

Teachers for all seasons

TEACHERS' DAY Instead of honouring our teachers only on a particular day, Gurusmarana, a web-based open-access archive on the stalwarts who worked in the colleges of Kerala, is an effort to document for posterity the achievements of the teachers

Almost two years have gone by since Gurusmarana, a web-based open-access archive, was begun to remember scholars who once graced colleges in Kerala. Several dusty, cobwebbed-garlanded portraits of former principals and heads of departments hang in corners of colleges in the city. As the years roll by, their achievements get reduced to a small name plate on the portrait and most students are clueless about those scholars and their achievements.

It was a chance remark by Education Minister M.A. Baby that set the ball rolling for Gurusmarana. "Seldom do politicians make creative suggestions but this time around, it was the Minister's suggestion that led to the creation of 'Gurusmarana,'" says Achuthsankar S. Nair, director of the Centre of Bioinformatics, University of Kerala, and the moving force behind the effort.

He continues: "Once the Minister had come to the department of journalism in Kariavattam to unveil a portrait of Professor Maxwell Fernandez, first head of the departments of journalism of the universities of Kerala and Calicut. The Minister wanted to know what was the professor's areas of specialisation and what were his publications; no one had a clue. Then the Minister remarked that there was no point in putting up a portrait if future students did not even have a chance to know more about that teacher and his/her achievements. The IHRD was asked to come up with a website." As the son of a distinguished academician himself, Achuthshankar decided to compile a profile of his father, Dr. A. Sukumaran Nair. "I hardly knew anything about my father's professional life. I was surprised to discover that he had been a student of renowned educationist Benjamin Bloom himself," recalls Dr. Achuthshankar.



DOCUMENTING HISTORY

Achuthsankar S. Nair

PHOTO: S. MAHINSHA

tions, where they taught and so on. But not a single person bothered to revert with information. It is as if people don't care," rues the academician.

It has been a one-man effort so far. But he has no regrets. Saying it has been a great experience to walk back in time to discover the stalwarts who had once headed the departments and taught generations of students in Kerala, he elaborates: "We often talk about the falling standards in our colleges. This journey back in time

that reveals the academic lineage of the teachers and their academic achievements show how much we have fallen."

The site does not merely profile the teachers and their degrees. It also has articles, lecture notes, research papers and books of the scholars and in case of singers and musicians, clippings of their performances as well. For instance the data on playback singer and Carnatic vocalist Professor C.K. Revamma (who was the first to take a doctorate in music from the University of Kerala) has photographs, media reports and excerpts from her performances.

"Many of them did not tom-tom their credentials or achievements. It would be a pity if we were to forget them. My own teacher Dr. K.P.P. Pillai was a rank holder all through his student life. He was a linguist who mastered Sanskrit and Hindi and translated Pala Narayan Nair's poems into Hindi. Yet, he is so reluctant to talk about this and has to be nudged and prodded to reveal a little about himself," says his awestruck former student. The contributions of 220 teachers have been archived. Dr. Achuthshankar agrees that now it is city-centric. But he hopes that more students chip in to provide information about their former teachers and enrich the archives: "I have submitted a proposal to the Government to ensure that when each teacher retires, the Government should ensure that they also hand in a CD of their biodata (which would be financed by the Government) to keep this archive alive."

And yes, the information on Professor Fernandez has also been included on the site

www.gurusmarana.ihrd.ac.in

SARASWATHY NAGARAJAN

Treasure trove of information

He adds that his father has been a treasure trove of information on former professors. For instance, when he was compiling a profile of Professor U.S. Nair, his father was able to come up with comprehensive information that proved to be correct when he double checked with U.S. Nair's son.

Later, Dr. Achuthshankar went to the University College and photographed the portraits there. "My father was able to identify many of those pictures and then I searched the net and spoke to children or students of the former academicians to gather information on them," he adds.

He also gave brochures about the project and the site to every college that comes under the University of Kerala. He even went to the extent of preparing a template for potential contributors so that their work would be easy. "All they had to do was fill in the name of the teacher, his/her qualifica-

Did you know

Professor P. Sundaram Pillai

(1855-1897) was professor of philosophy at the University College. He bought a piece of land in Perurkada and named it Harveypuram after his mentor and Principal Professor Harvey. He wrote *Tamil Thai Vazhth*, a sort of State anthem of Tamil Nadu.

Dr. Alexander Crichton Mitchell

(1864-1952) was professor of Physics and later Principal of University College. He designed the building of the Physics laboratory of University College.

Professor Louise Ouwerkerk

a postgraduate in economics from Cambridge, taught the subject at the Government College for Women from 1929 to 39. Her book *No Elephants for the Maharaja* was published in 1994.

Thomas Malcolm Muggerridge

Editor of *Punch*, taught journalism in U.C. College, Aluva. His autobiography *The Chronicles of My Wasted Years* has a chapter on Aluva when he talks about meeting Mahatma Gandhiji, and an evocative description of the riverside at night.

Dr. C.O. Karunakaran

(1893-1970) was the first Principal of the Trivandrum Medical College. He reminisces about the challenges in setting up the college.

The site has extensive information on these teacher and more.