

Dr RJR: a teacher-researcher-administrator par excellence

Born on 3rd June 1949, to Mr. Rajaratnam, a public prosecutor and Mrs. Leela, a homemaker, **Rajarethinam Jebamani Rabindra** was blessed to grow up with four sisters. He completed his graduation in B.Sc. (Ag.) from Agricultural College and Research Institute, TNAU, Madurai and his M.Sc. (Ag.) and Ph.D. in Agricultural Entomology from TNAU, Coimbatore. He excelled academically to have the best student awards bestowed on him. His professional career began at TNAU in August 1970 and when he left TNAU in February 2002, he was the Professor and Head, Department of Entomology and Director, Centre of Advanced Studies in Entomology, TNAU, Coimbatore.

R J Rabindra taught at his own alma mater where he had blossomed as a student. Being a student awardee of ICAR and CSIR fellowships and a first-class grad and doctorate in entomology, Dr. Rabindra was a teacher par excellence spanning a period of four decades from 1970. He won the students' hearts as well as the best post-graduate teacher award, the TNAU gold medal in 1998-99. He authored several manuals for students and young workers in pest management and biocontrol, of which Mass production Technology for biocontrol agents written in 1999 is the bible for students even today. During 1992 to 2002, he was the reason for countless students opting for Entomology for higher studies.

During his career at TNAU, he taught both undergraduate and post graduates, guided



Ph. D. students, formulated syllabus for courses, designed practicals, wrote manuals, totally focusing on developing appropriate modules to metamorphose the budding young minds into scientists and teachers. The strong fundamentals he had created for the students helped them to learn and expand their vista of future goals.

Students of Dr. Rabindra reminisce about his unambiguous way of teaching with a great command of language and clarity of thought, even after decades of graduation, with most of them remaining as his ardent devotees. Many learnt entomology from him, while many more learnt leadership qualities. A man of great vision and high intellect, he simplified hypotheses, paid attention to minor details and gave a new meaning to perfection, while teaching.

Every Ph.D student he mentored would vouch for his methodical and meticulous approach. Always prepared for the long-drawn sessions, his clear instructions and constant training to impart knowledge and skill in conceptualization and conduct of experiments with complex protocols bespoke his relentless tutoring. He led by example in being curious, energetic and resourceful and set the bar high for his students, all the while gently nudging them to better themselves and watching with pride as they grew focused. His students never had to scuttle, as usually young researchers do, for manpower or material or methods during the days of research under his guidance. A student could totally devote his time only to research without a worry and their theses were accomplished well before the time. He stayed by his students' side always ready to lend a hand, in theory and practice. Each of his idea was well- thought-out, diligently processed and usually culminated in fine conclusion through refined and repeated testing. Then he let the students to explore further. There were never loose ends, unfinished details or hasty finishing of experimentation.

One of the authors, NG says "During my Ph. D days, he sat me across a small table and taught every single technique personally even when he was at his busiest as the Head of the Department of Entomology. He found time to constantly check on my progress with a word of appreciation or criticism or a challenge. He goaded and coaxed for better contribution. He walked me through the execution of what he taught and then set me free for rest of the experiments. If I am a confident insect pathologist today, the foundation was laid more than 25 years ago, all credit to him."

As a researcher, his major interest was on integrated pest management in pulses, cotton and vegetables. He was one of the leading insect pathologists of the country specializing mainly on insect pathogenic viruses for pest control. He excelled in several advanced research techniques in histology, ultra-microtomy, electron microscopy, molecular analysis for insect viruses, insect cell culture and isoenzyme analysis. Besides leading several Institutional projects, he ran more than 20 externally funded projects.

After three decades at TNAU, he switched to ICAR to don the role of Project Director in February 2002 at Project Directorate of Biological Control (which later was upgraded to National Bureau of Agriculturally Important Insects (NBAIL) and now is National Bureau of Agricultural Insect Resources (NBAIR)) and retired in June 2011. He was Director for two terms, a clear indicator of his prowess as a Research Manager. As Director of PDBC / NBAIL and Project Coordinator (PC), AICRP on Biological Control, Dr. RJR (as he is fondly called) followed a strictly systematic and meticulous approach to research management, coordination and national and international networking with various organisations. During his tenure as Director, he was more of a teacher and under his constant vigilance the scientists at PDBC were monitored and mentored as students by him, to emerge as meritorious researchers. He critically looked at the research results submitted by the scientists and further challenged to bring out their best. He firmly believed that lab results should be translatable to the farmers' fields.

