

Prof. K. Mahadevan Pillai.
The Pioneer in Neuroradiology in India

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It was a sheer surprise for me that no one has written anything about Prof. Mahadevan Pillai till now except couple of paragraphs in Prof. Sunil Pandya's compilation Neuro-sciences in India written by a radiologist whom Dr. Pillai groomed up all the way to a professorship in Radiology, He has given glowing tributes to prof. Pillai's work but no details, about him are available in that article. I asked my senior colleagues why not even an obituary was written about him at the time of his death. They told me that some radiologist was entrusted with that work but that was not done for some reason or other'

It was then I thought I would check the details about him. He was our Professor of Radiology at Trivandrum Medical College from 1962 to 1965 _ for that matter"the first ever full Professor of Radiology in Kerala. Till that time Radiology departments of Trivandrum and Calicut Medical colleges were headed by assistant professors. I still remember those days in radiology when as a house surgeon and later as postgraduate student in Medicine, I used to marvel at the carotid and vertebral angiogram done by Dr. Mahadevan Pillai. His dexterity of doing these investigations was very remarkable' When Dr' Mahadevan Pillai left Trivandrum Medical College, his photo was unveiled at the Radiology Dept. I thought that I would start my search about him from that picture. It was a rude shock for me in May 1997 to see that the room where his Photo was kept had already been demolished for making the space for another department and possibly that photograph might have been put aside by some very kind hearted labourer for some one to come and hang it somewhere else soon'!

I soon learned that everything about Dr' Mahadevan Pillai was already forgotten by almost every one. I knew that my only way to get the

information was from his colleagues, now living, and also from his son Sri Sankara Pillai. Brief bits of information from different sources coupled with whatever I personally knew about him did not give me some very relevant pieces. But totally unexpectedly Dr. Mohandas, Director of Sree chitra Thirunal date of birth and his period in SCTIMST and Dr. Umadathan, principal, Medical College, Trivandrum gave some more information about the exact contract period of his professorship in Trivandrum Medical College.

One can not blame the poor radiologist who was asked to write about Dr. Pillai. Dr: Pillai was a rolling stone throughout his life. Proverbs need not be always true, but this rolling stone certainly did not gather much of moss from any place.

Dr. Pillai (born on 13- 10- 1908) belonged to an ancient Nair family in Kayamkulam (Perumana) and took his MBBS from Vizag Medical College (1934). There was a brief stint of Military service in 1935 when he was posted in Pollachi in Tamil Nadu.

By that time he got married and in 1935 he was sent to UK by his 'in laws'. He was there for about four or five years and tried his luck for MRCP both at London and Edinburgh. Prof. K. S. Mani of Bangalore has written to me how he flopped once for his membership examination. He just managed to scrap thorough the clinical and most of the viva but the parting question in the last 30 seconds of his viva sealed his fate. He was asked the dose of Tincture Digitalis in cardiac failure by none other than Prof. George Beaumont (The present generation of students might not have heard this name but during those days Prof. Beaumont was a name to reckon with. I still keep a few of the publications like the eighth edition of Medicine: Essentials for Practitioners and Students (1962) and the fourteenth edition of Recent Advances in Medicine (edited by Baron, Compston and Dawson. 1965.) which I studied for my MD Medicine just for historical curiosity!) Dr. Pillai instead of saying the dose in .minims, mentioned the dose as milliliter (How many readers would remember this mensuration of minims now - Well it is not menstruation).

The return of the person (1940) who went to UK was certainly ignominious and Dr. Pillai's sister Smt. Bharathi Amma wrote up a limerick about her brother without MRCP. Then he joined Madras

Government service (1942) and had his quota of rotations at different hospitals including the TB Sanatorium at Tambaram. It must have been a nagging feeling of despair which drove him again to UK to take at least a diploma and get away with it. Thus in the next trip to UK he managed to have his Diploma in Medical Radiology (DMR). You should also remember that during those days radiology was not a very favored speciality. Now of course it has become the most wanted speciality.

The stars then on showered favours on him as he was posted as an Assistant Professor in Radiology in Madras Medical College (Bernard Institute). The radiology department then was doing only plain X. Rays routinely. Intravenous pyelography was an unusually heroic procedure then. It is in such a department, Dr. Pillai was posted in 1952. Dr. B. Ramamurthi had already started his department of Neurosurgery in 1950. Since Dr. Pillai had already done few cerebral angiograms in UK he decided to start the same with the help of Dr. Ramamurthi. In the initial days Dr. Ramamurthi would carry a surgical set to the X-Ray Department to expose the carotid artery if the percutaneous procedure failed. But it was practically never needed as they became experts not only in percutaneous carotid puncture but also vertebral artery puncture (through the back of head over the arch of atlas and through subclavian puncture).

