

## In Memorium



**Professor V.S. Gananathan**  
(1917-2001)

**Professor V.S. Gananathan** passed away on 15th December 2001, after a protracted illness in his brother's house at Chennai, where he had shifted from Pune in 1998.

My acquaintance with Professor Gananathan goes back to 1968, when

I enrolled for M.Sc. Geography, at the University of Pune. He was Professor and Head at the time, a position he was to occupy for 28 years until his retirement in 1978.

My impressions of Gananathan or Ganappa as his wife and students affectionately referred to him, are those of any admiring student. I was never his colleague, since I joined the department as lecturer shortly after he had left. So before nostalgia clouds this narrative, let me draw a brief sketch of his academic life and career as an introduction to the man and his scholarship.

Gananathan was born on 12th July, 1917, to Bamma and Captain V.R. Sundaresa Iyer, who was a doctor in the army during World War I. Later his father joined the Medical Services of Madras Presidency, serving as Chief Medical Officer at the various government run hospitals in the Presidency. Ganappa, (fifth among eight children) and his youngest brother Krishnan, stayed with the parents. Due to frequent transfers of his father, Ganappa and his brother attended a number of schools, mostly in the major

towns of the Presidency. For his college and university education, he was at Madras, living with his grandparents in a large family house, full of aunts, uncles and many cousins.

Gananathan received his first degree B.A. Honours in Economics from Pachiappa College, Madras (1936-39). He also took Diplomas in German Language and Geography, at the Madras University. Geography was not offered in colleges then Gananathan's first teaching stint was at a boys school, run by the Ramakrishna Mission- where he taught History in Tamil. Shortly afterwards, he got a teaching job at the Intermediate level at his alma mater- Pachiappa College. The real break came when he went to Syracuse University in New York State to do a Masters in geography (1948-49). While at Syracuse, he was fortunate to come in contact with geographers like G.B. Cressey, Preston E. James and R.E. Dickinson.

Gananathan's first University teaching assignment came on his return (with an A.M. in Geography from U.S.A.) at Guwahati University, Assam (1949-50). In 1950, he finally joined the Pune University to establish the geography department and build it up from scratch to an eminent position in Western India. This was the culmination of his 28 years of dedicated service in which many of his Masters and Doctoral students became university professors and college teachers- one of them went on to become the Vice-Chancellor of Pune University!

Among his major achievements: his stewardship of a one Reader-Head department, with half a peon (1950), which he developed into a well - equipped major department of geography,

with seven full time faculty and ten non-teaching assistants, is noteworthy. That he popularized the subject is evident from the enrollment in post-graduate courses, which rose from 3-5 students in the early fifties to around 30-35 students by the time he left. His contribution to the advancement of the subject, particularly Economic and Urban geography is seen in the number of doctoral dissertations produced in this specialization.

Among the significant milestones of his career, Gananathan was a visiting professor at the University of Pittsburgh in 1962. He was chairperson at some sessions of the Urban Geography seminar held at Lund, in 1960: he was a member of the UGC Review Committee, on the Advisory Board of NCERT, and the Board of Studies (in geography) of several universities in India. Besides publishing several research papers he authored the book, *Economic Geography of India*, published by the National Book Trust. For several years he was the president of the Deccan Geographical Society.

To his students, Gananathan came across as a man who believed in maintaining the established order. His was an era when the Head enjoyed immense discretionary powers- Gananathan used these judiciously- for the benefit of his students and colleagues. Gananathan instilled a kind of colonial discipline in the department, where everything worked with clock-work precision- for example, his time of arrival and departure in the department never changed in the quarter of a century that I knew him. The students and staff of geography could tell when Gananathan was in, from the smell of smoke from his cigar. He followed a regimented schedule: without fail he had black coffee at 10 a.m.- this was a break from the morning routine, mainly administrative work, which he kept to the minimum- no clutter of papers on his table. He seldom filed official correspondence, and once he was through, most papers were relegated to the dustbin. In his interaction with students, colleagues or those in authority, he was proper,

brief, rarely extending himself beyond the call of duty, either in his work or in personal relationships. A bit of a recluse, in comparison to his wife Laxmi, who was lively and gregarious. She took active interest in all social activities in the department. Gananathan had very set ways- for instance whenever he donned a checked bush shirt, we knew he was off on fieldwork. He usually took the afternoon off on Wednesdays and invariably he was on leave on Mahashivratri day when he observed a strict fast. Come evening and he would drive to the Cantonment in his black car – a Standard Ten – accompanied by his wife. The first halt was always at the Café Delite (which served excellent South Indian cuisine), followed by a movie at the West End or New Empire – both theatres screened English films.

The Gananathans were a loving and devoted couple. They had no children. They enjoyed music, classical Carnatic, Hindustani and Western and the theatre, which they attended regularly during their visits to Madras in winter.

Gananathan was a liberal teacher, fully aware that we had absolutely no clue of the subject he taught- *Development of Modern Geography*. His lectures were never crammed with too much information or detail, he made a fine art of simplifying the basics of the subject. His was an unhurried pace, a languorous style of delivery, with an unmistakable drawl – a spill over from his USA days! Each sentence would be punctuated with long pauses – as if to make sure we had got the point.

Gananathan had developed a certain style, which set him apart from the rest of his colleagues. He identified with “Camp culture”<sup>77</sup> – felt drawn to students who spoke English with whom he would occasionally talk about the latest films he had seen.

In his passing our traditional links with old world geographers have suddenly snapped. May his soul rest in peace Amen!

Jaymala Diddee