



**Science
Societies**

A Good Model to Follow

Laj Ahuja Encourages Young Scientists to Focus on Solutions to Global Challenges, Help Others

By Denice Rackley

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Laj Ahuja, a soil scientist, systems modeling researcher, and ASA and SSSA Fellow.

“Happiness in heart and mind comes from helping others,” states ASA and SSSA Fellow Laj Ahuja.

Measuring his life in what he has contributed to the science community and how he has helped

others, Ahuja is grateful for his many opportunities.

Born in the west Punjab region of India in 1935, Ahuja and his family navigated many challenges. His

father passed away before his birth, and Ahuja was raised by his mother with the help of other

family members. When he was 12, India was divided into two countries, India and Pakistan, forcing

his family to relocate to the east. With the country in a state of extended upheaval, the resulting

unrest impacted every facet of life, resulting in multiple moves for Ahuja’s family during his school

years.

Journey into Soil Science

Wanting to remain near family and continue his education, Ahuja attended college in Delhi. At the

University of Delhi, he received a bachelor of science in agronomy and chemistry. He then had an

opportunity to work in the Himalayas (Himachal Pradesh), assisting farmers in adopting

improved

agricultural methods. Pursuing an interest in crops at the Indian Agriculture Research Institute, he

acquired his master's in soil and water with research focused on water management, micronutrients, and hybrid corn. He worked as an assistant professor for a year in an agriculture

college in Solan, India and then began his Ph.D. studies at IARI before winning a small scholarship

that funded his dream of coming to the United States to pursue his doctorate at the University of

California–Davis (UC–Davis) from 1965–1968.

It was at UC–Davis that Ahuja began his journey in soil physics. Under the tutelage of Donald Nielsen,

Ahuja became intrigued by soil physics because it integrates the entirety of agriculture under one

roof. This system approach has permeated Ahuja's work.

Ahuja held several research and teaching positions before joining USDA–ARS's National Water

Quality Lab in Oklahoma in 1979, working as a research soil scientist. In 1991, he transferred to Fort

Collins, CO, to work as a research leader at the former Great Plains Systems Research Lab, remaining

there until his retirement in 2017.

At the USDA, Ahuja gradually moved from experimental soil physics research that fostered a broader

understanding of soil science into an inclusive approach of modeling systems,

emphasizing the
practical applications of his work.

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