

IN MEMORIAM

Professor H.K. Kumbnani

(16 September 1935 – 24 November 2019)

Professor H.K. Kumbnani retired as a professor of anthropology from the University of Delhi in September 2000, after having taught for more than thirty-one years. He was ailing for quite some time, and I had not seen him for a couple of years. However, I heard that he was being looked after by his brother, as his children stayed outside Delhi and his wife had predeceased him. Although Dr. Kumbnani was alone, he was always in high spirits and his wit and humour was as animated as it ever was.

I had a special relationship with Dr. Kumbnani. He accompanied my classes – both B.Sc. (Hons.) Final Year and M.Sc. (Final) – for fieldwork. In 1971, he went with us to village Kamre in Ranchi, and in 1973, to Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh. On the first occasion, Dr. P.K. Datta, who passed away in 1985, was with him as our field supervisor. Since the M.Sc. class had batches of students specializing in physical and social anthropology respectively, with students of physical anthropology outnumbering those of social, along with him came another teacher of physical anthropology, Dr. M.K. Bhasin. For the supervision of social anthropology students, the task was assigned to Dr. B.R. Ghosh, who later joined the Anthropological Survey of India.

During those days, the B.Sc. (Hons.) Final Year dissertation of each student, based on a first-hand fieldwork, was supervised by a group of teachers – the ethnographic portion was read and commented upon by a social anthropology teacher; the physical anthropology portion had sections respectively on anthropometric measurements, dermatoglyphics, and serology, and each of these sections was read by a different teacher. Dr. Kumbnani supervised us for the dermatoglyphic data, which comprised a study of palmar and finger prints. However, for master's dissertation, each student was allotted to a different teacher, and the system of assigning it in physical anthropology was through the lottery method.

During the spell of my master's fieldwork, physical anthropological data were collected by all the students together and were pooled, so that each one of them could learn the techniques of collecting blood samples and their analysis, finger and palmar prints, anthropometric and somatoscopic data, demographic information, or on any other field that might have been introduced that year. In 1973, the department added to the list of the conventional topics

one on a study of sex-chromatin bodies (also called Barr Bodies, after the name of its discoverer, Murray L. Barr). Dr. Kumbnani those days was supervising a doctoral thesis on this topic and seemed to be quite keen to promote this area of enquiry. The data for this topic was collected by scraping from the inner cheeks layers of soft tissues with the aid of a spatula. The smears thus collected (which were called 'buccal smears') were spread on a slide, covered and stained. On each subject, two slides were to be prepared, one for smears scraped from the right cheek, the other, for the left. Data on this topic was to be collected from women, and from those of the castes of Brahmin and Rajput who visited the Government Hospital in Dharamsala. Since the data on buccal smears had to be gathered from women, the teachers decided that this task should be assigned to female students only; so my turn of learning the technique of collecting the buccal smears was destined not to come.

We returned from the field in early December 1973, after spending three weeks or so in Dharamsala, visiting a couple of places of tourist interest as well, including McLeod Ganj, the abode of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. Within a week of our return from the field, the list of the topics to be assigned to the students was ready. Neither of us knew in advance, or even had an inkling, of the topic that was going to fall in our lap, nor had anyone of us collected any secondary data or information on any anticipated topic. Some topics were studied a lot in the past, almost every year, like of serology, dermatoglyphics, tasting ability, growth and development, arm-folding, hand-clasping, and colour blindness; and a new topic like the study of the patterns of sex-chromatin bodies.

On the stipulated day and time, both the teachers who had accompanied us to the field came to the seminar room of the department where the students of physical anthropology were eagerly waiting to know the topics of their dissertation. For those who may not know, in the Delhi Anthropology Department, dissertation is given the highest importance, because it is highly scoring and can be a prelude to the future researches the student was contemplating to embark on. The teachers had brought with them folded chits of paper on each one of which was written the topic and the name of the supervisor. The students were called alphabetically. I was the last one to grab my chit, and as everyone had known by then, fated to write a dissertation on a study of the buccal smears, under Dr. Kumbnani's supervision.

I was excited as well as nervous. I was happy for I was going to be the first master's student in my department to write a dissertation on sex-chromatin bodies, and I was equally nervous because 500 slides of buccal smears from 250 women had to be examined, and the dissertation based on this work had to be handed over to the department for evaluation by mid-March. Each slide had to be seen under the microscope, first to judge whether it was clean enough to be kept as a sample or discarded. If food particles stuck to the smears, obstructing the examination of cells, then it should be rejected, but it had to be done after showing it to the dissertation supervisor.

Since I was the first student in the department to attempt a dissertation on this topic, which would also lay down a blueprint, a structure, for the future students, I needed more guidance than my fellow colleagues who would always look at the past dissertations for the thumbnail sketches of their respective works. Some of them unabashedly copied from the earlier dissertations, which were easily available in the department library; and some of them simply got the dissertations issued, instructing their respective typists to type from there, thus taking no pains of copying it down in their own hand. Those days, the word 'plagiarism' was not a part of our lexicon; rather the term 'cut-and-paste' was used but not with so much of derogation as it is now.

