

Panchanan Maheswari

The articles on the birth centenary of Panchanan Maheswari in *Current Science* remind me of my association with Maheswari which dates back to the early 1950s. During the period 1951–58, he used to come to Madras and to the University Botany Laboratory (UBL) for meetings or to examine our students appearing for the post-M Sc diploma examinations in mycology and plant pathology, a course aimed at preparing students for research in the twin areas of mycology and plant pathology at the UBL. The teaching of this course was shared by T. S. Sadasivan, K. Ramakrishnan, and myself. It was during the visits to examine our students that Maheswari used to call Ramakrishnan and myself and, much in the spirit of a student wanting to probe the mysteries of mycology and plant pathology, put us both through a vigorous viva on a range of topics and issues on the subject. These encounters brought out the best in the Professor and the worst in me. I became aware of how little I knew. We also came to know that Maheswari had a keen interest in the subjects that were supposed to be our speciality.

It was around this time that Maheswari founded the International Society for Plant Morphology and its journal, *Phytomorphology*. That I was not a plant morphologist *sensu stricto* did not matter, and he came up to me and asked me if I would not like to become a member of the Society and added encouragingly that I could pay the life membership fee in instalments. How could I say ‘no’ to a request from one of the stature of Maheswari? So I became a life member of the Society. In later years, he used to ask me to referee papers submitted for publication to the journal and always insisted on a quick reply, as he wanted to ensure speedy publication. He found time and energy to write and sign a postcard, when required, to remind me that a reply from me was pending. Essentially, he built up a personal relationship with those whom he knew that was of lasting value and this was a notable part of his personality. He was always prompt in his replies and thus set an example for others. He not only founded the Society, but worked for it and nurtured it with great dedication.

For some time, I was in Delhi as Professor of plant pathology at the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI). One day Maheswari asked me if I could go over and meet him at his residence in Probyn Road in the evening after 5 on

that day or the next, since he wanted to talk to me. He had decided to give a series of lectures on the history of plant pathology to his students and he wanted me to talk to him on the subject over a period of several days, preferably successively in what seemed like a prelude to the lectures he was planning to give his students. From what I had gathered about the Professor in my earlier encounters with him, I was certain there was no need for any inputs from me, as his sweep of knowledge and interest in science was remarkable. No arguments from me were of avail and he persuaded me to agree. I did not tell him that the history of science interested me deeply; I thought it would be wise to agree and, in the process, learn from the Professor, aspects or themes I did not know. We met almost daily in this way and there is no denying that I gained immensely from this interaction. The long bus journey from IARI to the university gave me the time to arrange my thoughts before talking to the Professor. As desired by him, I used to often carry a bundle of books such as the *Phytopathological Classics*, as he wanted to study them before he spoke, for example, about Millardet’s discovery of fungicidal properties of Bordeaux mixture and other classical discoveries in plant pathology. He was meticulous in seeking, getting and digesting information. He was equally meticulous in presenting that information clearly and attractively to his audience. I vividly remember a general lecture on ‘Plants and Man’, that he gave in the Delhi University in which, referring to the introduction of sugar beet in Europe by Napoleon, he showed a cartoon in which a baby was shown sucking a sugar beet at its narrow end, as if it were a feeding bottle; the cartoon appeared in the British Press (I presume) and carried the caption: ‘suck baby, suck’ – it was intended to highlight Napoleon’s introduction of sugar beet into Europe and its popularization.

It was also during this period that I was invited to organize the new Department of Botany in the University of Rajasthan, Jodhpur by Mohan Sinha Mehta, the then Vice-Chancellor of the University of Rajasthan. When the offer of a Professorship was delivered to me, I was surprised as I had not applied for the post. As I was in doubt if I should accept the offer or not, I sought Maheswari’s advice. He told me that he had been asked if he

would be willing to head the Botanical Survey of India and he had refused. He added that he always preferred a University position. Finally he said, ‘If I were you, I would accept the offer.’ My mentor, Sadasivan agreed with the view. When I accepted the offer, and after I settled in Jodhpur, Maheswari sent a note about me to *Nature* with the heading ‘Botany at Jodhpur’, which eventually appeared in the journal. This was a kind gesture and I knew it came from him naturally. Indeed, when I presented myself to the Vice-Chancellor at Jaipur in response to his offer, he told me that the offer was sent to me on the suggestion of Maheswari. Maheswari also visited the department and spent time with our staff and research students to familiarize himself with the research and teaching programmes of the department. He genuinely wanted the department to develop into a centre of excellence and he was a source of support and encouragement. Thereafter, whenever I visited Delhi on official work, he wanted me to visit him and the department before I returned to Jodhpur or Jaipur. He would ask me to see the mycological work being carried out in the department or he would share with me his thoughts on a variety of subjects. On one of my visits, he spoke of the handsome financial support that had come from granting agencies and said there was an expensive instrument that had just been sanctioned. Yet it was going to take time to process the order and import the equipment, but he had apprehensions that one of his colleagues for whom the equipment was meant, might now say that the instrument was obsolete and the entire process of procuring a more modern and sophisticated instrument would have to be gone through! And then he added: ‘Subramanian, in choosing and sticking to fungal taxonomy and your special group, you have done wisely.’ Continuing, he said that his choice of plant embryology and its systematic and persistent pursuit had yielded immense dividends and such unyielding pursuit was essential for the growth and development of our science.

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