

COMMENTARIES & NOTES

Appreciation: Professor B.A. Abeywickrama (1920-2011)



Fortunate indeed were those who passed through the University of Ceylon during the early 1950s. That period was adorned by many men and women who truly illuminated the academic landscape of the fledgling institution. Every faculty and nearly every department had their outstanding individuals who combined academic excellence with diligence, integrity, humanity and humility. One of the last of that rare breed was Bartholemeusz Aristides Abeywickrama who passed away on the 2nd of May 2011.

Born on 17 February 1920, his early schooling was at St. Aloysius College, Galle and later, Royal College, Colombo. He excelled academically at both, securing a large number of prizes. Entering the then University College, Colombo he won a Cambridge Studentship, the Sir Marcus Fernando Scholarship and an Entrance Scholarship in Botany. Graduating with a second class honours in Botany from the University of London in 1941 he was appointed as an Assistant Demonstrator in the following year. A Government Science Scholarship took him to Clare College, Cambridge in 1946. Studies on the ecology of temperate woodlands secured him a Ph.D.

(Cantab) in 1949. Returning as a lecturer, he commenced an unbroken career of progressive advancement in the university system until retirement in 1985. In addition to his specialization in Plant Taxonomy and Ecology, he served simultaneously in numerous science related roles. At a point in time, he was the recipient of the highly prestigious Nuffield Foundation Post-doctoral Research Fellowship for an year's tenure in UK.

He was meticulously neat and orderly, blessed with good handwriting, a hint of ambidexterity and a phenomenal memory that made him an outstanding lecturer. He was appointed Professor of Botany in 1965.

Then followed a period of exemplary service to the university system. Dean, Faculty of Science (1966-1969), member of the Academic Advisory Committee for the University of Colombo (1967), Vice-Chancellor, University of Colombo (1989-1972) and with the amalgamation of all University campuses, as the first Vice-Chancellor (1972-1974). His dedication was exemplary.

He was a member of the committee that recommended the establishment of the Natural Resources, Energy and Science Authority (NARESA), the precursor of the National Science Foundation. He was also a member of the Board of Management of the Sri Lanka National Science Council (1968-1977). He served on several sectional committees and the Editorial Board of the JNSF (1976-2004).

Scientific associations and statutory bodies had the benefit of his wide experience and counsel. This included the Ceylon Natural History Society (President, 1961), Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science (General President, 1968), National Academy of Sciences (President, 1980/1981) and Sri Lanka Institute of Biology (President, 1983/1984). He was the Chairman of the International Biology Programme Committee for Sri Lanka (1968-1973), the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Committee (1974-1983),

Coconut Research Board (1977-1983), Coconut Cultivation Board (1977-1979), Research Committee of the Tea Board (1989) and the National Science Council (NSC) Sri Lanka Flora Revision Advisory Committee (1990-1998). He also served as a member of the Advisory Committee to the Director-General UNESCO on Humid Tropics Research (1959-1964), the Fauna and Flora Advisory Committee (1958-1981), the Council of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (1972-1973), the Agricultural Development Authority (1978-1979) and the Palmyrah Development Board (1978-1980). In these capacities, he had participated in many international conferences by invitation or as Sri Lanka's official delegate.

Professor Abeywickrama was acknowledged as a distinguished academic and outstanding scholar with more than fifty important publications to his credit. In recognition of his outstanding contributions, the University of Colombo in 1985, conferred on him the title of Professor Emeritus and awarded him the Degree of D.Sc. (Honoris Causa).

Until his demise, Professor Abeywickrama maintained an abiding interest in matters botanical and scientific.

His wife Pulsara pre-deceased him while his son and two daughters continue a worthy family tradition of scholarship.

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