

My Idol at AEC

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In this world of uneven distribution of merit & intention for excellence, my respected senior Prof. Aparna Kumar Padmapati ('Padmapati Sir' to all of us) is an exception and God has bestowed on him these two qualities in abundance & equal measures. For more than two decades, I had the good luck of seeing him from close quarters. During that period, I found him as a mentor, a senior friend and an idol to look at. Selfless, dedicated, helpful, I found a perfect teacher in him. Albeit, he acted moody at times; but that is a characteristic of every brilliant person.

Sir, during his days at AEC (Assam Engineering College), had been 'everything' for us, in the department of Mechanical Engineering. A store house of knowledge and inspiration, he would catch us, while gossiping, in our chambers or in the verandah of Mechanical Engineering Department and after a smile, would initiate a topic on Fluid Mechanics or Theory of Machines. *Euler's Equation* of Turbo Machines was one of his favourite topics. Truly speaking, I learnt a lot from him.

Sir had the spirit of treating his colleagues any number of times with tea and *samosa* in a day. In between taking classes, we frequently used to meet in the chamber of Padmapati Sir who could speak on almost every topic under the Sun with depth and confidence. That was because he was a voracious reader. The day prior to leaving for Chennai (Madras) to appear for my Ph. D. defence (viva-voce), I gathered some courage and requested him for a 'walk the talk' up to the college canteen so that I could offer him a treat and beg his blessings. He smiled and brushed away my offer, saying, "Why try to bribe me? My blessings are always with you." Then he took out his purse, called the attendant, Dinanath Sarma, and gave him a tenner to fetch us tea and snacks. I tried to interrupt; he didn't care and said, '*Tumi bhaale bhaale viva dee aahaa, taar pisot khuwaba. Aaji nelaage.*'

During my teaching days at Assam Engineering College, I stayed in the Jalukbari campus only for a short while and mostly commuted from the city. Every morning, Sir's first communication to me was, "*Kowa, Banerjee, Guwahatir kee khabar? Kaali kee kee ghatil mahanagarit?*" I would ponder over for some time, smile, fumble and try to say something when Sir would stop me and joke, "*Kiyo? Tumi dekhon jana je Paresh (Late Prof. Paresh Malla Deka) jowa kaali AMIE Coaching centre khulise. Tumi-o taat class loba, nohoy ne?*" To my reply, "May be," Sir would joke, "Why 'may be'? *Tumi to Pareshok 'Dada' buli maata, tomak to he class diboi...*" That takes me back to December, 1992, when Pareshda left us and he was my only colleague at AEC whom I addressed as 'Dada'.

I do not know how much he was aware of it, but I do know the extent that we talked, amongst ourselves, about Prof. Padmapati.

To ensure that his juniors in the department always held their heads high, Padmapati Sir saw to it that we stayed upright and upbeat. That called for strict monitoring and also for his occasional outbursts. But, no! We never dared to protest. Why? Simply because we knew the soft heart that our strong Sir owned!

In July, 1984, I was to join I.I.T., Madras, for a three-year stint, so as to pursue Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering. In due time, I got my schedule approved by Prof. Padmapati. And per norm, it was obligatory on my part to obtain an official order of release from the Principal of the college, prior to the day of leaving.

On the destined day, I went to college in the morning, wished Sir and prayed him to recommend my release to Principal Sir.

Oh God! What a turnaround!!

Refusing to release me, Sir asked me to complete the remaining portion of the Fluid Mechanics course in the 4th year class (the semester system was not in vogue those days), and then to join Ph.D. program at Madras. But that was not possible as I needed at least one more month to complete the 4th year syllabus. Over and above, I had vacated my rented accommodation at Rehabari, Guwahati, only two days ago and was temporarily putting up with a relation. I told Sir everything and also reminded him that I had set my program, including the day of boarding the train, only after he had okayed it verbally. I had, as well, handed over my prepared notes on the remaining portion of Fluid Mechanics to a new lecturer, Sri Pradip Kr. Mahanta (Dr. Pradip Kr. Mahanta, Professor, of today), per Sir's wish and advice. But, Sir wouldn't budge; my effort appeared to go in vain.

My ex-student, Sanjib Sabhapandit (of '*Kushal Konwar*' fame and maker of many classical Axomiya movies of today), who was my colleague those days, had been sitting next to me in Sir's room. I almost broke down at the sudden U-turn of my fortune. Sanjib pressed my legs from under the table and hinted at me to come out of the room.

The two of us went to the canteen. Sipping cold CocaCola, Sanjib advised me to act cool. "Sure," I assured him while returning to my room though I was fighting it within.

About an hour later, Principal Sir sent me a slip wherein he asked me to see him immediately. I hesitated. What's the use?.....Sanjib insisted, "*Jaaok, Sir. Ebaar jaaok* (please Sir, go and see the Principal)."

