

APPRECIATION

EMERITUS PROFESSOR BARTHOLOMEUSZ ARISTIDES ABEYWICKRAMA (1920-2011)



Prof. B. A. Abeywickrama, one of the most distinguished Sri Lankan Botanists of our time, passed away on 03rd May 2011, having attained a ripe old age of four score and eleven years. He had his early education at St. Aloysius College, Galle and later at Royal College, Colombo. He obtained his B.Sc. Degree in Botany from the University College London, in 1941. In 1945, the young Abeywickrama proceeded to the United Kingdom on a Government Science Scholarship, to be enrolled at the University of Cambridge from where he obtained his Ph. D. Degree in 1949. His post-graduate research on 'The variation in the field layer vegetation of two woodlands in Cambridgeshire', was conducted under the supervision of Prof. A. S. Watt, FRS of 'Pattern and Process' fame. Dr. Abeywickrama's pioneering research which examined the niche differentiation of a group of temperate woodland species is still being quoted in the international literature.

On return to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), Dr. Abeywickrama served initially as a lecturer

(1949 - 1964) at the University of Ceylon, where he introduced Ecology as a subject to the science curriculum for the first time. In 1961, Dr. Abeywickrama was entrusted with the responsibility of setting up the Department of Botany at the newly established University of Ceylon at Peradeniya. He took a keen personal interest in designing and equipping its laboratories. In 1965, he was appointed as the Professor of Botany, a position he held till his retirement in 1985. During his university career spanning 40 years (1945-1985), Prof. Abeywickrama held a number of important administrative positions. In 1966, he was elected as the Dean of the Faculty of Science and then in 1969 as the Vice Chancellor of the University of Ceylon. He also served as the sectional editor of the Ceylon Journal of Science (Biological Sciences).

Students of Botany in Sri Lanka are indebted to Prof. Abeywickrama for his seminal publications on the local flora and their biogeographic affinities. He has over 50 publications in the fields of plant science, environmental science, conservation and science education. He initiated the expanded revision of Henry Trimen's monumental publication 'The Hand Book to the Flora of Ceylon' (1893-1900), under the joint auspices of the Smithsonian Institution, the Ceylon Department of Agriculture and the University of Ceylon in the 1960s. His contribution to plant systematics has been aptly recognized by naming a plant species endemic to Sri Lanka discovered during this revisional process as *Abarema abeywickremae* Kosterm. (Family - Fabaceae) in honour of him.

Prof. Abeywickrama gave leadership to many scientific associations and statutory bodies. He was a founder member in both the Ceylon (Sri Lanka) Association for the Advancement of Science (CAAS/SLAAS) and the National Academy of Science, Sri Lanka. In the CAAS he served as the President of Section D (Life Sciences) in 1955 and then as the General President of SLAAS in 1968. In 1960, he was elected as the President of the Ceylon Natural History Society. From its inception and for several decades, Prof. Abeywickrama served as an active member in various committees in Sri Lanka's premier grant giving organization for scientific research, the National Science

Council (NSC), later named the Natural Resources, Energy and Science Authority (NARESA) and currently the National Science Foundation (NSF) of Sri Lanka. Prof. Abeywickrama was the Chairman of the Coconut Research Board (1977-1983) and Coconut Development Authority and the Coconut Cultivation Board (1977-1979) and contributed much to the progress and advancement of the coconut industry. He also contributed as a member of the task force that recommended the establishment of the Central Environmental Authority to safeguard the environment of Sri Lanka.

Prof. Abeywickrama always nurtured a strong conservation ethic. In 1954, at the 8th General Conference of UNESCO held in Montevideo, Uruguay, it was Prof. Abeywickrama who took the initiative to propose a resolution that research on scientific issues relating to the humid tropical zone be considered as a priority area. His proposal was accepted unanimously. In recognition of the initiative by this Sri Lankan scientist, the first landmark meeting of specialists in humid tropics research was held in Kandy in 1956. Prof. Abeywickrama served as a member of the first International Scientific Advisory Committee for humid tropics research. Since then, in UNESCO's biological studies programs, Prof. Abeywickrama rendered his experience and expertise as Chairman of the Sri Lanka Committee of the International Biological Programme (IBP; 1968-1973), and later of the Man and Biosphere (MAB) Programme (1974-1983). This was the time when the Forest Department of Sri Lanka, adhering to the advice of Prof. Abeywickrama, set aside representative areas of Sri Lanka's different natural forest types for biological and ecological research, first designating them as IBP plots and then as national MAB reserves. In 1956, he participated in one of the earliest scientific expeditions to the Knuckles region, jointly organized by the Natural History Society and Ceylon Geological Society, which revealed its natural history for the first time to the scientific community.

Prof. Abeywickrama also served as a member of the George Rajapaksa committee, appointed by the Government to investigate and report on the very controversial 'Sinharaja logging project'. He played a pivotal role as an ecologist and contributed to the initial scaling down and eventual total suspension of its logging and then to designating it as a conservation forest of international repute. It is a tribute to the pioneering efforts of Prof. Abeywickrama and like-minded others that both these forests are now inscribed as World Heritage Sites. Along with other conservationists, he once again voiced his strong opinion on the likely environmental impacts of the initial Forestry Master Plan prepared in 1982. These protests ultimately led to a complete revision of the plan and to a moratorium imposed on further logging in Sri Lanka's wet zone forests which stands even to date.

Prof. Abeywickrama was made a Fellow of the Linnaean Society in 1958, a Fellow of the World Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1967, Fellow of the Institute of Biology, London and a Fellow of the Indian Botanical Society in 1968. On his retirement in 1985, in recognition of his long years of scholarly contribution to the higher education sector and to conservation of Sri Lanka's natural heritage, the University of Colombo appointed him as Professor Emeritus and conferred on him the Degree of Doctor of Science (D. Sc. *honoris causa*). In 1996, the Open University of Sri Lanka too, honoured him with the conferment of a second D. Sc.

Over a time span of 60 years, Prof. Abeywickrama has been a colossus in the fields of plant science, science education and nature conservation in Sri Lanka. He was an erudite scholar, a righteous and unpretentious gentleman and above all, a role model. His demise has left a void hard to fill.

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