Because of the newness of the topic, I was totally dependent upon Dr. Kumbnani for his advice. He gave me a bunch of articles (particularly by Ursula Mittwoch), guided me to look for an M.D. dissertation (by Renu Kapoor) on Barr bodies submitted to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Delhi, and advised his student (named Neelam Chabra) who was writing a Ph.D. thesis under his guidance on the same topic to share her collection of secondary information with me and also help me in the cytogenetic laboratory in the analysis of data. I still remember his excitement when I spotted two Barr bodies in a pair of slides (a case of Trisomy-X). He spent a good time at the microscope, examining both the slides, moving it sideways, confirming the presence of the two elliptical-sized Barr bodies, and advised me to keep this slide safe, for the examiners of my dissertation might like to see it. He also told me later that if I chose to continue for my doctorate on this topic, then I should go to Dharamsala for a detailed account of her bio-makeup, her stature, any evidence of her learning difficulty, history of her illnesses, for Triple-X syndrome is a rare occurrence (1 in 1000 women). Dr. Kumbnani was very pleased with my dissertation, which secured me 70 per cent marks, highest in my class of 1974. He also wanted me to pursue my doctoral work under his supervision on chromosomal anthropology.

Dr. Kumbnani was known in the department as a man with 'big laughter' – when he laughed, it would be known to all. One of his colleagues in the department, who happened to know him from his college days, used to tell us that even as a student, he was popular among his friends for his 'cheerfulness' and 'laughter'. His wit was unparalleled. He told us once in the field how he got through his proficiency test in German language when he had started his research under the prestigious Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship. Dr. Kumbnani was in Germany when India had her parliamentary elections. A couple of days after the election was over, he had his viva voce test for proficiency in German. One of the questions asked to him was: "How many people in India voted in the national election this time?" The interview board wanted to assess his knowledge of numbers in German language. Dr. Kumbnani gave the approximate number of people who had voted, and then, he said, "minus one". "Why?" One of the members asked. "Because I am here," quipped

Dr. Kumbnani. The testers burst into laughter; and Dr. Kumbnani cleared the viva voce examination.

When I saw Dr. Kumbnani for the first time, his looks mightily impressed me. He was an extremely fair-complexioned man with rosy cheeks. He was well-dressed and relaxed. He made everyone comfortable whenever anyone went to see him. Whenever a student asked for a recommendatory letter or testimonial for admission, job, or scholarship, he would promptly take out from his almirah his petite, portable, typewriter, and would type it out neatly in the presence of the asker, sign it, fold it, and keep it in an envelope, and hand it over to the student smilingly. When the student would be leaving his room, he would wish him or her well. He was truly an example of a perfect gentleman.

He was always punctual in his classes and taught well. Having no pretensions, he never spoke of his laurels and achievements. Largely confined to his work, students, and family, he was a non-interventionist. In Staff Council meetings, he spoke the last, and only when it was needed.

Dr. Kumbnani's best self was displayed during fieldwork. He would exhibit his wit and the presence of mind. During my B.Sc. fieldwork I discovered his intense love for Urdu poetry. Since it was also my hobby – memorising and reciting the verses – he developed fondness for me. And, he would ask me not only to recite new verses, but also write them down on pieces of paper. However, he did not want every verse to be committed to writing, but only those who he thought touched his soul. Since I wrote these verses in Devanagri script, which he found difficult to read, he would write these again in Arabic script. Being a Sindhi, he was well versed in Arabic script. Once I told him that I also knew this script because I had learned Urdu in my childhood, he would want the verses to be written for him in this script.

This *silsilâ* (continuation) of writing verses for Dr. Kumbnani which began in December 1971 continued till he retired from the University of Delhi. A couple of days before his retirement, he came to my room with a wad of papers on which were written in my hand the Urdu verses. This process of writing verses had increased when I joined the department as a lecturer in 1985; and soon occupied a room next to his.

Dr. Kumbnani spent a couple of years in Benin city, teaching courses in anthropology. Since he was expected to lecture on social anthropology also, especially with reference to South Asia, he sought my help in arranging reading material for the topics on which he was supposed to lecture. Whenever he returned to India during vacations, he would discuss with me the course he was teaching. He described this experience of teaching in Benin as one of his best, for the students were attentive and look keen interest in knowing about India.

Not many people are known to me for reading the newspapers voraciously. Dr. Kumbnani was one of them. While reading the newspapers, he would tick the news items and articles that engaged him the most. He would then keep their clippings systematically classified in different folders. In his room, one could see files over files containing newspaper clippings. You name an interesting topic in science or anything bizarre or unusual, and Dr. Kumbnani will take out dozens of clippings on it. He incorporated this information in his class lectures.

Dr. Kumbnani committedly pursued the specialization of dermatoglyphics, guiding a number of doctoral and master's dissertations. In addition, he worked on human genetics and taught a course on it for several years. Among his illustrious students are Dr. Harshawardhana of the Anthropological Survey of India, Dr. P.R. Mondal of the Delhi Department of Anthropology, and Dr. R.P. Sharma (who joining the banking service after his doctorate).

Vinay Kumar Srivastava

Anthropological Survey of India,

(Ministry of Culture, Government of India).



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