

## **Obituary: Prof. Mohan Lal Banerji (1916 – 2012)**

**Professor Mohan Lal Banerji** was born on 10<sup>th</sup> September 1916 at Patiala in undivided Punjab. He had his early education in his home state Punjab. In 1938, he passed B.Sc. Honours in Botany from the Punjab University, Lahore, the then capital of erstwhile Punjab. In 1939, he passed M.Sc. in Botany with Plant Mycology as the special paper.

He joined the teaching profession in 1940 in the Department of Botany, Government College, Lahore and continued there up to 1943 as a lecturer. He then joined S. D. College, Lahore as lecturer and worked up to 1945. His name and fame was firmly established by the time as a teacher and the Department of Botany, Benaras Hindu University invited him to join as an Assistant Professor of Botany in 1946 and he worked there up to 1947. At the time of partition and Independence of India in 1947, he naturally opted for India and joined in the Department of Botany of the Meerut College, Meerut, U.P. in 1948, where he firmly established himself as a natural gifted research worker, speaker and teacher as well. In 1962 he joined the University of Kalyani, as a Lecturer in Botany and became Professor and retired on 30.09.1981.



He had traveled widely with his students and colleagues and made collections risking his life in different inaccessible terrains of India and particularly in East Nepal and in the N.W. Himalaya. He had always a soft corner for the lofty Himalayan Flora and having a special attraction for Nepal. In 1960, Prof. Banerji was awarded the Ph.D. degree in Botany for his brilliant dissertation on '*Flora of East Nepal*' from Punjab University worked under the supervision of Rev. Father H. Santapau.

During his stay at Kalyani University, he had two foreign assignments under Colombo Plan to Nepal to organize and set up a nucleus of herbarium for bigger national work, which he did with great success. He also made a precursor of Flora of Nepal. In 1976, he was invited by the Kabul University as Visiting Professor of Botany on Govt. of India deputation where he made himself a legendary figure in the field of Botany.

He had expensive mountaineering and hiking training and toured extensively to every inch of East Nepal as well as in the Himalayas surveying the vegetation and collecting the specimens as documents of floristic composition, analyzing floristic components, etc. His collected specimens are the important elements for compiling the Flora of East Nepal.

He worked in close collaboration with the Genève Botanic Garden, Switzerland in identifying the plant specimens collected by the Swiss-India Everest Expedition Team in 1952. He also assisted Rijks Herbarium, Netherlands and Makino Herbarium, Japan for the plants of Nepal.

Professor Banerji proved himself as an accomplished teacher and active researcher. He had 11 students who were awarded with the Ph.D. degree under his supervision. His affection and fascination had shifted to foliar anatomy, petal venation patterns, and plant taxonomy specially the study of orchids. He had his own garden with some rare species of orchids and some other taxonomically important plants including some garden ornamentals.

Prof. Banerji was academically a very rich person. In 1975 he was the first recipient of the D.Sc. in Botany from the University of Kalyani for his valuable contributions on the Flora of Nepal. Moreover, a number of honors and awards conferred on Prof. Banerji for his outstanding contributions in Botany. He had over 80 publications of very high standard of botanical work in different journals of repute. Beside angiosperms he has also contributed in the fields of fungi, liverworts, ferns and gymnosperms.

He had published 3 books on botany, 'A Handbook of Watermoulds', 'Orchids of Nepal Himalaya' along with B. B. Thapa, and 'Orchids of Nepal' along with Dr. Prava Pradhan. He had also published a book on Nepal in Nepalese, 'Yeah Ho Nepal Mai-Lay Jana Ko' (This is Nepal I knew) providing various information on this Himalayan Royal state.

Prof. Banerji's works were freely mentioned in many foreign publications like 'Himalaya: Life on the Edge of the World' by David Zurick and P.P. Karan; 'Bibliographic du Nepal', Paris by J.F. Dobremez, F. Vigny and L.H.J. Williams; 'The Flora of Eastern Himalaya' and in 'An Enumeration of the Flowering Plants of Nepal' by H. Hara and his associates.

He will always be referred for his works of the Himalayas, Nepal, Phytogeography, Taxonomy, Foliar anatomy and evolution of stamens and petals, development of vasculature patterns of leaves as well as petals, and finally the Orchids. Apart from professional knowledge he was proficient in different languages like Urdu, Punjabi, Nepali and English. He had a liberal outlook but highly independent in thoughts and action.

He was a man of strong-personality and was always jovial in nature. He was very outspoken and dynamic. He could not stand any injustice for which, in many quarters, when he made protests, many misinterpretations were obliquely explained on his conduct. But, he never compromised with principles and ideology he stood for.

He loved his colleagues and students just like the members of his own family. In the educational field trips and excursions his leading performance, technique of teaching and the involvement in field study and works with all can always be remembered as guiding force and inspiration to everyone. He will be long remembered for his subtle humor, wit as an avid reader, critical editor, untiring writer and lively speaker. His great asset was his keen desire to learn, teach and profess modern instrumentation and techniques.

Professor Banerji left us on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2012. He left behind his wife Smt. Latika Banerjee residing at Kalyani, P1/202, Kalyani-741235, Nadia, W.B. May his departed soul rest in peace.

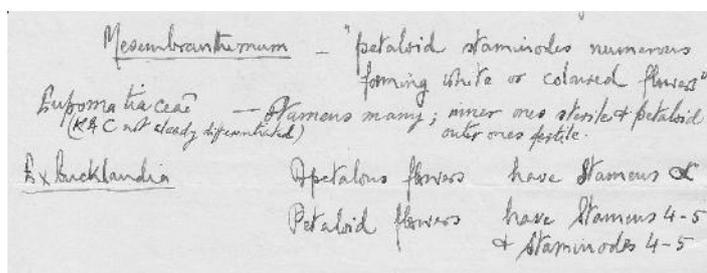


Fig.: Hand writing of Prof. M. L. Banerji

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