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# C. K. Prahalad, Proponent of Poor as Consumers, Dies at 68

By **VIKAS BAJAJ**

C. K. Prahalad, a management professor and author who popularized the idea that companies could make money while helping to alleviate poverty, died Friday in the La Jolla neighborhood of San Diego. He was 68 and lived in San Diego.

The cause was an undiagnosed lung illness, his family said.

Mr. Prahalad wrote “[The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty Through Profits](#),” about how companies could tap the poor as customers and, as a result, improve the lives of millions of impoverished people in developing countries.

His work on poverty, and earlier on how companies should build “core competence,” earned him a loyal following in corporate boardrooms around the world, especially in India. Though he had lived in the United States for more than 40 years, he traveled frequently to India to advise corporate executives and political leaders.

Anand Mahindra, chairman of a Mumbai-based business conglomerate, Mahindra & Mahindra, said Indian executives flocked to listen to Mr. Prahalad, who pushed them to be more adventurous in expanding their companies overseas and at home.

“He would say, ‘I just don’t believe you guys have enough ambition,’ ” Mr. Mahindra said in a telephone interview. “It had to do with his patriotism, his very, very deep desire to see Indian brands and companies succeed.”

Coimbatore Krishnarao Prahalad was born in the south Indian city of Coimbatore on Aug. 8, 1941. His mother was a homemaker and his father was a judge and prominent labor rights lawyer who wrote several books about Hindu philosophy.

In the early 1970s, Mr. Prahalad came to the United States to pursue a doctoral degree in management at Harvard Business School. After earning his degree, Mr. Prahalad moved back to India in 1975 but he arrived just as [Indira Gandhi](#), then prime minister, was declaring emergency rule and suspending many civil rights.

“As a patriotic person, my father believed that is not what India represented,” his son, Murali, said. Two years later, “they made a very tough choice to return to the United States.”

He became a professor at the [University of Michigan's Ross School of Business](#), where he taught until his death, traveling regularly from California.

Mr. Prahalad had established a reputation as a formidable business strategist when he started his work on poverty in 1995, according to the preface of "Bottom of the Pyramid." His daughter, Deepa, said her father was concerned about the lopsidedness of growth in India, which had begun loosening government control over its economy in the early 1990s — something that he had long advocated.

"India was starting to see some examples that money could be made and consumers could be tapped," she said. "What concerned him was that the focus in developing countries was often on the middle class and upper class."

In the book, he focused on initiatives that he believed had succeeded in reducing poverty. One example was [e-Choupal](#), a project started by the Indian tobacco, food and hotel conglomerate, ITC. The company provided computers to farmers so they could check the prices of soya beans and other commodities in various markets, and compare them with the prices ITC was offering. Doing so raised farmers' incomes and reduced ITC's costs because it did not have to use middlemen.

Executives and scholars say his research helped encourage companies to serve poor customers with products like small-size pouches of shampoo and low-cost cellphone service.

In recent months, he was researching new management styles emerging in nations like India and China and how to assure that the economic rise of people in developing countries could be managed in an environmentally sustainable way, his daughter said.

In addition to his wife, daughter and son, Mr. Prahalad is survived by three grandchildren, a brother and a sister.