OBITUARY

Sanjay Kumar Chandra
(1939 - 2017)

Prof. Sanjay Kumar Chandra (popularly known as Sanjay Chandra) of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, breathed his last on 1st November, 2017 in his Calcutta residence as he succumbed to a prolonged illness deeply mourned by his wife Ruma, daughters Janasruti, Jabaruti, son Smarta and grandson Nikhil, as also by a wide circle of friends, colleagues and admirers in India and abroad. Born in an elite family of Katwa, a sub-division town of West Bengal, Chandra, had a brilliant academic career right from his early schooling to post-graduation and thereafter. After doing his Masters in Geology from Presidency College (Calcutta University) in 1960 with flying colors, he joined Moscow State University in 1961 for higher studies and research in Geology, availing prestigious USSR Government Scholarship, where he was conferred Ph. D in Geology and Mineralogy in 1966.

After completion of his doctoral dissertation he embarked on a remarkably checkered academic career spanning more than three decades, starting with brief stints in the Indian Council of Social Sciences Research (ICSSR) as a Senior Fellow, and in INSDOC at Delhi as a Translator by virtue of his proficiency in several foreign languages. He joined B.E college, Sibpur (West Bengal) as a Lecturer in 1966 teaching geology in the Department of Geology and Mining. He also taught geology related subjects in Indian Institute of Management, Joka (Kolkata) before he joined the faculty of Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi in the Department of Environmental Science, and the Centre for Social and Regional Developments in 1971. Chandra found his niche in the progressive and liberal ambience of the University where his intellect and talent came into full bloom inculcating his scientific outlook, progressive social and democratic values. He retired as a Professor of the Department on his superannuation in the year 2001.

As a geoscientist par excellence, Chandra earned international acclaim for his original research in Gondwana Geology. Throughout his scientific career he undertook extensive studies in Gondwana geology, both in India and abroad. His large number of publications in peer reviewed national and international journals which are deemed as archival treasure for Gondwana studies. In 2004 he collaborated with Vladimir V. Silantiev of the Palaeontology Department of Kazan State University, and systematically described "non-marine bivalve molluscs from Gondwana Coal measures in Jharia and Raniganj coalfields in India, and compared them with similar forms in Kuznetz coal basin in Siberia. Six genera: Gondwanella, Bakulia, Indomya, Prokopiereskia, Anadomella and Concinnellina were established, and also eleven species, all new, - indicating possible endemism of the fauna. Further, three stratigraphic intervals of the Raniganj formation were identified from the incidence of bivalve species which was key to inter-basin correlation. Chandra presented the findings in several National and International Conferences in India and abroad.

Post superannuation Chandra's interests diversified focusing among others on the geological history and paleogeography of the rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati. He amalgamated his deep knowledge of 'Rig Veda', archaeological findings, geology and basin tectonics to reconstruct paleogeography of the rivers, a classical work opening a new vista of research which assumes significance in the wake of recent moves to rejuvenate Saraswati, Yamuna and Ganga. He brought a whiff of radical thinking in the arena of geoscientific research. Some of his notable findings may be summarized as:

1. Ganga ends at Allahabad and is now a tributary to Yamuna.
2. Ganga is irrelevant to the origin and evolution of the plains of North India, east of Aravalli.
3. Ganga should not be hyphenated with Sindhu in describing alluvium, basin, trough or plain in North India. Diverse civilizations flowed here in two distinct settings. (CAS Lecture, CSRD, JNU, August 2012).

He also predicted Katwa, a sub-division town of West Bengal likely to be turned into an island in the next sea level rise based on paleogeographic revelations of the Lower Bengal delta.

A multifaceted persona as he was, his contributions were in varied fields ranging from geoscience to literature. Chandra had an exceptional mastery over several languages, ancient and modern, - Sanskrit, English, German, French and Russian, apart from Bengali, his mother tongue. Chandra brought to light several references to geology in the old Bengali literature of nineteenth century like those of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore. He also translated several poems of legendary Russian poets, e.g., Pushkin, Turgenev, Boris Pasternak etc., which drew encomiums in literary circles. He wrote and published exhaustively in Bengali, too. From popular science to creative literature, - a wide range of scientific essays, stories, reflective narratives, poems and literary criticisms, - he left an indelible insignia of his linguistic and literary talent.

Since student days Sanjay was wedded to left ideology which became a doctrine of his life. Chandra held a disdain for traditional, conservative beliefs and ways. In JNU a popular and successful teacher as he was, Chandra was a friend, philosopher and guide to many of his students. As a motivational teacher he introduced his students to progressive ideals, - radical and creative thinking, research and analysis; and freedom for thought and expression. Chandra was also held in deep esteem among his peers for his frank and logical views. A rationalist to the core he was averse to religious rituals and practices. In a way his life was a rare mix of left ideology and science.

In his demise Chandra has left a legacy of radical thinking, creativity and research in geoscience in India.

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