

## Kelkar centenary (1909–1990)

Purushotam Kashinath Kelkar was born on 1 June 1909 in a Maharashtrian Brahmin family in Dharwar. He had his early education in Bombay and came to the Indian Institute of Science, as many bright science graduates did those days, to obtain a post-graduate diploma in electrical engineering. He later went to the University of Liverpool to receive a Ph.D degree in electrical engineering. He served in the Indian Institute of Science as a lecturer and left the Institute after a few years to be a professor of electrical engineering in the Victoria Jubilee Technological Institute in Bombay where he worked during 1943–56. In 1956, Kelkar was appointed as the planning officer for IIT Bombay which was to be set up by the Government of India with the aid of the Soviet Union. He planned the campus and many aspects of this institution. When IIT Bombay started to function in 1958, the directorship was offered to someone else and Kelkar was appointed deputy director. Kelkar did not have much time to mull over the issue, since he soon got an invitation by the Government of India to be the Director of the Indian Institute of Technology to be set up in Uttar Pradesh (UP). The new institute was to collaborate with a consortium of US universities, an idea that had been mooted by Pandit Nehru when he met President Kennedy. Kelkar went to UP to meet the Chief Minister and others and it was decided to locate the campus in Kanpur. He had discussions with the members of the consortium of US Universities which included MIT, Caltech, Berkeley, Purdue, Princeton, Ohio State and so on, to convince them of the need to support the new institute. The American participants were so impressed with Kelkar's ideas on building a new institution of excellence in science and technology that they joined this venture. It was Kelkar's view that the new institute should create, transmit and utilize knowledge in the most effective way possible.

Undergraduate classes of IIT Kanpur started in 1960 in the premises of the Harcourt Butler Institute of Technology in Kanpur city. There was hardly any infrastructure for teaching and research. It was only in 1963 that academic activities started in the new campus far away from

the city, near Kalyanpur village. Kelkar started looking for good faculty from all over the world, in which effort he was aided by Norman Dahl of MIT who headed the American consortium. There were no facilities of any kind in the campus in 1963. There was a student hostel, a nearly complete building with class rooms, a huge workshop shed and a few



faculty houses. One still remembers those hot summers in the workshop and crowded classrooms. The only thing that abounded in the campus was enthusiasm. IIT Kanpur slowly started growing. It developed new curricula, new ways of teaching science and engineering, new areas of research and new ways of evaluating students. The experiment led by Kelkar was so absorbing that faculty and students alike did not mind the discomfort of living on the outskirts of a city which offered so little. Aspiration and idealism held them together. Kelkar's extraordinary leadership was characterized by generosity, humility and unlimited encouragement to young faculty members (most of whom had returned from universities in the US and elsewhere). In tackling issues and dealing with people, he exhibited great sensitivity.

The 1960s in IIT Kanpur were glorious. It is unlikely that there will again be an exciting campus with such a body of bright young faculty and brilliant students. Imagine, the heads of departments were in their thirties or early forties.

They had the freedom to decide, plan and execute. Kelkar did not interfere, once he found that people were doing things in good faith and with enthusiasm. He knew how to support young people and through them promote excellence and create traditions. By the end of the 1960s, IIT Kanpur became the envy of many older institutions. People could not understand the language of IIT Kanpur. The phrase 'pursuit of excellence' was essentially coined in IIT Kanpur at that time. Today, the student and faculty alumni of this institute are contributing in a big way to the country and the world at large.

Kelkar retired from IIT Kanpur in 1971 and went to IIT Bombay as its Director. He served there for a few years, but his spirit remained in IIT Kanpur.

Kelkar was a fellow of the Indian Academy of Sciences. The Government of India conferred Padma Bhushan on him. He was a member of the Council of Indian Institute of Science for some time. He passed away in 1990. Kelkar left the national scenario quietly just as he had entered it.

I worked with Kelkar closely as a young faculty member from 1963 onwards. I admired him and enjoyed working with him. I was hardly 30 years old when he asked me to be the first head of the chemistry department at IIT Kanpur. We could do so many things in chemistry at that time, and could usher in a new era in chemical education. Towards the end of his stay in Kanpur, I spent many hours with Kelkar, specially after working hours, talking about matters related to science, education and philosophy. It was truly an experience, and a training period for me.

There is no way that I can adequately pay tribute to this great educationist and institution builder. It may suffice to say that many of us owe our idealism, goals in life and growth in our professions to the Kelkar days of IIT Kanpur.

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