Let me quote Prof. Ramamurthi "Dr. K. M. Pillai was a superb radiologist willing to take in new ideas. His help and guidance resulted in great improvement in neurological diagnosis and localisation. ... He took part in all the clinical and radiological meetings and was a much respected colleague. He was often feared by physicians and surgeons as he could point out some findings they did not elicit or some diagnosis that they had missed. He was a jovial personality. The dean of those early days was Lt. Col. Prasada Rao an old fashioned and prejudiced physician with no vision for the future. Both from jealousy and for communal reasons he used to give the fledging neurosurgery department unnecessary trouble. His physical vision was poor and Dr. Pillai named him appropriately, Dhritrashtra (the blind king in the epic Mahabharatha) which became quite popular".

Only those of the older generations of neurosurgeons and neurologists of India would know the difficulty of the investigations like carotid and vertebral angiography, ventriculography, pneumoencephalogram etc. Every thing necessary for these investigations had to be carried by them to the radiology department and the entire staff of the radiology department would view us with a lot of jealousy and disdain. If and when we fail to puncture the carotid artery in the first attempt, the radiologists and radiographers would look at us with glee and derision. It was not unusual even till early 1980's in different parts of India, the radiologists to scare the patient's relatives when they went to their department for getting the date for the angiographic studies. The patients, relatives would return terrified and ask us whether such a test would kill their patients. Radiologists like Dr. Pillai was a real exception to this even as early as 1952!

Those days were hectic with Dr. Ramamurthi operating at all odd hours and all his neuroradiological investigations were in the domain of Dr. Pillai. He was lucky to have done these investigations when he was in UK and he could go repeatedly to European countries for presentation of his research papers and get acquainted with great stalwarts in radiology like Seldinger, JWD Bull and Lindgren.

You should remember that Roentgen invented his X. Rays only in 1895, the first ever ventriculogram was done by Dr. Walter Danay of America 1918 and the first ever carotid angiogram was done by Dr. Egaz Moniz (Portugal) in 1927 (but iodides used only in 1933). By middle of 1950's these investigations were successfully performed routinely in Bernard Institute. Dr. Pillai had some connection with Prof. Sanchez Parez of Spain who made the cassette changers for the Angiographic tables for taking the arterial, capillary and venous phase for the angiographic studies, But the radiology department to which Dr. Mahadevan Pillai was posted was just an unwanted space with no equipments required for these investigations. By his frequent jaunts abroad he could bring home equipments like Seldinger needle and long rolls of catheters for use in this country. The quantity and quality of the work done in Bernard Institute at that time was quite amazing. Radiologists in other parts of India had to acknowledge the brilliance of the work done in Bernard Institute not only for radiodiagnosis but also for radium treatment- It was rumoured then that to get an early appointment with Dr. B. Ramamurthi the only way was to go through Dr. Pillai. The BRM-Pillai team brought out a series of papers which were exceptionally good by any count 3,4, 5,6, 7, 8..

Even for such a brilliant ream like BRM-Pillai there were plenty of oppositions. The most irksome trouble was the then Dean of the Madras Medical College Hospital Dr. Lt. Col. Prasad Rao. Dr. Pillai was always quick wit and started calling him 'Dridharastra' as Prasad Rao had very poor eye sight. (In Indian mythology, Dridharastra was the blind king in the epic 'Mahabharatha'). Prasad Rao's nick name became quite popular. But it only added more trouble to BRM and Pillai.

Dr. K. S. Mani was then an assistant to BRM in Madras. He learned the essential neuroradiological investigations from that place and admired Pillai as much as BRM. Dr. Pillai had a lucrative practice in radiology and comfortably settled in Madras in a house which he bought at Llyod's Road. The name of the house was "Sadamangalam". A daughter of Dr. Pillai was also named as Mangalam. He had acquired a first class Siemen,s 300 ma X. ray plant and was doing a lot of private work as well. (He kept this machine with him till his Trivandrum days and sold it out to one of his students. That machine is still working somewhere near vettukad, Trivandrum, though half a century old. In Western countries such a machine would be a priceless vintage one).

