

Obituary

Professor Sharad Rajaguru
(26/11/1933 – 14/12/2022)



Professor Sharad Rajaguru is one of the few truly endearing personalities, popular with his friends and students alike. He is Raja to his friends and Guruji to his students, and Rajaguruji to many of his colleagues. As I sit down to write a few words, memories flush back in my mind. I remembered when I met with Sir in Mongalkot excavation camp probably in January 2010. At 10 pm on a winter night the first question I was asked 'what is soil?'. Sir explaining to me details about landform, rock, quaternary geology etc. He was probably the only Quaternary geoarchaeologist in India, unparalleled among his colleagues for his personal knowledge of fluvial Quaternary sequences in the various physiographic regions of India. He lives his field-work with tireless enthusiasm and intensity. His contribution to our understanding of man-land relationships during the Quaternary has been recognized as influential both within the country and abroad. While guiding and supervising the research of his numerous doctoral students he has been able to put many of the different environmental

regions of this Subcontinent on the Quaternary map of the world. He has been deeply involved in the fields of palaeoclimatology, the palaeomonsoon, sea level changes, fluvial geomorphology, duricrusts, palaeopedology, sedimentary geology, and the geoarchaeology of humid and arid environments as well as periglacial environments. Above all he is a kind-hearted scholar whose commitment to research and to his students has introduced in them a deep sense of respect, admiration and gratitude.

Professor Rajaguru was born in Pune in 1933 in a traditional middle class Maharashtrian family. His father ran a small book and stationery shop and his mother was a housewife. As the only child of his parents, he enjoyed their loving care, good humour and protection. Though the modest family and the absence of an academic environment did not provide adequate mental motivation to the growing child but the intellectual climate outside the home was very strong. Pune was the epicenter of the Swadeshi movement and many dedicated local freedom fighters dominated the country's political scene. Gandhiji was very much the focus of this movement. The entire middle class of Pune was under his influence, and the Rajagurus were no exception. As a teenager Rajaguru never missed an opportunity to accompany his mother to Gandhiji's prayer meetings. Gandhiji's philosophy of the simple life, his concern for the poor, patriotism, his support of non-violence made a tremendous impression on Rajaguru. He studied in a school and college run by the Deccan Education Society founded by Lokmanya Tilak. He recalled his school days with great affection and speaks of his teachers as having deeply influenced and prepared his attitudes to life. During his early college days Rajaguru had been drifting into too many extra-curricular activities. Instead of being in the classroom, he was seen more often at theatres showing English films, in the swimming pool or cycling all over the countryside. Professor K.V. Kelkar, his geology teacher at Fergusson College was not only a teacher but a philosopher-guide to him. He induced Rajaguru to study geology more seriously, reminding him of his duties as an educated citizen and awakening him an awareness of his responsibilities.

He obliged his happiness and much else to his wife Sudha Rajaguru, the inspiration behind his successful academic pursuits. Her involvement in his life coincided with his entry into the Deccan College. Subsequently she never let him look back and shouldered the burden

of domestic responsibilities. She dedicated herself to looking after his parents and to bringing up their two children, Anita (now an architect) and Mihir (an engineer). Rajaguru also developed strong bonds with his children. He inherited the shop his father owned and occasionally spends a couple of hours there reliving childhood memories.

After his geology degree he worked briefly at Jamshedpur as a technical assistant in the National Metallurgical Laboratory, in Nagpur with Khandelwala Ferro Alloys and in the High Explosives Factory in Pune. He was, however, unhappy with the bureaucratic government organizations. His desire to obtain a Ph.D. brought him into contact with Professor Sankalia in 1958. In 1960 he joined the faculty of the Deccan College where he remained for the rest of his professional life and where he enjoyed complete freedom to pursue his academic interests. This has given most productive and successful phase of his life with an enduring effect on the Quaternary geology and geoarchaeology of peninsular India.

