

A Tribute to the Guru “The Diminutive Genius”



Ragnathar Kanagasuntheram

M.B.B.S (Cey); Ph.D (Cantab); D.Sc. (Jaffna); A.M (S'Pore); F.I.Biol. (Lond)
(1919 – 2010)

Ragnathar Kanagasuntheram, born on October 13, 1919 in Karainagar, a tiny village in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, had his early education at the primary vernacular school before joining the Karainagar Hindu College. Both at the school and the college he was always first in the class and won many prizes including the best all rounder prize. In the junior school certificate examination in 1936, he obtained a First Division pass, one among the three for the entire Sri Lanka. Later he moved to the Jaffna Hindu College and passed the London Matriculation examination in 1938 which enabled him to pursue his medical studies at the University College, Colombo.

His performance in the medical school was outstanding for he obtained First class in anatomy, physiology, pathology, Distinction in medicine, surgery and winning the Rockwood Gold medal in 1944. After completing the “House postings”, he also passed the Primary FRCS examination in 1947. But destiny probably did not allow him to pursue further in that direction for he decided to teach anatomy to the students and joined as a Lecturer in anatomy in 1948. His thirst for knowledge made him move later to Cambridge to do PhD in anatomy under the guidance of Prof. H.A Harris and Prof J.D. Boyd at Fitzwilliam College. A scholarly thesis on the “Hand of gibbon” earned him not only the PhD in 1952 but also the prestigious post of Demonstrator in anatomy at Cambridge, a great honour. On his return to Colombo he was appointed as a Senior lecturer in the Department. Again in 1956 he visited Cambridge briefly to study Descriptive and Experimental Embryology under Professor Abercrombie FRS.

The 1958 riots in Ceylon, forced Dr. Kanagasuntheram to leave his mother land and take up the post of a Senior lecturer at the University of Khartoum, Sudan. The shift to Khartoum enabled him to utilize the available facilities and finances to harness his research potential to a maximum. His work on primate anatomy brought him international recognition. He visited Cambridge every year and built up an everlasting relationship with Prof. Boyd. He also visited other research centers. Notable among them was his visit to the Laboratory of Neurophysiology at Wisconsin, USA, under Professor. C.N. Woolsey who taught him the neuro-physiological techniques for mapping the somatic sensory area of Galago, a rare species of lower primate found in Sudan.

It was in 1962 that Dr. Kanagasuntheram reached the topmost rung in the academic ladder, which he so carefully ascended, when he was appointed as the Professor of anatomy at the University of Singapore. Without resting on his laurels, he steamed ahead at the helm of affairs to build up the Department of Anatomy from scratch. On his initiative and perseverance, routine histology lab, animal house, micro-photographic unit, tissue culture lab, experimental embryology lab, surgical operation theatre, electron microscope lab, and electrophysiological lab, were all set up in stages, within a short span of 8 years. This enabled him to train seven PhD's in the department itself which included, I am proud to say, me and my late wife Dr. Leela Krishnamurti.

He has to his credit over 100 scientific publications in various International Journals of repute, some of which are widely quoted including Grey's Text book of Anatomy. Besides, he has also authored two books on anatomy. In recognition of his meritorious services, the University of Singapore conferred on him the title Emeritus Professor of Anatomy in 1980. The final accolade to his yeoman contribution to teaching and research was his election as a Fellow of Biological Sciences, London, supported by three FRS's. He was also the first Asian to be appointed as an examiner for Primary FRACS.

Professor Kanagasuntheram, affectionately referred to as "Kanaks" by pupils and colleagues scattered all over the world, was a simple, unassuming person ranked as one of the top academics from this part of the world. He was an active dedicated teacher of Comparative Anatomy & Embryology and a renowned researcher. Like all good teachers he was also a task master.

Strangely, destiny decreed that Professor Kanagasuntheram should return to the land of his birth, Jaffna in 1981 to take up the post of Professor of Anatomy as well as the post of Dean Faculty of Medicine, of the newly established Jaffna Medical College which conferred on him the D.Sc. Once again, the 1983 unrest in Jaffna forced Professor Kanagasuntheram to go back to Singapore and later to South Australia where he spent his last days with his children and grandchildren and playing Tennis, which was his first love. The distinguished lamp that started in Karainagar went round the world illuminating till it finally got extinguished in South Australia on 19th July 2010.

Prof. A. Krishnamurti
Editor in Chief