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VISIONARY SCIENCE

Preserving foetus, an elephantine process

by Dhanya Matsa

Bangalore: An elephant carrying a six-month-old foetus died in the forests surrounding Mysore around 85 years ago; but a visionary physiology professor Subba Rao took it upon himself to preserve the foetus for students of Zoology. The foetus is still being proudly preserved by the Department of Zoology in a museum in Bangalore University.

In the contemporary scene, where students learn physiology through virtual media, such rare specimens need to be accorded importance. "Several research students from other countries come to take a look and it and study it, but no such interest is shown in our own country," said Head of the Department of Zoology, Ban-

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— Prof Mohan, HOD, Zoology Department

galore University, Prof Ramachandra Mohan.

An even more telling tale of apathy is that this museum, which also hosts now extinct frog specimens and other valuable natural science specimens, is being maintained by the Department of Zoology with its department funds and with no money to spare even to secure the rare and valuable specimens.

A rarity by itself, the preservation of the foetus requires extra care as opposed to regular specimens that are preserved in formaldehyde. Professor Mohan explains,

"Every visiting professor and delegates of an international conference held last year were stunned to see the preserved elephant foetus. I fear to put a monetary value on it as it would be sought after by several natural sciences museums in the world. The value is in the foetus itself as it can play a vital role in research of the natural sciences."

Natural science enthusiasts can tell you that tourists stream into the National History Museum at Mozambique to see the 22 elephant foetuses, each representing varying periods of growth in

the nearly two-year pregnancy period of the elephant. Apart from the tourist value, scientists can derive invaluable data from which inferences regarding evolution can be arrived at.

"The DNA fingerprinting of these specimens can throw light on several aspects of natural sciences, especially physiology. Students from colleges and schools in the city used to visit the museum after which they even included some of the specimens in their syllabus to learn and understand the concept better," says Professor Mohan.

These valuable specimens also reflect another important aspect - Most of the specimens were collected by students of the 100-year-old department of Zoology and that list includes Professor Subba Rao.