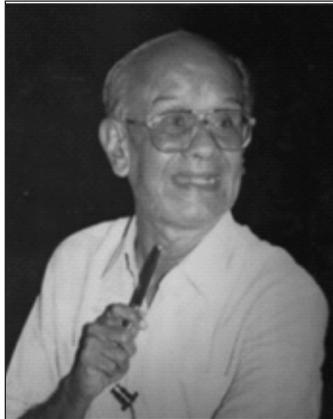


## ***Obituary - Prof. B. Arunachalam***



**Remembering Prof. B. Arunachalam**  
(1933---2014)

It was the month of June in 1970. As I hastily entered my introductory first year B.A. Geography class in Parle (now Sathaye) College, a darkish, bespectacled, frail but smartly agile person, engaged in drawing a figure on the blackboard beckoned me to enter the quiet classroom. Soon the silence in the class was broken by a bullet speed roll call followed by a lively lecture on the cycle of erosion and landforms replete with interesting illustrations. Despite the initial struggle to catch up with the pace of his delivery, the class ended with an overwhelming feel of a good lecture.

That was my first encounter with Prof. B. Arunachalam with whom I was to get associated as a P.G. student and later on as a colleague in the University Department for almost twelve years till he retired as Head in 1993. As I was returning from his

residence in the Mumbai suburb of Andheri, after bidding this stalwart of Geography and my teacher last farewell on December, 17, 2014, reminiscences of his academic life and personality traits crowded my mind.

Born in Tamil Nadu on 01-07-1933 and initially educated at Cuddalore, Balsubramiam Arunachalam completed his Masters Honours in Geography with Mathematical Cartography as specialization from the Presidency College, Chennai. He was awarded the prestigious Senior Thomson prize. In 1953, Principal C. B. Joshi, the renowned Geographer and institution builder from Maharashtra intended to start the Department and graduate course in Geography in Ruparel College, in Mumbai. His telegraphic request for one of the brightest of the post-graduate Geography scholars as his assistant (along

with a pouch of the famous Madras snuff!) was instantly granted by his friend, the well-known Geographer from Tamil Nadu, Professor Thirunaranan. As directed by the latter, the young Arunachalam joined the team Ruparel as a lecturer. He continued to work there till 1960, when he shifted to Parle College like most of the teaching staff of Ruparel under the leadership of Principal Joshi. Prof. Arunachalam had a lion's share in nurturing the Department of Geography in Parle College and in laying the foundation of the PG Department in 1969 there with Prof. C. D. Deshpande as the Head.

By 1970, the Post Graduate Department of Geography was relocated in the Vidyanagari campus of Mumbai University. The Department consisting of Prof. Deshpande, Prof. Arunachalam and Dr. K. Sita offered a good blend of the core courses of Human, Physical and Regional Geography and relevant specializations. As students in mid-1970s, we witnessed them together battling over various constraints of a teething department and yet making it vibrant with academic programmes that were occasionally extended to even the undergraduate students. Regular excursions in the city as well as across the valley of Ulhas or in search of exclusive geomorphic features like plugs or dykes in the Western Ghats or studying the coastal landforms in the rural outskirts of Mumbai were exciting departmental activities.

Following Prof. Deshpande's retirement in 1977, Prof. Arunachalam became the Head of the Department. During the long stable inning of Headship he also held some key administrative posts such as an Officer on Special Duty (OSD) with distinction in the University. I remember how as OSD

(1984-86) he sternly tackled the issue of bungling of medical examination marks of the daughter of the then chief minister of Maharashtra and gracefully withstood political pressures.

Having a science background, Prof. Arunachalam's primary interests were Physical Geography and Geomorphology. However, his initial specialization and passion for Cartography prompted him to the fascinating interdisciplinary field of ancient maritime trade and the indigenous navigational and cartographic traditions of India, the theme in which perhaps he found his lifetime satisfaction. Having published widely (110 articles including 30 on cartography) in reputed journals in India and abroad, he became a Professor in spite of not having a doctoral degree and guided doctoral students as well in diverse themes like Plant and Soil Geography, Geography of Retailing and Historical Cartography.

Endowed with sharp memory, good oratory and command over English, Prof. Arunachalam was a successful teacher, though strict enough to keep the students, on their toes. Mischievously hiding the key reference books, such as Spark's Geomorphology that he might be using, he would motivate us to read several other reference books and journals.

