

P. Thankappan Nair: Remembering Kolkata's 'barefoot historian'

P. Thankappan Nair, known as the 'Barefoot Historian of Kolkata', has left behind a legacy of passion for history. He passed away at the age of 91 in Kerala on June 18

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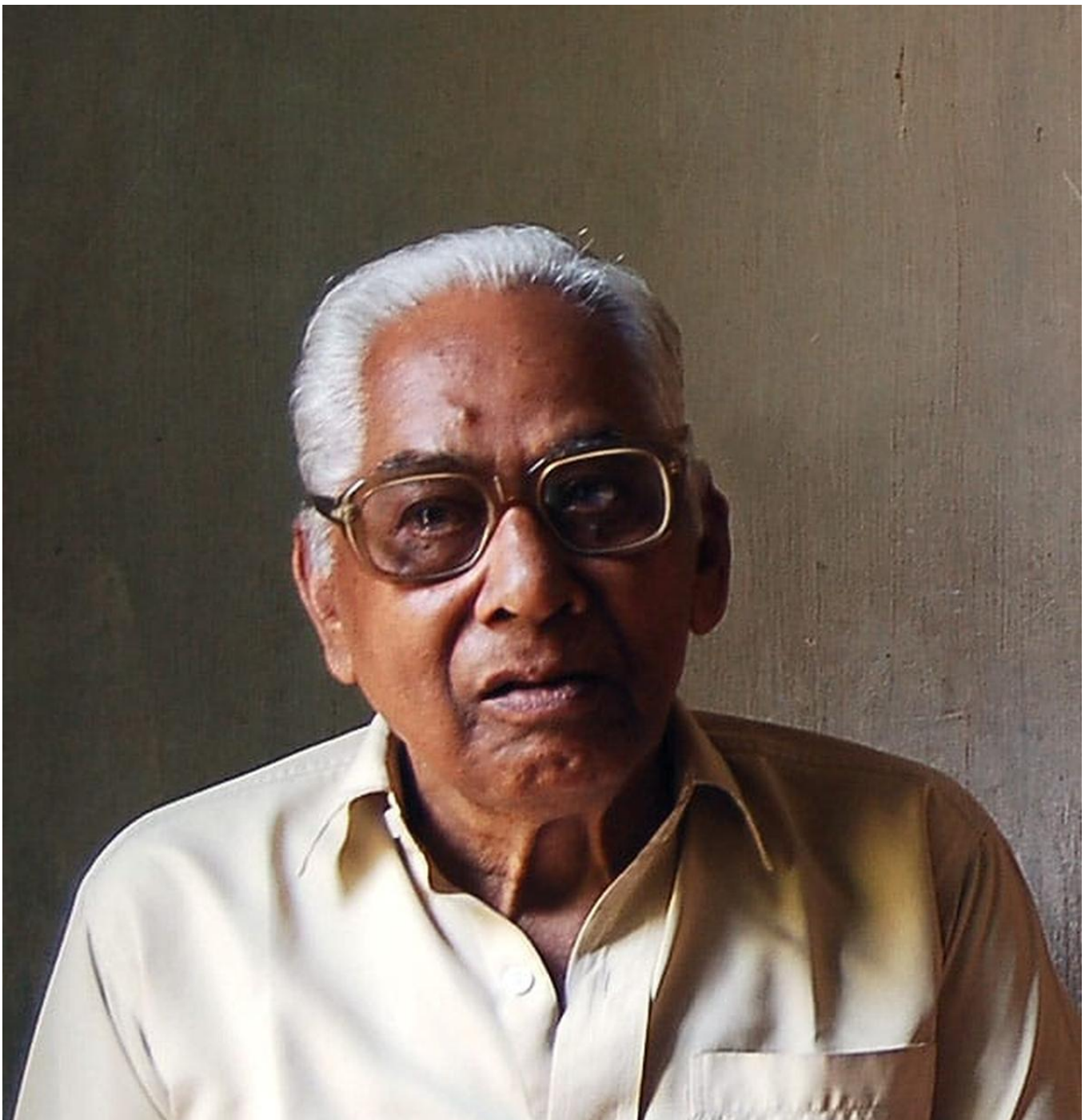
P. Thankappan Nair, who was affectionately called the 'Barefoot Historian of Kolkata' | Photo Credit: T. Ajayakumar

People who were associated with P. Thankappan Nair, affectionately called the 'Barefoot Historian of Kolkata', hold him in awe, remember him with great love and respect and continue to wonder how a humble job-seeker came to Kolkata in 1955 from a remote village in Kerala, fell in love with the City of Joy, settled in the city and left behind an impressive bunch of works on its history, written with the dedication of a passionate historian. Despite all his efforts, the late historian remained distant from the institutions that hold sway over how history is told, written and

transmitted in our times.

On his passing on June 18 at the age of 91, they mourned the passing of an era, passing of a friend, and, above all, of a guide in the labyrinthine country we call the past.

As a father, he set an example of quiet dedication. Even after he returned to Chendamangalam, near North Paravur, in Ernakulam district of Kerala after 63 years in Kolkata, he continued to read books, newspapers and engage in farming activities as health permitted, says his younger son Manoj Nair, a school teacher at nearby Elanthikkara.





P. Thankappan Nair | Photo Credit: T. Ajayakumar

In his mission, he was a self-less seeker of truth and a human being who represented a great detachment from the lures of money and position, says P.A. Sojan, who has been long associated with him.

The late Mr. Nair went first to Assam seeking a job after he passed Class 10 and a typing course. He later returned to Kolkata and took up a small job in the city, where he soon immersed himself in the history of the metropolis.

Priceless collection of books

He left behind more than 60 books on various aspects of the history of West Bengal's capital city and had a large and priceless collection of books. The latter turned into a major attraction for history lovers in the city.

Senior journalist Ravi Kuttikkadu recalls Mr. Nair as sitting in the middle of several heaps of books when he visited him a few years ago for an interview. He says that by that time, the historian had already authored more than 70 books and several were waiting to be written.

The historian, who spent most of his waking time at the National Library, used no phones and was known by all of his neighbourhood.

Jawhar Sircar, MP, from Kolkata says he and his wife were shattered by the news of the death of the historian, who was known to the people of Kolkata as a historian of the city and to him as a personal friend through two decades.

The late historian lived in a one-room rented house at Kansaripara Lane. He had his daily meal at 9 a.m. and walked to the National Library. Mr. Sircar recalls that one of his books was on the history of streets in Kolkata, which was dedicated to him.

Kolkata honoured him on quite a few occasions, but he deserved more, says Mr. Sircar.

The historian, who died of age-related health issues, was laid to rest on June 18. He is survived by his wife, Seetha, 80, and children Manoj and Maya. His son Manish predeceased him.

