

OBITUARY: Professor PS Ganapathy

(10.05.1939 – 18.12.2024)



Perfect Blend of a Passionate Teacher, Ahead-of-Time Researcher, Excellent Mentor & Ultimate Human Being.

It is often said that a good teacher is God's greatest blessing to a civilized society. With his deep insight into a vast canvas of knowledge, he shapes the lives of his students by igniting a hunger for their quest. The best teachers are also those who guide their students on where to look to satisfy their quest but never exactly tell them what to search, probe and explore. He always aims to inculcate the traits of keen observation, effective assimilation and original interpretation of the knowledge gathered by them. A true master always endeavours to push & upgrade his disciples from mediocrity to superiority and greatness for the benefit of the society. This teacher-student bonding is an eternal association; hence, his influence on his student's life never ends. Professor Portonovo Somasundaram Ganapathy, former Head of the Department of Botany, University of Delhi (North Campus), embodies all these attributes of a great teacher.

Professor Ganapathy was born in a teacher's family in Bengaluru in 1939. He had his early education in Bengaluru and then moved to the USA for higher studies. He did his Ph.D. in Experimental Embryology with Professor Barbara Palsar at the University of Chicago in 1963. He then moved to Professor A.C. Hildebrandt's Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, for post-doctoral research involving plant cell and tissue culture-based technologies.

In 1965, when Professor Panchanan Maheshwari was visiting Professor Hildebrandt's laboratory in Wisconsin, he spotted young Ganapathy and invited him to join the Botany Department at Delhi University. He joined the department as a Research Associate in 1965 and became a teaching faculty in the late 1960s. He finally served the department as its Head from 1996 to 1999 before superannuating from the post.

Professor Ganapathy was a straightforward man of very few words. He was a silent worker who preferred to showcase his skills and intelligence through academic actions rather than a glamorous noise. Teaching was his first passion, and he was always concerned with improving the standard of teaching of graduate and post-graduate courses by upgrading the instrumentation infrastructure in the university labs. He wanted to create a state-of-the-art human resources resource that was fighting fit to take on all frontline challenges in plant science research of the 21st century in India and abroad. The wide range of topics he gave his Ph.D. scholars for their research testifies to his foresight. Some of his favourite research areas were soma-clonal breeding, experimental embryology, seed biology, in vitro mutagenesis & cell line selections for developing salinity resistance in crops, physiology of growth and morphogenesis and understanding the source-sink relationships in legumes for grain filling.

He silently but consistently inspired his students to dream large by asking tough questions in their respective research domains. He always emphasized to his research fellows that real learning in R&D research starts when we know and do something but fail to measure its relevance and application and finally make a meaningful presentation to convince other scientists. According to Professor Ganapathy, the real journey of a researcher starts from this point on. He also reminded his students that there is nothing like applied science; all good research must generate high-quality basic knowledge that could have several applications. Therefore, the first task he gave to his new Ph.D. student was always to identify the knowledge gaps in their short-listed field (s) of proposed research

programs. He then advised his students to prepare a list of all national and international research groups working in the exact R&D domains, which could be their potential competitors in the race. A SWOT analysis of these labs was used to make the focus and objectives of his student's thesis work crystal clear before proceeding with appropriate experimental strategies and designs. His doctoral students shall always remain grateful to Professor Ganapathy for these teaching tips and guidance that stayed with us throughout our careers. His fire of curiosity, ambitions, and passion for learning has always paved the way for them in their scientific pursuits. His influence was so motivating and ever-lasting that all his students continued their careers in hardcore plant science research or university teaching. "Believing in Yourself" was the ultimate guru mantra they all imbibed from him. We all agreed that all scientific discussion sessions with Professor Ganapathy over coffee in his room were like reading an encyclopaedia of human values and intellectual enrichment. Professor Ganapathy never encouraged his students to publish pamphlet-like short research papers with little meaningful data. According to him, all research papers must have stand-alone information of a complete story with substantial experimental data and procedural details that could be duplicated by any other worker for cross-checking its validity. Reprinting a publication and even a Ph. D. thesis must be a prized possession that should instil a sense of satisfaction and pride in the author's mind.

Besides being a diligent academician, Professor Ganapathy was an avid and voracious reader of scientific literature. He used to keep himself abreast with all current and the latest research developments in plant science as a whole, experimental in vitro morphogenesis in particular. Such was his brilliant grasping power that, on his return from the library every day, he used to visit the desks of different Ph. D. scholars of the department and keep a slip of the reference details of a publication that appeared on that day and which they should read for advancing their thesis projects. It was common to see many students rushing towards the library after Professor Ganapathy's daily sojourn. He emphasized that unless students developed the power of reading and analyzing the old and prevailing R&D trends in their subject of investigation, they would never be able to create the new for future use in society. He propagated the understanding that the

importance of research work could only be measured by the number of previous publications it made superfluous. As a practice, he asked his students first to show their experiments' failure or negative results because, for him, setting the limits of error is more important in science than opening the doors to infinite wisdom.

In addition to his academic credentials, Professor Ganapathy was an extremely polite, friendly and caring mentor who created an environment of authority around him with minimal power or force. He was always ready to go out of the way to solve the professional and personal problems of anybody in distress. He was, therefore, always held in very high esteem by all his acquaintances. Professor Ganapathy always encouraged his Ph.D. students to move out of their parent lab in the department to seek a job. He emphasized that they should independently carve their career niche on their own merits rather than on the crutches of their mentors' connections. All his students fulfilled his desire and excelled in their preferred scientific/teaching domains in different parts of the country.

Professor Ganapathy passed away on 18 December 2024. He is survived by his wife, Dr. Vatsala; his son, Vinayak and his family; and his youngest brother. The entire teaching and research community of the plant sciences in India and abroad was deeply saddened by the passing of such a noble human being who shaped many lives through his mentorship. This obituary note represents a tapestry of the heartfelt love, respect and profound gratitude of his students Ajit Kavathekar, Vatsala Ganapathy, Kumkum Shukla, Savithri Singh, Ajay Mathur, Kalyani Krishna, Ruchira Pandey, Saguna Dewan, Sharda Thakur. It attempts to convey a big "thank you" to him for all the life lessons and moral values imparted by this remarkable man. He will forever be remembered as an excellent scientist, teacher, caring friend and, above all, a wonderful human being.

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