a handful of agencies of the North, he never accepted government-dominated media as a valid alternative.

How could such a model journalist be against asking questions? My astonishment probably put him in teaching mode: “If you don’t know, you find out, read, research and ask questions off the record. What you just did was to offer a platform for that guy to state the view of developed countries to the world media without the other side being heard... you don’t know if he’s lying or bluffing and even if you knew, you wouldn’t be able to refute him.”

|| The monumental journalistic work of Chakravarthi Raghavan is the best available history of decades of secret dealings that shaped the present-day world..

Raghavan’s advice on when to ask questions is the best summary for a journalist to stick to the social role of providing information with accuracy, without ignoring the fact that throwing light on an event will have an impact on the final outcome.

A specialist on the arcane trade negotiations within GATT, Raghavan had the unusual patience to explain to me that the ministerial meeting was not about trade at all, but about “Services”.

“Like hotels and restaurants?”

“More like finances, insurance, transport, investment, EVERYTHING! The Third World gives up its sovereignty in exchange for vague promises.”

“But they are not agreeing to anything, they will only negotiate.”

“Single undertaking!”

‘Single undertaking’ meant that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”. By putting services on the table, developing countries shot themselves in their foot, giving the developed world bargaining chips to negotiate against reducing agriculture subsidies, import of textiles into rich countries and the lowering of “non-tariff barriers” that were used to disguise their protectionism as sanitary or environmental safety issues.

In a couple of days, while waiting for our turns at the teletypes to file our stories, I had an introductory course on the gap between reality and discourse in trade negotiations, which are usually secret, or blurred from public, and even parliamentary, scrutiny by obscure jargon.

In the following years, I saw Raghavan at work in Geneva or at ministerial meetings of the WTO around the world. As a journalist he was never allowed inside the negotiating rooms but walking the corridors or sitting at the coffee shop he could report on the meetings to his subscribers in detail, thanks to the confidence his sources had in his integrity and high standards.

He wrote daily for negotiators and policymakers who could act on the information he was circulating, but he also reached out to the larger public. His book on the Uruguay Round, *Recolonization!* Was one of the rallying points of the mass movements that made “globalization” a bad word at the eve of the new Millennium.

The monumental journalistic work of Chakravarthi Raghavan is the best available history of decades of secret dealings that shaped the present-day world. An invaluable resource to understand it and to make transformations possible.

## The 1970s crusader against biowarfare in India

*PK Rajagopalan (Fellow of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine, Former Director, Vector Control Research Centre, Indian Council of Medical Research)*

It was sometime in 1973 that I had the opportunity to meet Chakravarthi Raghavan (CR), who was then the Chief Editor of the Press Trust of India (PTI). I was working as a senior scientist at the World Health Organization /Indian Council of Medical Research’s Genetic Control of Mosquitoes Unit (GCMU).

I was officially asked to be in touch with K S Jayaraman (KSJ), then the Chief Science Correspondent of PTI. The background of the meeting can be traced to biowarfare accusations made by KSJ against WHO. His investigations led to an adjournment motion passed in the Indian Parliament, and detailed investigations by two (167<sup>th</sup> and 200<sup>th</sup>) Public Accounts Committees, which have been published.

|| CR had to pay the price for his patriotism and ultimately had to move to Geneva.

During 1973-75, I had to meet CR on several occasions regarding these investigations. It was due to his untiring efforts that the matter was handled at the highest level in the Government. Starting with the Scientific Advisor to the Prime Minister, Ashok Parthasarathy, Mr P.N. Haksar, the Personal Secretary to the Prime Minister, the Chief of Staff of Indian Army, Gen Bewoor, and the Research and Analysis Wing were all involved at one time or the other, and ultimately the GCMU was closed down.

CR had to pay the price for his patriotism and ultimately had to move to Geneva. I received much advice from CR, which has fashioned [my writing](#) about the way scientific research is handled by governmental agencies in India, articles published after my retirement in 1990 and published in independent journals like Frontline.



Chakravarthi Raghavan (2006). Used with permission of Artie Raghavan.

CR had asked KSJ to write the complete story of the GCMU investigations and piece together several published and unpublished documents which were known in detail to only CR, KSJ and myself. But with the tragic passing away of CR and the ill-health and age of both KSJ and myself, this will now never see the light of the day now.

