

Dr. R O B Wijesekera: A Scientist with Humane Qualities

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Dr. R. O. B. Wijesekera, the doyen of Natural Product Chemistry, and a much loved figure among all those he worked with, passed away on the 13th July 2021 after a brief illness. He was 92 years at the time of his demise, and knowing his abiding love of cricket, he would have said with a satisfied smile, “I have batted a good innings”. Dr ROB leaves behind his charming wife Marina.

Dr. Wijesekera’s illustrious career as a natural product chemist and research manager is well known among the scientific community. But not many know about his endearing qualities as a human being. I will endeavor to give justice to both these aspects.

Dr. R.O.B. Wijesekera started his research career at the MRI in 1952 where he worked on indigenous medicinal plants. He proceeded for his PhD to the University of Sheffield in 1955 and returned in 1959. He joined the CISIR in 1966 and built up a vibrant and active Natural Products Section producing research papers and patents at a prolific rate, and gaining much fame in the field of spices and essential oils. His immense contribution towards human resources development was the concept of a two-part Ph.D. system where several of his protégés were sent to spend brief periods in European laboratories by arrangement with his colleagues at foreign universities. Their work

was then used for presentation of doctoral theses at local Universities. He was thus responsible for the conferment of PhD s on several of his staff, for which their gratitude is palpably displayed by their devotion to him. Although scattered far and wide across the world they never fail to pay homage as it were to their beloved guru on their regular visits to their homeland. The words of one of his students L N Fernando, now domiciled in the United States, says it all. “Dr. R.O.B. Wijesekera, the man who changed the direction of my life, my mentor and my best friend”.

For the performance of research in this sector and his leadership, he was awarded the Guinness Award for Scientific Achievement in 1976 administered by the Commonwealth Science Council. The citation starts off with “*The Sri Lankan Scientist to receive the award is Dr. ROB Wijesekera of the CISIR. Dr. Wijesekera has for the past ten years built up a unit to study and develop the extraction of essential oils from plants notably cardamom, citronella, and cinnamon,- ...*”

Dr. ROB’s international career took off from here, when he served as a consultant to UNIDO-ESCAP on the essential oil industry. Thereafter to Guyana as Special Consultant to the Government and in 1978 he was selected by the WHO as Task Force Manager of their International Research Programme on Plants for

Fertility. Having proven himself as an able research manager, he was recruited by UNIDO in 1980 as a Special Technical Advisor to the Chemical Industries Branch and was responsible for the Industrial Utilisation of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants programme in several countries. He was instrumental in initiating major UNIDO projects in the areas of essential oils and medicinal plants in several countries, mainly in Asia and Africa. His extensive travels into the exotic and little-known areas in the world is vividly described in his autobiographical treatise titled 'Clouds are not spheres nor mountains cones', which was published in 2011.

After his return to Sri Lanka, Dr. Wijesekera came back to CISIR (then ITI) as the Chairman, in 1995, before taking over as the inaugural Chairman of the National Science & Technology Commission (NASTEC), when the S&T Development Act came into force in 1998. Although I meant to list his impressive achievements in brief it would be remiss of me to omit the letters behind his name. Dr. Wijesekera was awarded an honorary DSc from the University of Sheffield, a DSc Honoris Causa by the University of Peradeniya, was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Chemistry and a Chartered Chemist of the U.K., and Fellow of the National Academy of Science (Sri Lanka). He was a past President of both the Institute of Chemistry and the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science, and was also the recipient of the Presidential Vidya Jyothi Award. He was much sought after as a Consultant in both the private and public sector, and internationally. Almost till the time of his demise he served as Director/Consultant at Link Natural Products Pvt.

It is at Link Natural where I worked as the Editor of the Link Natural Digest with him as the Editor in Chief that I really got to know Dr ROB on a personal basis and I learnt so much from him. However much he aged, his love for reading scientific material never abated, and his innate ability to just skim through an article and identify areas of research potential never

failed to amaze me. He was a scientist with an incredible vision and he had an uncanny insight into what subjects would draw the interests of the readers when compiling the Digest. During his tenure as Editor Chief of the Link Natural Digest, the accolades he received from eminent scientists all over the world are indeed gratifying.

Another unique characteristic he had was his phenomenal memory. He could recall events of his childhood as if they happened just the other day and even quote verbatim conversations that took place. At first I was skeptical and thought it was just a figment of his imagination, but when it was repeated (on several occasions actually) the content was the same. And the most endearing quality about him was his genuine concern for the welfare of his staff, professional and domestic, going to extraordinary lengths to assist them in any way he could. As for me, he leaves an irreplaceable void in my working life as a mentor and sounding board. He influenced my thinking patterns immeasurably. As for his personal life, he was very much a family man and was an amazing husband, father and grandfather. He was so proud of their achievements and would talk about them so much that I felt I knew them personally. So much so that even before I met them, I'm sure I would have been able to identify each one of them if I saw them for the first time.

Finally, I think he would also want it mentioned that he was an FRCS, not a medical one but a Former Royal College Student who distinguished himself both as a scholar and in sports having represented his school in cricket and rugby. He would talk nostalgically about his school days and eulogize his Principal, Bradby who seemed to me to be in another plane when compared to present day teachers. Sri Lanka could do with more Principals like him.

Dr. Wijesekera led a good life, and I know he will reach a place where his actions will be richly rewarded. May attain the supreme bliss of Nibbana.

Ms. Dilmani Warnasuriya has served the CISIR for over three decades, having been attached to the Food Technology Section and Microbiology Section, and later on being appointed as Manager of Information Services Centre at ITI. She has served as the President of the National Library Association and as the Editor of Link Natural Products Digest.