Principal Sir, Prof. Debabrata Goswami, was in his chamber. I entered. Half-open packs of three or four varieties of cigarettes, lying scattered on the table, greeted me. The martyrs-in-waiting tried to lure the Under-trial! I smiled at them. The situation was already smoky for me; I could not aggravate it further! Pushing temptation a mile away, I advised the small sticks of big addiction, "You, the sacrificing heroes! Why hurry for death? Have some more breath. After all, Goswami Sir is there to light your pyre." The sticks laughed, "You Mr. Under-trial, get your dioptré adjusted and take a fresh look at Padmapati Sir. Your vision will change." I couldn't get them really.

Goswami Sir lighted a fag, preparatory to opening a dialogue. That was his style. My eyes, in the meantime, had discovered a better target though. Glittering on the table was a one-page note that none but Prof. Padmapati had scripted. His handwriting was so familiar!

The eyes, for a change, acted very smart (effect of readjusted dioptré?). They left out the portion wherein Sir had replied to Principal's queries as to 'when is the Ph. D. program at IITM likely to start', 'what portion of Fluid Mechanics is yet to be covered', etc. Instead, they focused on the words written about my imminent release.

And, what did they discover?

Another U-turn!

Two consecutive U-turns meant no turn at all!

Good, very.... very good.

Padmapati Sir had put the earth back to her orbit! In his note to the Principal, Sir had recommended my release on that day itself, so that I could join the Ph. D. program in time.

My earth regained her motion with my heartbeat returning to normal!

I received the official release letter in the afternoon by 4 O' clock.

And interestingly, that was not the end of all.

I couldn't imagine that even after clearing me for joining the three-year Ph. D. program, Padmapati Sir had been keeping a track of this junior. Happy at being finally released, I almost ran to the college Bus Stop (Ulubari stop of AEC) to avail of the immediate bus to the city. My family knew nothing of the day-long swings. Cell phones were not on sale those days. Padmapati Sir, however, worked on his own signal.

Suddenly, a very familiar fiat car stopped in front of me. I could see Prof. Padmapati at the steering. He looked at me through the open window pane and eyed me to take the seat next to him. 'Oh, what a person this Padmapati Sir is! I cannot read him.' I told myself before reacting to his offer.

Thanking Sir for the good offer, I said that the ASTC bus, due in another fifteen minutes, would do for me. Yes, it's true that I couldn't yet get over the feeling of almost being bowled over by the spin of the sequences during the day. But, it's doubly true that I ended the day, without the bails being dislodged, because of our saviour, one and only Padmapati Sir. His love and support for us followed no bias. That is the beauty of a real teacher. He overrode my emotion of the hour and smiled me a lift up to the gate of Gauhati University, two kilometers away. While driving, he talked soft and encouraged me for a good doctoral work during the next three years at IIT, Madras. We nearly reached the gate when Sir saw a G.U. bus fuming to leave for the city. He speeded up and intercepted the bus, – for me to board it. I touched his feet before getting down. Blessing me, he smiled again. "You are peerless, Sir!"

I haven't come across too many seniors as versatile as Padmapati Sir. He used to tell me, "Look, people have a tendency to live extravagant and with excess baggage. You don't really need as many sweaters and woolen garments as you own." Yes, I saw many of our subordinate staff at AEC covering them in winter with clothes gifted by Padmapati Sir.

Handsome, in fact very handsome, Sir had the habit of not always being very well dressed. A genius, he hardly attached any importance to his dresses. On a day when the Heat Engine laboratory would function practically with the Cochran Boiler steaming and the steam engine/steam turbine fuming, he would drive Upen (boiler instructor), Dina, Badan, Jyotish et al. (lab attendants) mad and drown himself cent per cent into action. His dress would get spoiled and even drenched in water. But, lo! Who cares? Could be you or me, but not our Padmapti Sir!!

On the other hand, he did not fall short of praising his juniors' good dressing senses.

After retiring from services, Sir went back to his ancestral home at Tezpur. Once I happened to see him there. It was a wonderful experience and joy for me. We talked a lot about ourselves and our dear ones. I invited him to my place at Guwahati. He accepted, "*Jaam, tomaar soyalir biyaat jaam* (I will visit you when your daughter gets married)." And, to my greatest pleasure, Sir kept his words. I felt blessed, loved and honoured when he really attended my daughter's marriage at Guwahati on 17th January, 2000.

To wind up, I would like it to be direct with my Sir.

"Sir, you have moulded many of us, especially me. In the field of teaching, you are a name of which I am a follower. I will consider myself blessed if I can attain even a fraction of what are leaving behind. Bless me and May God be you."

About the Author:

Dr. Biswajit Banerjee, born at Jorhat, Assam, did Bachelor of Engineering from Jorhat Engineering College, followed by M.Tech. & Ph.D from IIT, Madras. Having spent a full teaching career at Assam Engineering College, Jalukbari, he is now actively associated with Royal School of Engineering & Technology, Betkuchi, Ghy-35, as its Principal.

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