Prof. Arunachalam was instrumental in re-energizing the Bombay Geographical Association (BGA), which was functioning in Bombay from 1832 to 1873 as a limb organization of the Royal Geographical Society, London. Amalgamated later with the Asiatic Society, Bombay, BGA was revived since 1935 in its present form and

later nurtured both by Prin. C. B. Joshi as well as Dr. C. D. Deshpande. Prof. Arunachalam was one of the key figures in starting the Indian National Cartographic Association (INCA) in 1979 and later establishing its Bombay Chapter as well. Educationist that he was, Prof. Arunachalam assumed the responsibility of nurturing school level Geography by organizing lectures, exhibitions, excursions, summer schools and orientation/refresher courses as well as by organizing diploma courses, map interpretation workshops, conferences and other academic events from the platforms of both the Bombay Geographical Association as well as INCA. He was also instrumental in introducing Geography as a compulsory paper at the First Year of Commerce in the University.

As Head, Prof. Arunachalam was open for suggestions and starting new fields of specializations in Geography. Thanks to his multidisciplinary approach a course on 'Spatial Dimensions of Development' along with some innovative specialisations in Human geography could be introduced by Dr. Swapna Banerjee Guha, who had joined the Department the department in the early 1980s.

Prof. Arunachalam had deep sense commitment for the sanctity of teaching profession and teachers' welfare. This was seen through his active participation in the functioning of the Bombay University Academic Staff Association (BUASA) that included a prolonged strike for implementation of the fourth pay commission. Professor Arunachalam cultivated professional and personal friendships in the University campus as

well as other academic and administrative institutions that cut across boundaries of narrow specializations. His well informed and timely lectures like those on the Kutch earthquake, Indian Ocean tsunami as well as maritime history of Indian navigation were greatly admired among the academic and professional circles of the University as well as the city.

Prof. Arunachalam would also be remembered for building a massive Map Archives and Reference Library in the Department of Geography of University of Mumbai. It was reckoned to be one of the three main map reference libraries in India. He also facilitated a compilation of large collection of facsimiles and photocopies of traditional Indian maps in different languages. With the advent of computer cartography and GIS technology Prof. Arunachalam organized GIS training workshops from the platform of INCA.

During 1980s Prof. Arunachalam started interacting with the Heras Institute of St Xavier College and got interested in the maritime history. It was then that he undertook a project with the CSIR to study maritime heritage of Lakshadweep islands that opened a new chapter of interdisciplinary applied research in maritime history of India. This resulted in Prof. Arunachalam being appointed as an academic advisor of the Maritime History Society (MHS), Mumbai in 1983. His active participation in the annual seminars and Monsoon Series Lectures of the MHS contributed substantially in making it an active platform for vibrant academic, technical and strategic interactions about the Indian naval traditions.

Prof. Arunachalam carried out major research projects sponsored by the CSIR (HRD, of the Govt. of India) entitled a] Lakshadweep traditions of navigation, b] Mediaeval traditions of cartography, c] Indigenous traditions of Indian Navigation and also edited book on 'Indian Ocean Islands'. As an academic advisor of MHS he was associated with various publications, of which he authored eight, co-authored two and edited the rest. Some of his MHS publications entitled as 'Essays in Maritime History', Vol. I and II, 'Mumbai by the Sea,' 'Heritage of Indian Sea Navigation', 'Chola Navigation Package', 'Maritime Heritage of Orissa', and so on indicate the depth and wide range of his scholarship in maritime navigational history and historical cartography of India. His research articles cut across a wide spectrum of interdisciplinary and applied themes and analysed various dimensions of coastal geomorphology, navigational charts of different time periods and power regimes in India, indigenous ship building industry and the coastal communities, maritime history of defense strategies, wetland transformations in peri-urban region and Bombay Dock Explosion to name a few.

His basic instincts for field experience prompted Prof. Arunachalam to direct a novel, adventurous sea voyage by simulating 'The Voyage of The Cholas' from Nagapattinam in the east coast of India to Java, Indonesia, on INS Tarangani, a sail boat of the Indian Navy, without using any modern navigational instruments. The navigation was done using only the position of the stars and a simple compass. Unfortunately, he was unable to join the voyage due to health issues, and later the voyage had to be abandoned midway due to cyclonic weather.

A major contribution of Prof B. Arunachalam was initiating the ambitious Magnum Opus on Maritime Heritage of India, which was almost complete except for Bengal and Andaman-Nicobar Islands. This series covered practically the entire maritime heritage of India. As the chairman of INCA Commission on History of Indian Cartography, Prof. Arunachalam produced a major Report on Mediaeval Traditions of Indian Cartography that was later enlarged and published by the INCA.

Many of these activities continued in his post-retirement, period after 1993, as well. He inspired a good number of teachers in colleges and University to participate in the activities of INCA as well as MHS and undertake research.

Prof. Arunachalam had to undergo a couple of angioplasties and suffered from a stroke in 2010, though that did not deter him from remaining academically active. Recovering from it he authored three more books for his Magnum Opus. His final volume for the MHS is in the press.

Prof. B. Arunachalam will be fondly remembered for his scholarly contributions to Indian Geography, especially in the field of Geomorphology and Cartography and for opening new vistas of academic collaboration and research in the professional field of history of Indian navigation.

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