

# Professor P. K. Kelkar — Some Recollections

[ We give below excerpts of the speech delivered by Dr. P. C. Kapur, Chairman KAL Series, at the 10th Kelkar alumni Lecture. On the 10th Anniversary of the Lecture Series, we thought that our readers may like to share this tribute to a great personality whom the Alumni remember and honor every year through the series of lectures by eminent people. It also offers a window on how Professor Kelkar made IITK into a dynamic entity and set goals and dreams which are cherished even today. ]

“Purushotham Kashinath Kelkar was the Founder-Director of the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur. From 1959 to 1970 he conceived, built from scratch and nurtured through its inevitable teething troubles—its warts and blemishes notwithstanding—this great academic institution. He now leads a richly deserved retired life in Bombay.

Dr. Kelkar was much more than a Founder-Director. In planning for IIT Kanpur, he abandoned the crutches of the conventional wisdom on higher education in the country and broke free of the prevailing rigidly hierarchical tradition of the university system. It is best to quote him from his 1981 convocation address at this Institute, “We plunged in the most usual spurt of ideas, innovation and adventure, occasionally bordering on the reckless”. If I may be permitted to use a minor hyperbole: Dr. Kelkar built this Institute in alternate layers of red building bricks—to give it an outer form—and blocks of innovative ideas—to give it inner meaning and content.

These educational blocks, which we take so much for granted now and which have been so widely copied throughout the country, included the semester system, engineering–science based common core with a strong underpinning of humanities and social sciences, early and extensive exposure to computers, continuing academic evaluation, letter grades, course-wise promotion, choice through electives, interdisciplinary thrust in emerging areas, inter-locking emphasis on teaching and research, self-regulating student bodies, student–run campus T. V., photography club, film society and so on.

By any yardstick this was a remarkable achievement; made possible because of one man’s clarity of

vision, courage of conviction and an abiding faith in his countrymen, specially in the young students and the young faculty, who come to Kanpur to embark on a great adventure in education and learning.

Because faith begets faith, Dr. Kelkar could cobble together consensus of a sort among the faculty, students and staff, whereby the Institute functioned in those formative years by a common agreement, with a collective will and in harmony of shared pride.

Dr. Kelkar understood clearly what most Managers and Administrators know but apparently do not understand that, beyond a point, rules, regulations and procedures become counter productive. That the beast once fattened to its critical mass, begins to nibble at the very charge it was meant to safeguard. That excessive regimentation saps intellectual vitality as surely as hierarchical formalism corrupts the individual integrity, which after all is the ultimate guarantor of one’s conduct.

Dr. Kelkar understood well that there must be ample psychological space for the accumulation of intellectual capital. Therefore, IIT’s environment could not be a mere clone of that in government offices, commercial establishments, the universities or even national research laboratories. He strove to create a place where any scholar, student or faculty, could, if he or she so desired, exert and touch the hem of creative excellence.

Dr. Kelkar is a modest man. He deftly shifts the burden of praise that we are eager to heap on him. He asserts, as he did in the 1981 convocation address, that IIT Kanpur was a mere creature of time, chosen per chance to become an agent of change. In taking this self effacing position, Dr. Kelkar absolves us from the venal sin – so widely prevalent – of praising the visionary while subverting his ideals.”

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\* A research project on “Calculation of Electronic Structure of Disordered Alloys” has been sanctioned by the Department of Science and Technology, Govt. of India. Prof. R. M. Singru (Phy) is the principal Investigator. Drs. A. Mookerjee, Rajendra Prasad and V. A. Singh are the other co-investigators.