OBITUARY

A.K. Kasturi
(1925-2015)

A lean person, clean shaven and neatly attired, enters the ground floor lecture hall for the second year B.Sc. class (transferred from Salem that year-1969) and we students stand up and greet him. He responds and asks us to introduce ourselves. We do that. At the end of the process, he starts teaching the subject right away. There are no notes, books or paper chits for reference with him. He starts writing on the board various lecture materials and begins teaching. The voice is clear, sharp and resounding. There is no let up in the speed in the delivery of speech or in writing speed on the black board. The lecture hour is over and he leaves the class. The lecture hours on the following days also start directly with the writing on the board or delivery of talk. No attendance is taken ever after. It continues till the end of the academic year. But to our surprise, we see our absentee days for his lecture are correctly marked in our final attendance roll at the end of the semester. We admire his excellent memory and he remembers each and every individual student by name. That is Professor Kasturi of the Geology Department of the Presidency College, Chennai.

Prof Kasturi was born on 7th September 1925 in Chennai. He attended Besant School and Ramakrishna Mission School. After completing B.Sc (honours) in Geology in the Presidency College, he started his teaching career at the age of 19 in the Presidency College in the then Madras. He was transferred as H.O.D to Government Arts College, Salem and was at Salem from 1963-69. He was transferred back to Presidency College, Chennai. He was promoted as Principal, Govt Arts College, Tiruppur in 1976 again he transferred as Principal, Govt Arts College, Uthagamandalam (Ooty) in 1977 and retired in 1982. After retirement, he volunteered as a Geology Teacher in schools in Lafayette and Walnut Creek, California under the Senior Citizens Programme during his visit to the USA.

Prof Kasturi believed that field work is as important as the laboratory work. He arranged for field work near Chennai in the Upper Gondwana beds of Stripperumbudur for BSc students to give an insight into the world of sedimentaries at graduation level itself. Trips to Dindigul pegmetites, Tiruchy Cretaceous and Holenarsipur mineral belt were all unforgettable. He even arranged mineral experts to talk to us in the field to get insight into mining aspects.

Prof Kasturi was meticulous in planning and then executing them. He was an early raiser and would be in the field gear at the assigned time and would expect the students also to do the same. It was difficult to keep pace with him. He loved the field work in the Tiruchy Cretaceous and often questioned us in the field if we collected a good fossil. Once shown, he would describe all the morphological characters and asked us to identify. Then he would give the name of the fossil and elaborate on the palaeontological characters. Once the methodology is taught, he expected us to pick more fossils and try to identify ourselves. His favourite was ammonites.

Prof Kasturi was gifted with memory, details on the crystal models were at his finger tips and would teach us in a way that we remember the formulas and crystal faces well. It was a pleasure to see him rotate the crystal model on all axes and at the same time hear him reveal the characters and formulas. It would look as if a magician is teaching. When asked to clear the doubt, he would patiently give the details.

When teaching Palaeontology became difficult for other professors of the Presidency college in the recent years, Prof Kasturi was one of the rare ‘species’ of humans, who at the prime age of 88, accepted the responsibility of teaching Palaeontology to the MSc students of the Presidency college in the year 2014 for one hour for one full month. Such was his love for students and the subject. His first daughter helped him to reach college on time. He would arrive at 11 in the morning and directly go to the class and start teaching in a method he had been adopting when he was in service. It was after a long gap of nearly 30 years. In a condolence meeting in the Presidency College, Chennai in February, 2015, Ms G Gunawathy, a present post-graduate student, recalled his fatherly affection to all students and his clear and vivid description of fossils in the laboratory. Browsing internet, a book entitled “Mischivous chicken” written by Prof Kasturi was seen with the theme - the life story of a person who had direct contact with an acclaimed “Avatar”, not in a spiritual way, but in a day to day, mentoring relationship – his reverence to Meher Baba.

If you had ever seen an unassuming, friendly, lovable, affectionate and generous at the same time punctual and methodical, he was Professor Kasturi of the Presidency College Geology Department, Chennai. His method and attitude were exemplary. He breathed his last on 9th January 2015 in the United States of America. We all miss him.

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