As PC, AICRP Biocontrol, he was highly successful in the implementation of

biological control based IPM projects in 14 agricultural universities and 6 ICAR research institutes covering important crops such as rice, coconut, seed crops, pulses, vegetables, sugarcane, spices, cotton, tobacco and polyhouse crops. Dr. RJR received accolades from the Council for the success stories related to stake holder participatory biological control programme covering 5000 acres in Kerala involving more than 4000 paddy farmers in Thrissur, Kerala. Besides, he developed new research programmes for classical biological control of alien invasive pest species. Successful management of sugarcane woolly aphid in southern India by development and conservation of parasitoids and predators during the year 2005 led to remarkable savings for the Indian farmers which was the landmark achievement of the institute under his leadership. Another feather in his cap was the spectacular control of the papaya mealybug in India through importation of the parasitoid *Acerophogus papayae* from Puerto Rico. He sustained this effort by setting up a national network involving various stake holder entomologists from SAUs, KVKs, CIPM centres, AICRP biocontrol centres, ICAR Institutes and Department of Agriculture and Horticulture for distribution of the parasitoid. This phenomenal achievement would always be remembered as the ICAR's flagship success story. An eloquent communicator, he could effortlessly persuade national policy makers and international research community, regarding his concepts and missions.

Post retirement, R J Rabindra became the Dean, College of Post Graduate studies, Central Agricultural University, Umiam, Meghalaya, where he served for almost a year. He made stellar contributions in strengthening the college curriculum and

facilities, which was a great service to honing the skills of CAU students. He continued to be active, when he returned to Coimbatore after his stint as Dean at CAU. He was on several research advisory committees and from June 2020, he worked as Consultant for TN Government funded FAW program at TNAU. His keen interest in research, even post retirement, was evident during several occasions. He continued to actively participate in all symposia and workshops conducted by NBAIR and AICRP Biocontrol. Seated with the NBAIR researchers in the lab, he was visibly thrilled to confirm the identity of virus infected FAW larvae.

“I (CRB, one of the authors) had the privilege of being in the email loop during March to May 2020, when he proactively communicated (through his crisp and articulate mails) with various international organisations, seeking supply of an exotic parasitoid *Apoanagyrus lopezi* to NBAIR to target the invasive Cassava mealy bug. His last telephonic conversation with me was an interesting one, as always, on the indigenous egg parasitoids recorded in India on FAW and which among them could be the potential ones to be utilised for field releases. I will treasure my last personal meeting with RJR Sir on 28th February 2020 at TNAU, Coimbatore during National Science Day celebrations (with the theme “Women in Science”), when I received not only a formal memento, but beautiful words of appreciation and encouragement from him.”

His personal touch in all his dealings and delightful manners endeared him to his students and colleagues. We vividly recall his kind and clear voice, his smile and the warmth with which he spoke. Conversations

with Dr RJR, whether personal or telephonic, always began with an enquiry about our family and health or with a word of gratitude to God for keeping all safe in his family. He was always the first one to reach a colleague to console on a personal loss. Without exception, he had the most appropriate, beautiful and wisest words on every occasion: inspiring, soothing and strengthening everyone around. Minimalism was a way of life for him, be it his personal life or his career.

Dr R J Rabindra left for his heavenly abode on 30th June 2021 (exactly 10 years after his superannuation from NBAII) and is survived by his mother Mrs. Leela, wife Mrs. Alice Rabindra, children, Andrew Rabindra, Joshua Rabindra and Johanna Vikram John. Dr RJR was one of the “chosen few” who was a rare intellectual, persistent worker, wonderful orator, great documenter, team leader, planner, educator and an able administrator, with an unobtrusive personality and charm to lace these qualities. Being a staunch believer in the Path of faith, to anyone who crossed his path, Dr RJR gave something to live for. Today he has left his indelible mark in entomology and biological control as well as his disciples’ hearts.

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