

Obituary

Radhey Shyam Ambasht (1936-2012)



In memory of Radhey Shyam Ambasht, Emeritus Professor of Banaras Hindu University, I would like to share some words on behalf of his students, his colleagues, and the wider ecological fraternity.

Professor Ambasht was an outstanding botanist and ecologist with a lifelong involvement in teaching and research. He extensively studied plant species biodiversity, productivity, energetics, nutrient cycling, and adaptability in different ecosystems such as eastern Himalayan forests, tropical grasslands of Vindhyas, and watersheds and wetland vegetation of several lakes and corridors of the Ganga, Varuna, and Rihand rivers. His studies in the eastern Himalayas on actinorhizal *Alnus nepalensis* revealed significant nitrogen fixation and accretion which contributed new knowledge on biogeochemical cycling of nitrogen in Himalayan ecosystems.

Professor Ambasht was born on 3 December 1936 at Gyanpur and died on 3 January 2012 at Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India. He obtained his B.Sc. degree from Agra University and his M.Sc. in Botany, Ph.D. in Ecology, and Diploma in German Language from Banaras Hindu University (BHU). His Ph.D. supervisor was Professor Ram Deo Misra.

For his contributions in ecology Professor Ambasht received many honours and great recognition. He received fellowships from the Indian National Science Academy (FNA), the National Academy of Sciences (FNASc), and the National Institute of Ecology (FNIE). His awards included the Birbal Sahni Gold Medal of the Indian Botanical Society; the Platinum Jubilee Lecture Award of the Indian Science Congress Association; and the National Award of the University Grants Commission (UGC); the S.P.

Saraswati Prize for Ecology and Environment. He was on the Board of the International Association of Ecology (INTECOL) from 1995 to 1998. Dr. K.C. Pant (Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission) released Professor Ambasht's Festschrift 'Landmarks of Botany' in India at the Forest Research Institute, Dehradun in 2000.

Professor Ambasht's work was mainly centred at the Department of Botany, Banaras Hindu University, where his functions and positions included Lecturer, 1960-1970; Reader, 1970-1982; Professor, 1983-1997; Coordinator, Centre of Advanced Study, 1988-1996; Head of the Botany Department, 1988-1990; Council of Scientific and Industrial Research Emeritus Scientist, 1997-2001; Indian National Science Academy Honorary Scientist, 2002; Indian National Science Academy Senior Scientist, 2003-2006; and Professor Emeritus from 2003 until the time of his death.

Professor Ambasht was a long-time contributor to the International Society for Tropical Ecology (publisher of the journal *Tropical Ecology*), first as Librarian (1972), then as Joint Secretary (1973-1983 and 1984-1989), Secretary (1990-1994), Member of the Executive Committee (1995-1998), and finally as Treasurer (2001-2004).

Professor Ambasht shared his research results and experiences with the ecological fraternity by participating in and contributing to ecology conferences all over the world. He chaired many such conferences - to mention some, the International Tropical Ecology Symposium, Malaysia, 1979; the International Savanna Symposium, Australia, 1984; the International Ecology Congress, Japan, 1990; the International Symposium on Tropical Forests, Germany, 1991; the International Wetland Conference, United States, 1992; the International Ecology Congress, United Kingdom, 1994; and the International Wetland Conference, Australia, 1996.

He had a great passion for botanical gardens and natural history museums and visited some of the most world famous, sharing the learning he gleaned from them in his lectures. His travels took him to the Bogor Botanical Gardens, Indonesia; the Smithsonian Natural History Museum, Washington, DC, USA (1989); the Botanic Gardens of the University of Bonn and the Botanical Garden of the University of Osnabrück, Germany (1991); the United States Botanic Garden, Washington, DC, USA (1992); the Japanese Natural History Museum and Institute and particularly its Ecology Park, Chiba, Japan (1993); and Kew Gardens, London, UK (1994).

Professor Ambasht was a great teacher throughout his life. He taught B.Sc. and M.Sc. students for 41 years, from 1960 to 2001. He lectured college and university teachers in six 'Summer Science Institutes of All India and Regional Nature', as well as 'Talent Search' students. He was an active member of the team of lecturers in several refresher courses in BHU and

We can remember and appreciate the contributions of the late Professor Ambasht through the words of many eminent personalities:

Mr. Kazuo Inamori, Chairman, Inamori Foundation called Professor Ambasht "*an internationally respected figure in these fields [ecology and environment]*", while inviting him to make nominations for the most prestigious Kyoto Prize of the Inamori Foundation for 1997 and 2001.

Mr. Toshikazu Kase, First Japanese Ambassador to United Nations (1998) said "*Because of your influential position we would be most honoured to declare your support*" for the selection of Kamakura city and Hachiman shrine as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Mr. Kenjuro Izumi, Director General in the Ministry of Construction, Government of Japan (1996) said "*Your valuable lectures and panel discussions were truly interesting and useful. Your great contributions and advice to us during the trips in Shikoku are highly appreciated*", and "*I believe you are continuously playing a worldwide important role in the field of ecology.*"

In the messages for Professor Ambasht's Festschrift (2000), **Professor M. S. Swaminathan, FRS** referred to the "*monumental contributions of Professor Ambasht to the growth of botanical research and education in our country*".

Professor M. G. K. Menon, FRS, former Union Minister, said "*I have known Professor Ambasht for many years now, and I have respected him as scientist of distinction and integrity. His*

other universities.

Professor Ambasht made remarkable research contributions in the field of ecology and published roughly 200 articles, appearing in most of the international journals in ecology. He supervised 30 Ph.D. scholars and co-guided a few more. His textbook on plant ecology remains popular all over the country.

He actively contributed to several professional bodies; most notably he was a Member of the Academic Council of Banaras Hindu University. He also served many other universities on com-

missions, selection committees, and other academic committees. He was the President of India Nominee to North-Eastern Hill University Court and the Uttar Pradesh Governor's Nominee to the Executive Council of VBS Purvanchal University.

Professor Ambasht is survived by two sons: Dr. Navin Ambasht, faculty member in Christ Church

interests in plant related ecology have been very wide".

Professor John Lee, University of Sheffield, UK, and President, International Association of Ecology said "*Professor Ambasht is a distinguished botanist who has played many prominent roles in advancing plant ecology, chairing sessions at the International Ecology Congress and as a member of the INTECOL Board from 1995 to 1998*".

Dr. T. N. Khoshoo, Distinguished Fellow, The Energy Research Institute, and Former Secretary, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, said "*Professor Ambasht is one of the celebrated ecologists of India, having done some very distinctive work on the subject*".

Professor John L. Harper, FRS, UK said "*Warmest good wishes to Professor Ambasht for his so greatly distinguished contribution to botany in India*".

Dr. (Mrs.) Manju Sharma, Secretary, Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of India, said "*Professor R. S. Ambasht is one of the most distinguished scientists of this country in the field of botany. His research work in ecology, forest management, soil biology, etc. has contributed immensely in our knowledge of botany...*"

And finally, **Professor A. K. Sharma, FNA of the CAS in Botany, University of Calcutta** said "*Professor Ambasht's contribution in Wetland on different facets of Plant Ecology including his methods of quantification has already earned him national and international acclaim*".

College in Kanpur, and Dr. Pravin Kumar Ambasht, on the teaching faculty of the Department of Bio-chemistry, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, India.

To the end, Professor Ambasht was a great teacher, a marvelous colleague, a legendary ecologist, and an admirable friend.

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