

My teacher

When I joined as a PhD student under Prof. Manoj Banerjee, he was a big name in low energy nuclear physics. At that time, he was deeply involved in nuclear structure calculations. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to get into particle physics. Manoj-da understood my reluctance to do nuclear structure and I was completely free to do whatever I chose. That was just like him. No imposition. He would never impose anything on his students. The fact is, he never treated them as *mere* students. He treated them as physicists – with all the respect that a physicist deserved. When he explained something to a student, the student felt that Manoj-da was not really *teaching* him but rather sharing his thoughts with him and was waiting for his comments and further inputs. The academic freedom Manoj-da's students enjoyed was truly remarkable. This was quite in contrast with the experiences of many of our contemporaries who had to confine their research mostly, if not entirely, within the limits set by their teachers. Manoj-da allowed me to start scratching the surface of particle physics as a sort of independent venture. Particle physics was not his area of activity at that time. To that he switched later, after leaving the country to join the University of Maryland where he led a highly motivated group of particle physicists. But, independent though I was, he was always ready to help me out whenever I faced any difficulty. All through those years, I received from him valuable help in my research, though his name never appeared as a co-author in my papers. Every time I interacted with him, I could see the amazing qualities of my teacher – the lightning speed with which he could work out a complicated algebra, his eagerness to start a calculation at the slightest provocation, his ability to hit the most important point in every context, the remarkable sense of mathematical rigour where rigour was particularly needed, so on and so forth. But above all, what deeply impressed all of us was his commitment to physics, a commitment that raised him much above the level of ordinary people. Whenever a point of dispute came up during a discussion, he would put forward his view passionately but would always settle it in a perfectly scientific manner, never allowing even a trace of ego to come in the way. One of his students once remarked, "Do you know why I consider Manoj Banerjee to be taller than most of the contemporary Indian physicists? It is because any student could publicly tell him, "Professor Banerjee, what you said was all wrong" and no harm would come his way." On the other hand, when a student committed a mistake or made a wrong statement, he would patiently correct him without showing any slightest disrespect to him just as he would explain something to any of his senior colleagues. About how many physicists in our country we could say this? I wonder.

Manoj Banerjee was so exceptional!

--- Padmanabha Dasgupta