When Professor Sankalia took Rajaguru to the Narmada valley to re-examine the Quaternary stratigraphy constructed by earlier workers, he was filled with anxiety about his ability to step into the shoes of scientists such as H. De Terra, T.T. Paterson, F.E. Zeuner, R.V. Joshi and others. At that time Indian prehistory was query with numerous stratigraphic puzzles, especially in the Narmada valley, where the problem of the alluvial sequence provided a fundamental challenge to his geological expertise. Working with his colleagues at various archaeological sites and on his own doctoral thesis laid the foundation of his future research programmes.

When in 1972 Rajguru receive the offer of a post-doctoral fellowship from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies at Canberra, he left the College to work for a year with Professor J.M. Bowler at the Australian National University's School of Biogeography and Geomorphology. Here he came under the friendly spell of Professor Bowler, a giant of a man, physically and intellectually, and a dominant figure in the field of Quaternary studies in the southern Hemisphere. Working with Bowler he experienced the intellectual encouragement and excitement that refreshed his hidden scholarly talents, covert since his college days. While at ANU he was associated with the discovery of Mungo man in the Central Australian desert. At that time (1974) this was the earliest evidence of man in Australia. Here he also felt for the

first time the real pleasure of scientific enquiry and the physical pressures generated by intensive field-work. This however, gave him both the confidence and a new sense of self to be able to pick up from where Professor Zeuner had left environmental archaeology in India. Fresh from his Australian experience he initiated a detailed study of Saurashtra and the desert geomorphic systems of Rajasthan. In addition, the study of the palaeo-monsoon and its relationship to desertification in northwest India became an obsession with him since his return to India.

During the last three and a half decades, beginning with his doctoral dissertation on the Late Quaternary history of the Mula-Mutha valley in the Bhima basin, he has carried out Quaternary research across mainland western India, in Saurashtra, along the Konkan and Goa coasts, in the central Narmada valley, the Kashmir and Manipur valleys, in the Garo Hills, along the upper and middle reaches of the Deccan rivers north of the Kaveri, on the southeast coast and Susunia hill, Lower Subarnarekha and Kharla river valley of Eastern India. He has identified Quaternary problems over much of the Subcontinent and addressed them through successfully guiding his research students. Till date he has authored or co-authored as many as 255 papers, in both international and national journals. He has collaborated with many well-known Quaternarists in the world.

Until recently most earth scientists believed that Quaternary environments of the Deccan have been largely stable and that the Pleistocene history of the region was relatively uneventful. When assessed against the comparative perfection of the Quaternary records in the Himalayan and Sub-Himalayan regions, the Deccan sediments are thin, lack vertical development and are apparently unsuitable for detailed studies. However, Professor Rajaguru's work during the last few decades has disproved this. Professor Rajaguru has established that the changes in fluvial environments and climatic conditions during the Quaternary in India coincided with global events within the inter-tropical zone.

Professor Rajaguru's interest in the problem of laterites their genesis and potential for palaeoclimatic interpretation goes back to his student days. He is of the opinion that laterites are the only Neogene formation in the Deccan Volcanic Province that can contribute to the reconstruction of Tertiary climates. Furthermore, on the basis of his studies in the semi-arid

parts of Maharashtra he has identified at least two generations of laterites. His work revealed that the laterites occurring in the Western Ghats were formed close to sea level, and subsequently uplifted to their present position.

Professor Rajaguru's collaborative work in the Thar desert of Rajasthan (1979-1992) with V.N. Misra, D.P. Agrawal, Gurdip Singh, Robert Wasson, R.P. Dhir, A.K. Singhvi promises to yield positive results on the dynamics of man-land interaction. Multidisciplinary studies on the dune sediments around Didwana have helped in reconstructing the evolutionary history of the Thar desert along its eastern margins. Professor Rajaguru's focus has been on the integration of the palaeomonsoons and human activity in the area. This work also highlights the importance of the desert for the Indian monsoon.

