

Obituary

Dr Vijai Mohan Sharma



(January 6, 1939 - July 6, 2021)

Dr Vijai Mohan Sharma (VMS), born on 6 January 1939, passed away in Singapore on 6th July 2021, bravely battling for life against his steadily failing health and persistent kidney ailment. He was an outstanding professional, an astute administrator, a well-known author and above all, a decent human being. Rarely can one find a professional of his kind with qualities of excellence, ethics, empathy and care for details, far beyond the standards of routine practice. While pursuing projects in the fields of Geotechnical Engineering, Rock Mechanics, Water Resources, Tunnelling, Field Instrumentation, Slope Stabilization & Numerical Modelling which were his forte, he never lost sight of the fact that, real life problems in Civil Engineering invariably call for sound engineering judgment to deal with the vortex of uncertainties. As far as I could make out during my decades of association with him, asking right questions in a technical discourse was much more important to him than merely indulging in a discourse in the comfort zone of conventional thinking and available design data.

Dr Sharma had an outstanding track record throughout his academic career. He obtained his B. Tech (Hons) in 1961 from the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur; P.G. Diploma (1966) and M.E. degree (1968) from the University of Roorkee and Ph.D. (Rock Mechanics) in 1985, from the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi. Central Soil and Materials Research Station (CSMRS), New Delhi became his karma-bhumi in the formative period of his career where he rose to the position of its Director. During his six-year-long tenure as Director, he placed CSMRS on the national map by transforming it into a world class laboratory, inter alia, covering fields of Water Resources Engineering, Rock Mechanics and Tunnelling. He worked at the University of Alberta in Canada as a UNDP Fellow. The country benefitted a great deal by his visits to Imperial College of Science and Technology, London; Building Research Establishment Garston; the Institute of Geological Sciences, in the United Kingdom and several other Engineering and Water Resources Development Centres in the Europe and Northern America. He took voluntary retirement from CSMRS and joined the Associated Instrument Manufacturers (India) Limited, (AIMIL), as a Chief Consultant and established Advanced Technology Engineering Services (ATES) in AIMIL. He got closely associated with major hydro-electric projects, tunnels and underground power houses and extended the scope of work to include Numerical Modelling, Reinforced Earth Technology and Non-destructive Testing. The list of his achievements during his 26-year long tenure at ATES(AIMIL) is very long.

The Indian National Academy of Engineering elected Dr Sharma as a Fellow in 1995, in recognition of his meritorious work. The same year, he was elected as the President of the Indian Geotechnical Society. This recognition came to him closely on the heels of his contribution as organizing secretary of Technical Sessions related to the historic 13th International Conference on Soil Mechanics and Foundation Engineering hosted by India in 1994. Earlier, he had served the IGS as its Honorary Secretary for the two consecutive terms during 1977-1981. He was also the Editor of the Journal of IGS during 1978-82. His general report on the underground structures presented at the 17th International Society for Soil Mechanics and Geotechnical Engineering held in 2009 carried a scholarly synthesis of the ideas contained in as many as 24 papers covering fields of Geotechnical Investigations and Seismic Analysis, Numerical Modelling and 3D simulation and use of field measurements for predictions, received from 17 countries. He was invited by the IGS to deliver the

prestigious IGS annual lecture in 2010. He also served as a Chairman of the Indian National Committee on Rock Mechanics and Tunnelling Technology; Chairman of the Indian National Committee on Construction Materials and Structures, and as a Delegate for RILEM for the period 1992-1997. Bureau of Indian Standards appointed him as the Chair of two of its Sectional Committees, CED-6 and RVD-8.

Dr VM Sharma published about 250 papers and edited 10 books covering fields of Rock Mechanics, In-situ Characterization of Soils, Modelling in Geomechanics, Dams-Accidents and Incidents, and Instrumentation in Geotechnical Engineering. He served on the Editorial board of several prestigious technical journals, including Materials and Structures of RILEM. Numerous awards won by him include the 'Gopal Ranjan' Award of the IIT, Roorkee for outstanding contribution in Rock Mechanics; and the Kueckelmann Award of the Indian Geotechnical Society for his outstanding Contribution to Geotechnical Engineering.

Of the various recollections of my intimate personal engagement with Dr Sharma over the period of last four decades, a few things stand out as exemplary and highly inspirational. On my request made in early 2019, despite his failing health, he agreed to join the Indian Roads Congress (IRC) Technical Committee on Disaster Mitigation. Both of us decided to co-author a Monograph on Criteria governing Selection of Technologies for Slope Stabilization and Landslide Hazard Mitigation. He proposed its first draft on the 26 January 2019 in two parts and formally presented the same at the IRC meeting held on 30 January 2019. The revision 1 was informally discussed between us in his office in the AIMIL campus on 20 July 2019. He further worked on it overtime to ensure that the updated version of the monograph gets ready by 22 July 2019 well in time for circulation to the members of the IRC committee. Later, he personally presented the revision 2 at the IRC meeting held on 29 July 2019. As the work developed, despite bi-weekly dialysis and enormous physical challenge, he never missed even a single meeting. Even after the monograph increased in its scope to be discussed again, without the slightest reaction, he wrote the following email to Shri Sanjay Nirmal, Secretary General of IRC on 3rd February 2020:

” Even though it is difficult for me to haul myself up to reach the first floor level which is the venue of the meeting, I will attend. In the absence of lift, I will need physical help, which I will bring with me. However, I understand it would be difficult to change the venue, and therefore I will try to reach the venue in time. I will, in any case, send the revised write-up before the meeting”.

The above message received from him reflected his deep commitment to the job. Indeed, he not only attended the IRC meeting on 21st February 2020, but also participated intensively in the ensuing discussion. Unfortunately, Covid-19 impeded the progress and now when he is no more, the draft monograph remains as an item on the unfinished agenda for the IRC.

Dr Sharma never failed to express his gratitude to acknowledge those associated with him. I recall him approaching me in the year 2000 for an article for the H.C. Verma (HCV) Commemorative Volume on Instrumentation in Geotechnical Engineering of which he was a joint editor with K.R Saxena, the then Director, Research and Development at Central Board of Irrigation and Power. His spirit of gratitude for HCV was so intense and disarming that all whom he had approached contributed state of the art papers for the commemorative volume which carry a Foreword from Professor M.G.K. Menon, Dr Vikram Sarabhai Distinguished Professor of the Department of Space.

For those who are born, death is certain but people like Dr VM Sharma continue to live in our hearts. I thank God for the privilege to work with him. May his soul rest in peace.

May God bless his soul to Rest in Peace