Dr. K. S. Mani moved out to Bangalore to the then formed All India Institute of Mental Health which later on became the 'National Institute of Mental health and Neurosciences' (NIMHANS). Much to the annoyance of Dr. BRM, Dr. K. S. Mani enticed Dr. Pillai to Bangalore. The then Director Dr. M. V. Govindaswamy formally invited Dr. Pillai to join there. Perhaps of his inherent nature to find newer pastures in life or because he wanted to establish his own identity moving away from the shade of his eminent colleague, he agreed to Dr. Mani's request and joined at Bangalore as an Associate Professor (May be in 1958 end or 1959). He was soon promoted as Professor of Radiology there.

He organized his department from a scratch with a Siemen,s craniograph skull unit and telepantoscope myelogram unit. Dr. R. M. Varma was the professor of Neurosurgery there and these three people had a wonderful time there. Dr. Mani has reminisced about this period in a publication as well. Cerebral angiography by direct puncture, ventriculography and myodil myelography were done so frequently that Bangalore became a good challenge to Madras as far as neuro radiological investigations were considered. He had a few publications from NIMHANS also, but I could lay hand only on one suchr0. By early 1960 he retired from NIMHANS and planned to settle down in Madras for his private practice.

But again a chain of events happened which forced Dr. Pillai to move his place of work. The then powerful kingmaker Sri. Kumbalathu Sanku Pillai who was a patient of Dr. Pillai managed to pull wires with the then Chief Minister of Kerala Sri. R. Sankar to get him a contract job as Professor of Radiology at Trivandrum Medical College for a period of three years (Date of joning at Trivandrum Medical College: 2- 11- I 962). For the first time the department of Radiology became an aggressive one in the Medical College hospital.

The remarkable change in the investigative methods became a source of considerable irritation to then sleepy department where such irritations catapulted to odd quarrels between the old timers and the newly appointed old man. But we remember with great esteem and respect the quantum and the quality of investigations done by Dr. Pillai. You should remember that Dr. Sambasivan, the first person to get a full qualification in neurosurgery came back only in 1966. Till that time when ever a problem case arose the only facility available for us was from Dr. Pillai. As a close friend of Prof. K. N. Pai he would do all the investigations for Prof. Pai's patients. I still remember the first ever case of renal artery stenosis diagnosed in MCH by Dr. Pillai by angiography. It was during this periof Dr. Pillai organized an annual meeting of the Radiological Society of India as well. Some of his pet ideas like the "radiopelvimetry for cephalopelvic disproportion" etc. were also brought out during this period. His stocky appearance, erect posture, totally bald head and booming voice would impress anyone. His immaculate dressing and generally joyful way of dealing with people and his own life (new cars every few years) were truly memorable.

At the end of the contract period at Trivandrum Medical College, his itching to go round the World returned and he left for Zambia in 1968 on a WHO job. His salary was very good so was also the type of job. On his return in 1975, he started a free lance job at Cochin. He thought that his academic career finally came to a successful end and was contended to have a comfortable leisurely retired life.

By then a series of catastrophic changes were happening in Sree Chitra Thirunal Centre. This centre actually began as a speciality wing of Medical College. But all those started it were thrown out and a series of directors, physiologists to surgeons were appointed with calamitous effect. This continued till Dr. Valiathan took over as the Director. After

an executive committee meeting of Chitra Centre, Dr. BRM suggested that Dr. Pillai would be available as Professor of Radiology if a personal invitation is made. Both of them went to Dr. Pillai who was then at Chavara and requested that he should join in Chitra Centre as Professor of Radiology. He joined at Chitra Centre (SCTIMST by then) on 1-7-1975 and continued till 31-12-1999. The remarkably high standards of the quality of radiological investigations of that place he achieved during his tenure there still stand as a silent testimony to the great capacity of that scientist. Even after retirement he continued his association with SCTIMST and Medical College, Trivandrum till his end. He lived to see the phenomenal change in diagnostic radiology by way of CT and MRI Scans.

After his retirement he was mostly at Cochin with his daughter and died on 24-10-1985 at the age of 77 years. His wife, Mrs. Rajanima, who belonged to Chavara Sankaramangalam family had died on 7th May 1978. He is survived by his two sons and three daughters. One of his sons is a surgeon now working in North Kerala.

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