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From the beneficiaries of Kirk's generous friendship

This month I have missed reading Kirk's commentary on Ujjwala 2.0 and on IPCC AR6.

We were shocked by Kirk's sudden demise and upset by the limitations on our mobility due to the pandemic. How we long to meet Joanie, Nadia and her family. During this pandemic, Kishore and I have often reminisced conversations we had over many meals with Kirk and Joanie in Delhi and in Pune over the last four plus decades. We have been family friends since we met in Delhi in 1985, received beautiful annual New Year greetings with a lovely letter about the year gone by. They have always been there for us as caring friends.

In 1984, I was fascinated to witness experiments on biomass stoves for improving efficiency and reducing pollution at the Field Research Unit of Tata Energy Research Institute (TERI) in Pondicherry. There I learnt about Prof Kirk Smith and his work on indoor air pollution and health. I was attracted to the idea of using my professional training to make the kitchens smokeless. I persuaded Dr C L Gupta to allow me to join the team that was developing and testing stoves. Thus began my journey with cooking energy. Little did I know that in six months' time Kirk and I would be in adjacent offices and work on a joint project in a Simulated Village Kitchen in Jor Bagh at TERI, Delhi.

Four (Chandra, Dilip, Kirk and I) of us made an excellent team and wrote about trade-offs between emissions and efficiency from biomass burning stoves. Kirk continued to inspire, inform and guide our work on cooking stoves at TERI. I was at East-West Centre, Hawaii for five-six weeks to write a proposal for EPA. In the files I came across his correspondence with EPA persuading EPA to fund my travel and stay to ensure that developing country researchers are not used for data mining only. Joanie and Kirk made me feel special as a person and valuable as a researcher. Kishore, more involved with biogas as a clean cooking fuel so far, got drawn into cookstove emissions after the EPA project was sanctioned. He could rebuild the Simulated Village Kitchen at TERI's campus in Gwalpahadi. This place became an active research site for collecting a huge data base on a number of variations of fuel types and stove types in India. That was probably the first time enough evidence was gathered to show how much biomass burning in developing countries contributed to climate change through emissions of black carbon, CO and NOx.

Kirk nurtured and mentored many generations of researchers as he expanded his work in India.

My career took a different path after 1994. But, I was able to keep my engagement with clean cooking space active due to Kirk's encouragement and support. He could bring together diverse stakeholders to solve complex problems. Kirk was at ease in speaking with rural women, meeting Aanganwadi workers in Haryana as well as people in corridors of power. He listened to the concerns of housewives and people in the field offices and advised the powers that be in shaping policies and programmes. His ability to transcend all kinds of disciplinary barriers was exceptional; he developed amazing story lines and shared knowledge generously.

Based on research findings, Kirk moved away from improving biomass burning stoves to making clean available in order to achieve the desired health benefits. His contribution in conceptualising and implementing Ujjwala scheme to promote the use of LPG in India is a unique example of research leadership and engagement with policy/programme to address very large and pressing public health and climate issues. Very often on the way to airport, Kirk would phone and share his excitement as well as his concerns about LPG use in rural kitchens. He would stay in Junnar near Pune to follow-up on the use of LPG. We would meet at Pune airport to catch-up. I admired his incessant pursuit of “Making clean available: Escaping India’s Chulha Trap” in field and using it to shape policies and programmes. He was open to option such as induction stoves based on renewable power. We hope that the Indian energy and environment sector stakeholders find ways to further Kirk’s legacy in the years ahead.

In Pune, our conversations also had retirement as a recurring subject. There was a concern on how we would cope with the choices we made. Kishore focused on his music and I just wanted more free time. Kirk put us in 50% of his friends who handled retirement well during what was to be our last lunch together. I recollect him ordering a Buddha bowl.

Kirk, you will be missed at many different levels while we continue to fondly cherish memories of our work friendship. Joanie and Nadia, we hope to meet you soon.

Veena & Kishore

Veenak78@gmail.com, vnkishore78@gmail.com