An entire era of honest science investigations and anti-imperialistic campaigns has ended. Nandita Haksar, daughter of P.N.Haksar, had [written](#) about CR and the GCMU project in 2020. I had the greatest respect and admiration for CR as a patriotic journalist, and we will not have another like him, who risked his career and life in India to bring out the truth about foreign collaborations. May his soul rest in peace.

### The ‘Gem of Geneva’

*Lori Wallach (Director, Public Citizens Global Trade Watch)*

It is rare that one person’s work has a measurable global impact. Yet without a doubt, Chakravarthi Raghavan’s reporting and journalistic dispatches from Geneva about the GATT and WTO informed countless thousands of people and helped to shape the actions

of government officials, civil society advocates, scholars and activists worldwide.

I personally learned so much from Mr. Raghavan. As we say in Washington with respect to the person recognized as a true sage on an issue, it seemed to me that he had forgotten more about the GATT and WTO than anyone else knows or has any chance to learn in a lifetime of scholarship...

That is because well before there was a WTO, he was committed to relentlessly unearthing the real story about GATT negotiations, power dynamics and proposals and had the intellectual skills and writing talent to translate intentionally arcane trade jargon into what it would mean for peoples' lives. And especially what it would mean for people in the Global South and the policy space developing country governments needed to improve their residents' economic security, health, and wellbeing. Because of his writing, and the word of Mr. Raghavan's colleagues at Third World Network, people worldwide were exposed to a development analysis that expanded the critiques they had developed from their own national perspectives. He helped to get the warning out about what was really at stake with the secretive Uruguay Round GATT negotiations that hatched the WTO. His journalistic dispatches and books helped to shape countless peoples' thinking about what was being sold as "trade" negotiations, but in reality posed tremendous and unprecedented threats to an array of critical non-trade economic and environmental and societal goals, policies and practices.

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When Mr. Raghavan's daughter let his colleagues at Third World Network know that his health was failing, I wrote a note to send him my love, and thanks and celebrate his truly amazing work and long career fighting for truth and for justice for the Global South. My hope was that it would make him smile to think about how bits of Raghavan wisdom had been sprinkled around Washington D.C. for decades.

There is no doubt that a large and diverse universe of people benefitted from Mr. R's knowledge of trade matters current and historic, both for the facts and for the context and perspective he always brought to an encyclopaedic array of GATT and WTO matters. And on the United Nations and its various agencies. In recent days I have also learned that Mr. R had another whole stellar career as a leading journalist in India before he turned his focus to the international bodies.

Mr. Raghavan seemed to blush when I called him the "Gem of Geneva" when visiting him at his apartment after he 'retired.' (Retired, but thankfully still sending insightful dispatches.) My nickname for Mr. R is true and well earned. Indeed, when I last visited him, I was stuck on a problem relating to a specific WTO agreement and related domestic policy issues. After some tea and catching up, I explained the issue and noted I was stumped about why the problem was happening and what to do about it. The problem was baked in, he noted. Not a bug, but a feature. He laid out which countries had pushed for the relevant provisions and the decade of pro-WTO history of why they thought it was a good idea. Who else would have known that critical insight?

|| We celebrate a rich and long life of meaningful service dedicated to furthering his deeply held values.

Awareness of his vast knowledge and expertise is probably why I recall being scared of Mr. Raghavan when Martin Khor first introduced us 25+ years ago. His *Recolonization* book on GATT and the Uruguay Round had been transformational for me. I also had been reading his SUNS, Third World Economics and other dispatches since perhaps 1990. And, I knew Public Citizen's founder Ralph Nader read them. So I was ready to be intimidated. It was a relief to find a kind and gracious person attached to that enormous brain power! Although when he disagreed, Mr. R was gently relentless in his determination to convince a person to rethink her views...

I suspect many people around the world likely share my jumble of sentiments about Chakravarthi Raghavan's passing: Of course, we mourn, feel loss and send our heartfelt condolences to his beloved daughter. We celebrate a rich and long life of meaningful service dedicated to furthering his deeply held values. And, we feel fortunate to have known him.

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