Remembering B.S. Kesavan: The Man and His Mission

Edited by L.J. Haravu
Dedicated to the memory of late Padma Shri B.S. Kesavan
By his students, colleagues, admirers and friends

To a friend, philosopher and guide
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Preface

Padma Shri B.S. Kesavan’s name is inseparable from the history and development of librarianship and libraries in India. This book represents a tribute from several individuals who were touched by this gentle giant of the library sphere.

The book begins with extracts of a lecture delivered to honour the memory of Mr. B.S. Kesavan, India’s first National Librarian in the centenary year of his birth, fittingly it would seem, at a function held in the city of Mysore, which was the home of Mr. Kesavan as a young man and where he began his career as a teacher of English. The lecture is biographical in that it recalls Mr. Kesavan’s early life, his education, his career as a teacher and later as the National Librarian of India. His professional achievements and his unique talent for institution building and his wonderful human qualities are recalled in the lecture.

The contributions in this book are mainly from his erstwhile colleagues at the National Library or at the Indian National Scientific Documentation Centre (INSDOC), and from his students, collaborators, admirers, and relatives.

Most of the contributions recall both professional and personal associations with Mr. Kesavan and bring out the qualities of his head and heart, the purity and selflessness of his actions which brought him name and those which endeared him to one and all. Anecdotes that bring out the leadership qualities of Mr. Kesavan illuminate and remind us of the stuff of great human beings. What is significant is that each of the contributions recalls the humane qualities of Mr. Kesavan, those that endeared him to all those who crossed his path, however briefly.

The contribution by Arun Kanti Dasgupta, himself a scholar librarian and a veritable repository of knowledge not only of library science but of personalities, events and trends in the social, political, cultural and literary scene in India for over 60 years, is outstanding because it puts Mr. B.S. Kesavan in a historical context and not as an isolated individual. How history shaped Mr. Kesavan and indeed how Mr. Kesavan shaped history has been brought out in amazing detail by Dasgupta. This alone will make this book valuable reading.

It is indeed a pity that many of Mr. Kesavan’s associates, colleagues and even students in the Mysore University, National Library and INSDOC are no longer with us and therefore we are denied of their reminiscences of Mr. Kesavan. Many former colleagues and students, who were approached to make a contribution to this offering, expressed their inability to make a useful contribution because of the physical limitations imposed by their old age.

Inevitably, in a book of contributions based on reminiscences, there will be repetitions of events and episodes involving Mr. Kesavan. The Editor has mostly retained these
and in some cases, made only marginal changes as each of the repetitions has a flavour that is unique to the contributor.

It is no coincidence that three independent contributions refer to a Sanskrit sloka (verse) that seemed to have been Mr. Kesavan’s guiding principle in the pursuit of the many noble goals during his life. The sloka is:

अमरं अक्षरम् नासिन्त
नासिन्तमूलम् अनोष्ठयम्
अयोग्या पुष्पो नासिन्त
योजकस्त्रां दुर्धरः ||

There is no sound or syllable that is not in a mantra
There is no herb that does not have curative properties
There is no human being who is unworthy
Rare indeed are Yojakastatras
(wise ones who know how to lead and guide others)

All contributors, as it were, saw a diamond in Mr. Kesavan, each from one or other facet. Some were dazzled, some touched and some others were thrilled; but saw they did a diamond.

The photograph used on the cover page of this offering is of Mr. Kesavan in his younger days. The photograph in a sense epitomizes his ever-youthful attitude to life even when he was past 80 years of age. His enthusiasm and ebullience and zest for life were as fresh as that of younger people, but with the gift of wisdom that he seems to have been blessed with from a young age.

God endowed him with learning and scholarship. He could have gained far greater recognition and fame had he indulged in his passion for scholarship, literature and language. But he chose to be a librarian, a profession that at that time, more than now, was not a much sought-after or favoured one among the highly educated. He embellished the profession with his genius for institution building and his capacity to carry people with him on his broad shoulders as he traversed the path to fulfill the noble goals that he set for himself. In doing so, he never forgot that he was a spiritual being in a human existence.

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Mr. Ramachandra Guha is acknowledged for permission to use an extract of the birth centenary lecture delivered by him to honour the memory of Mr. B.S. Kesavan. Thanks are also due to Mr. T.S. Satyan for permission to use an extract from his book titled, ‘Alive and Clicking’.

The Editor is also grateful to Mr. Arun Ghosh for providing news of recent developments in the National Library, and to Mr. A.K. Dasgupta and Mr. S. Chandrashekar of Acharya Vidyav Kula, Mysore for translating material submitted in Bengali and Kannada respectively.

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