

Abinash Phoophaji – My Impressions

Anjana Chaturvedi

Very often in all kinds of seasons, we would hear our metallic gate clang and would see a bespectacled, wiry and erect elderly gentleman step on the verandah with a smile on his face and twinkle in his eyes. He would pull a chair, sip on a glass of water and would be off in ten minutes – walking briskly either towards the Institution of Engineers or Charbagh! Watching him walk away at his brisk pace I would, through the years, marvel at the man so simply clad in his trademark bush shirt or tweed coat with a muffler and topi! And today, after he has walked into eternity, I find it difficult to put to paper my mosaic of impressions of the man we knew as Avinash Phoophaji.

As children we would often wonder why this man, who was later to be a Chief Engineer, visited us on foot rather than in a car with a dome light. As we gained height, we also gained some understanding of Phoophaji and the answers were simple: the 'simple' man was simply averse to the idea of misusing any government facility and believed in the idea of brisk walk and physical fitness and held it close to his heart. A bundle of energy, Phoophaji could move from one end of Lucknow (as Lucknow was in the sixties and seventies) to another and needed no conveyance other than his two strong legs.

As the years rolled on, to our inexperienced ears the seemingly disconnected utterances from Phoophaji, one realized were actually originating from an ocean of knowledge that he was. He was always so eager to share the knowledge he possessed and could speak on practically every subject with a fair degree of authority. The secret of the way he acquired this knowledge dawned upon me when he visited us at Wellington (Nilgiris) in mid-Eighties. Out of the twenty four hours or so that he spent with us practically half of them were devoted to hungrily devouring our collection of books. He took me quite by surprise when he sat down to make notes from a chapter on: Panama Canal that was in one of the books!

In his easy manner, Phoophaji to us always came across as a man who had only good words for all and no expectations from anyone. It is not only that he had 'good words' alone he was always there to extend a helping hand when needed without asking. The memory of his being at our home at three in the morning of Diwali for a ceremony the year Papa went away is permanently etched in my memory.