

Remembering Professor MP Singh's contributions

Singh's legacy is not restricted to scholarship, teaching and institution building; it also encompasses an attempt to create a just and humane society.



Prof. (Dr) MP Singh

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Published on:

09 Mar 2026

As a student at the Delhi University's (DU) Law Faculty in the early 2000s, a distinct memory I have is that of a classroom overflowing with students, waiting for a smartly dressed man who would walk into a class with books in one hand and an attendance register in the other. This man was Professor MP Singh, who taught Constitutional Law.

Singh spoke softly but firmly and though he lacked the flamboyance of other teachers like Professor Moolchand Sharma, the depth of his scholarship and his gentle, unassuming demeanour had a magical effect on all students.

Watching him teach was the first time it struck me that I, too, should pursue an academic career. At DU's Law Faculty, where he taught for decades, he was instrumental in shaping the lives of countless students, many of whom went on to become successful academics, Supreme Court

judges and practising lawyers. Consequently, his passing has created a void that will be difficult to fill.

Contribution to scholarship

Singh's profound scholarship has shaped the discourse on Constitutional Law in India and abroad. Generations of students have gained invaluable insights from his authoritative textbook, *V N Shukla's Constitution of India*, which has been cited by the Indian Supreme Court and foreign courts, including the Constitutional Court of South Africa, to enhance jurisprudential understanding. He was one of the first Indian scholars to work on South Asian constitutionalism. His work clearly reflected his passionate commitment to the Indian Constitution in particular and to constitutionalism in general.

For Singh, this commitment was not merely a professional pursuit; it was a matter of conviction. He once told me that his decision to support the Mandal Commission's recommendations had antagonised many of his colleagues at DU, yet he steadfastly held to his view because of his belief in affirmative action and in improving the conditions of the backward classes. He firmly believed that the promise of freedom and democracy remains unfulfilled until the lives of the downtrodden are uplifted.

Another remarkable quality of Prof Singh was his active encouragement of dissent, both in the class and outside. He would often cite examples from US legal academia, stating that it scrutinised the American Supreme Court's decisions scathingly and saying that Indian law professors should do the same with the Indian Supreme Court's decisions. In a seminar at NUJS in 2009, I distinctly remember how Singh, despite being the VC, welcomed the views of younger faculty members and engaged with those who disagreed with him on the Delhi High Court's *Naz Foundation* judgment that decriminalised homosexuality. I am sure he would have welcomed my disagreement with him on his endorsement of the Supreme Court's judgment on Article 370. Alas, I could never have that conversation with him.

Nurturing talent

While people will remember Prof Singh as a doyen of constitutional and comparative law scholarship, a lesser-known fact is his stellar role in

nurturing young talent while serving as Vice-Chancellor (VC) at the National University of Juridical Sciences (NUJS) in Kolkata from 2005 to 2010. The success of National Law School (NLS) in Bangalore in attracting high-quality students to study law immediately after their schooling led to attempts to establish similar institutions elsewhere. As a result, NUJS was established in 1999.

However, Singh's worldview about legal education was very different from that of the founders of the National Law University (NLU) model. While the likes of Professor Madhav Menon conceptualised NLUs as high-quality vocational centres that would principally focus on training bright law students, Singh believed in making universities intellectually vibrant places, where imparting vocational skills was just one aspect. In Singh's worldview, a law school was a place to pursue knowledge and nurture scholarship – a task that students and teachers have to perform collectively. Singh was convinced that no university can become intellectually energetic until it has in its ranks bright, committed minds who will excel in both teaching and research.

A remarkable quality of Singh was that he never felt insecure about younger scholars. Thus, he worked in mission mode, leaving no stone unturned in his efforts to recruit excellent faculty. In 2008 and 2009, he recruited Shamnad Basheer and Sudhir Krishnaswamy as full professors at NUJS when they were in their early 30s, something which is uncommon in India. Singh advocated for Shamnad, emphasising that he was an exceptional scholar, and appointed him as the MHRD Chair Professor of IP law at NUJS.

Likewise, Singh batted for Sudhir, then an Assistant Professor at NLS, despite skepticism about his direct promotion to Professor. Time has validated Singh's decision. Sudhir went on to win the prestigious Infosys prize and has transformed NLS as its VC. Shamnad, who sadly passed away, is remembered as a distinguished scholar of IP law and for his efforts to unlock the doors of elite NLUs for marginalised sections of society.

Singh consistently talked about VKRV Rao, a visionary economist and exemplary institution builder who founded and developed the Delhi School of Economics (DSE). Notable figures like Jagdish Bhagwati and Manmohan Singh were appointed full professors at DSE in their late 20s

or early 30s. While they may be household names today, they were not as recognised in their youth. However, someone with foresight understood their potential and provided them with a platform to showcase their abilities. MP Singh is the Indian legal academia's VKRV Rao.

Singh decisively brought in another impressive group of promising young scholars. History has proven him right in his assessments of these individuals' potential. Unlike most VCs at public universities, who are often constrained by bureaucratic formalities, Singh stood out as a VC committed to headhunting. He actively sought out bright, talented and dedicated faculty members, demonstrating his unwavering commitment to academic excellence.

Legacy

Scholars may leave this world, but they never disappear. They continue to speak to us through their scholarship. Singh's scholarship will continue to inspire future generations. His students, whether at Delhi University or at other institutions where he taught such as NUJS, National Law University Delhi and the Jindal Global Law School, will fondly remember him as a man with a sharp intellect and high integrity who never allowed his tall stature to come in between while dealing with students.

However, Singh's legacy is not restricted to scholarship, teaching and institution building. It also encompasses an attempt to create a just and humane society that is genuinely governed by the rule of law and committed to the core constitutional values of equality, liberty and fraternity. As someone who was deeply committed to India's diversity, plurality and secularism, which he believed are rooted in India's civilizational ethos, he left his students and those whose lives he touched with a responsibility to continue working towards building an inclusive India. This India should be free from discrimination based on caste, religion, gender, language, or any other identity marker.

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