During the last decade Professor Rajaguru has studied relict soils including laterites, ferricretes, calcretes and vertisols in different parts of western Rajasthan and Maharashtra and Bengal ranging in age from the Early Tertiary to the Early Pleistocene. According to him, ferricretes formed on a relatively flat landscape probably close to the sea level under an equatorial humid climate. He is of the opinion that the monsoon pattern prevalent during their formation was different from that during the Late Quaternary because of the low elevation of the Tibet Himalayas.

Professor Rajaguru has also attempted a study of natural site formation processes in the context of a Middle Palaeolithic site in the central Narmada valley. He undertook a detailed geomorphological study of the region around Samnapur as well as a reconnaissance study of a stretch of the river between Jabalpur and Narsinghpur. His work revealed that the present course of the Narmada is not older than early Late Pleistocene, while some tributary streams appear to pre-date the Narmada. He further observes that the grouping of the Narmada alluvium warrants reconsideration and revision.

Professor Rajaguru's work has won him recognition and honour. He has been a research guide of the University of Poona in both geology and archaeology. He was elected President of the Indian Society for Prehistoric and Quaternary Studies in 1982. He was a Member of the Research Advisory Council of the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology, Dehradun from 1985

to 1988 and also a Member of the Expert Advisory Committee on Palaeoclimate Research in India (1988-89) established by the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India. He was elected Fellow of the National Academy of Sciences (Allahabad) in 1990. For several years he served as Head of the University Department of Archaeology and was appointed Joint Director of the Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute in 1991. He has delivered invited lectures in many universities in India and abroad. His international recognition is securely established. He is on the editorial boards of three international journals: Geomorphology, Geoarchaeology and the Journal of Archaeological Science, as well as being sometime editor of *Man and Environment* the journal of the Indian Society for Prehistoric and Quaternary Studies.

Professor Rajaguru dislikes arrogance, authoritarian attitudes, flattery and showmanship and prefers to keep away from people in high places. He is a man of clear sincerity, and total commitment to his work. He greatly enjoys working on wide ranging topics and with different scholars from diverse regions and cultural backgrounds. He derives great satisfaction from working with his students from different parts of India and the neighbouring countries. He is dedicated to helping them address their own research problems and shares his knowledge and experience. In this way he has proven himself to be a teacher in the truest sense. In turn, Guruji remembers with a sense of gratitude the warm hospitality he has received in his students' homes in Assam, Karnataka, Kashmir, Kerala, Manipur, West Bengal and Iran. His close personal relationship with them has had an important effect on his outlook on people, culture, religion and politics.

Last few years, Professor Rajaguru has been invited on several occasions by CASTEL, Kolkata to deliver lectures on 'Introduction to Prehistory' course. He has never declined the request to lecture, often agreeing to an invitation extended with a notice of a few days or his ill-health. Actually, he loves to come to Kolkata & Bengal. Whenever he visited Kolkata, he told me, 'Please be kind to students. You do not know what they may be facing outside the classroom'. Whenever he used to come, stays at my home and did not prefer to stay at any hotel or guest house.

He was much more than an academic pundit. He was always there for his students. Always surrounded by his students, he is Guruji to his students. Above all he is a kind-hearted scholar whose commitment to research and to his students has introduced in them a deep sense of respect, admiration and gratitude. He was not yet resigned to the idea of retirement. He is a man of clear sincerity, and total commitment to his work. I remembered that Sir came to Kolkata in January 2020 before Covid and delivered Dharani Sen Memorial lecture and we visited Suarnarekha valley, Jharkhand. His energy in the classroom as well as fieldwork amazed us all. While travelling in train coaches, probably to field trips, so often he would sit and silently read and write notes. His modesty is typical when he says he has learnt a lot from his students. His passion and love for the subject and especially young students is unmatched. From the core of my heart, I pray for his sole and deep condolence. Om Shanti!

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