

The humble facilitator

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Lifetime achievement award

Dr S Natesh

former senior adviser, Department of Biotechnology, Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of India, New Delhi

Highly respected, Dr S Natesh has worked tirelessly towards bridging the gap between policy making and biotechnology industry in India. His sincere efforts have helped the biotech sector unleash several firsts and milestones

Soft spoken and down to earth are the two qualities that are very often attributed to the teachers. Dr S Natesh went on to carry these qualities with him as an administrator. Having served the department of biotechnology (DBT) as one of its oldest members over a period of two and half decades, Dr Natesh played a very crucial role in taking the biotechnology sector to a new level. As a key executioner of few important projects, right from the beginning he was involved in the key policy making decisions for promoting new ideas and collaborations. For his deep involvement in promoting good science, he has been kept in high regard equally by his colleagues, academicians and industry leaders. It was also during his time when the goals were set by the government to create talent pool (the launch of DBT supported masters course in biotechnology), infrastructure for animal models and indigenous chemicals for research. He played his role well in different capacities to spearhead the key initiatives in bioenergy, biomedical research, scientific communication and international collaborations.

Having taught at the Delhi University (DU) for a period of nine years, Dr Natesh moved to the government in 1984, while continuing simultaneously as a guest faculty for another nine years. Though his stint at DBT ended

Q in August this year, Dr Natesh is still occupied with lots of committees as a head or member. He currently holds the post of a trustee at the Wellcome Trust-DBT India Alliance that awards seventy fellowships each year to attract the best Indian biomedical scientists working abroad. Feeling quite contented with the work he did all along, he cherishes the moments spent at DU and DBT during his thirty seven year long career. With exceptional experiences and expertise on his side, Dr Natesh believes that the industry and academia are moving closer at a faster pace. The multi-disciplinary research along with the mix of engineering and biosciences is what he thinks is important at the moment.

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Born in a middle class family at Mysore, Dr Natesh spent his early childhood days with his parents and six brothers and sisters. Education was somewhat disjointed as he had to shuffle between Mysore to Bangalore. After completing his secondary school leaving certificate (SSLC) from Mysore in 1965, he moved to Pune on insistence of his elder brother who was working there at National Chemical Laboratory (NCL). At NCL he got admission for pre degree plus three-year bachelors course in botany at Abasaheb Garware College, also better known as MES college back then. After graduating in 1969, he joined the masters course in botany at the department of botany, University of Pune. Taking a look back at those days, Dr Natesh told us that he loved to travel every week to Khandala for field trips. "I really enjoyed the days when we used to take the Jhanta Express train from Pune to Khandala in the morning and used to return with polybags full of various plants by the evening. It seemed as if we knew all the big and small plants in Pune and surrounding areas. It was a wonderful experience of the lifetime," recalls Dr Natesh with a laugh.

He credits his teacher at the botany department, Ms Hema Sahni for being an inspiration both in education and life. He passed his MSc course in 1971 with flying colors by topping the class.

Dr S Natesh made major intellectual contribution towards the concept and content development of several major programs of DBT such as the National Biotechnology Development Strategy, National Biotechnology Regulatory Authority, Agri-food Cluster in Mohali, Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council, Biotechnology Industry Partnership Program, Translational Health Science and Technology Institute in Faridabad, Regional Centre for Biotechnology in Faridabad, National Institute for Animal Biotechnology, Small Business Innovation Research Initiative, and Biotech cluster in the campus of UAS, Bangalore. All these initiatives have been aimed at making the industry more mature and expand its presence in the country.

I The first and brief professional break came as a lectureship at Ahmednagar college. He also acted as a demonstrator there, though he didn't continue with the job for long, as another opportunity at Delhi University (DU) was awaiting him. He came to Delhi the same year and accepted the University Grants Commission (UGC) scholarship worth 300 at the Centre of Advanced Botany at DU. There, Professor PM Joshi guided him to apply for the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) fellowship to the tune of 350, an amount that Dr Natesh says was considered huge at that time. After a delay of 3-4 months, he joined the doctorate degree in botany at DU under Prof. Bhandari. After he completed his research education, around the year 1974, it was time for his first real job which was at Khalsa college, Delhi. For the next nine years, he taught botany and those according to him were the best days of his early professional life.

"Then Khalsa wasn't counted among the best colleges compared to St. Stephans or Hindu college, despite the fact that our college had the best building, labs and library. Besides, the college was generous with the fundings as compared to others. Other than teaching, I initiated essay competitions, debates in the college and it was a great experience altogether," recalls Natesh, looking amused.

Dr Natesh, through his efforts, brought DBT and industry closer to each other. His collaborative and participative attitude helped many labs to bring out products. He definitely has left his mark that is going to stay a long time. Along with teaching, Dr Natesh also experimented with organizing skills, when he got a chance to organize the international genetic conference at Delhi. However, over a period of time, Dr Natesh, who always have an eye for doing new things and believed in creativity, seemed slightly restless with the monotonous work he carried out. He wonders if it could have been possible to change the curriculum after a certain period of time to keep the interest. But he knew at that time it wasn't possible as most of the teachers according to him always resist changes. Around the same time in 1984, he got an opportunity to serve at Department of Science and Technology as a senior scientific officer. Dr Rajesh Jain managing director, Panacea Biotec, New Delhi