

From a Thatched Hut to the Heritage.
Prof. Asoke K Bagchi.
President, Neurological Society of India, 1970.

On the 26 November 1925 I was born at Rangpur (Bangladesh). My birth took place in a Nissen hut of thatched bamboo on the courtyard of one Mr. Sanyal. Mother says that the November chill of North Bengal made her to roll me up with torn pieces of old rags. She also said, as I was constantly crying after birth, the country midwife put one of her honeyed finger tips into my mouth which I suckled roudly and stopped crying.

In my family my grandfather and father were graduate medical practitioners from the Calcutta University. I never saw my grandfather because he died while on Medical Service during 1914-1916-world war.

I grew up in the small town of Pabna in Bangladesh, in the affectionate care of my parents, grandmother and others!

I was taught at home by my parents and an uncle who was an adopted son of my grandmother. He was known as Badal uncle and was very brilliant in his studies. His teachings were so clear and interesting, that even today I can hear his tenor ringing in my ears!

On the 9 January 1934 mother got me bathed very early and dressed me up in white dhoti and kurta and gave a tikka of dahi on my forehead and sent me to my future school with father. I was not at all nervous, but a little shivery. I was taken to my future beloved G. C. Institution where I studied till 1941. I stooped down and made obeisance to my headmaster, Babu Radha Vinode Basak. He blessed me with both of his hands and muttered, "Brighten your face as the others in your family."

Circus incident

When I was reading in Class V, a large circus pitched its tent near our school. One day uncle took me to the circus. Oh Lord! what a spectacle was waiting for me inside the tent! There were many delightful events but the trapeeze gave me a thrill. Where I saw young white girls and boys who were playing. They almost floated in the air to catch the pendulous handles of the swings. Oh Lord! if a player misses grip what will happen! Uncle said, that trapeeze was the most dangerous of all the items. The game fascinated me and I took a silent vow to take up the career of a trapeeze player in future.

Exactly 27 years later in winter a breathless messenger approached a young Calcutta Neurosurgeon to examine a trapeeze player, who fell down and had a head injury. I was the neurosurgeon, the same boy of 1935! The players belonged to the Great Rayman Circus, which I saw in 1935. Originally the circus was owned by Italians, but later it changed to Indian ownership of Mr. Gopalan of Kerala.

I operated upon the girl, Sarla, and saved her from impending death. Sarla is now a housewife at Coimbatore. So my fate made me a neurosurgeon instead of a trapeeze artist.

In 1941 I passed the matriculation examination from the same school and was admitted for the study of Intermediate in Science in the Edward College of our town. The college was one of the three degree colleges in North Bengal. It was a degree college both for arts and science studies. Strangely enough, one Sri Gokhale was the Principal who taught in the college; on enquiry he was out to be one of the cousins of the famous Indian freedom fighter, Gopal Krishna Gokhale. The centre point of excellence of education in the Institution was our principal. Roy Radhikanath Bose Bahadur who was

one of the most brilliant English teachers of the period. Many of the readers of this anecdote may still remember his famous book, "Rhetoric and Prosody" by Bose and Sterling. It was the smallest and best available of contemporary books on the subject. He was the person who helped me to understand English and write it properly. I am indebted to him for opening up the wide vista of English literature in front of my young eyes.

I passed the ISC examination of the University of Calcutta from the college in 1943 and soon after proceeded to Calcutta with my father for an admission into the Calcutta Medical College or the Carmichael Medical College, the only two Medical Colleges then extant in Bengal for the degree of MBBS. The only loop hole of my career was that I did not study Biology as a compulsory subject which was not taught at Edward College.

One morning I went to the Calcutta Medical College and met a corpulent person. He assured my father that I could be admitted, provided he could spare with Rs. 500/- for the lapse in my curriculum of studies. My young brain started throbbing and I resented loudly saying, "father, I would not study medicine after bribing". so my father was also very sorry and the next morning he took me to a house near the City college of North Calcutta, where a friend of his Dr. Hiren Chatterjee used to live. The friendly gentleman went through my mark sheet and said, I am sufficiently qualified to get a seat in the Carmichael Medical college. He further added that after admission I would need to attend special classes on Biology in the Science Section of the college for six months. so I merrily came out with rots of hopes in my mind for a bright, though unknown future

. on the day of the interview, plenty of young men like me assembled in the College Hall and were interviewed by quite a large group of elderly people. one of them asked me, "why do you want to study medicine?," I promptly replied, "I want to learn medicine properly and to set up a practice and treat the suffering people,'

I joined the first MBBS course. the curriculum contained Anatomy, Physiology, Organic and physical Chemistry and pharmacology.

The first MBBS examination was held in 1945, I luckily excelled in all the subjects and received five medals and a bunch of certificates. After promotion to the third year class, pathology a new but interesting subject was added to our curriculum. At that stage I met a reputed professor of Pathology, Dr. D. N. Banerjee, who graduated from Calcutta and had undergone post-graduate education under the world renowned professor of Pathology, Dr. Ludwig Aschoff, the discoverer of Aschoff's nodules in human hearts in cases of Rheumatic Fever. Dr. Banerjee was a Morbid Anatomist besides being a linguist and a medical historian. with his careful training and compassionate teaching I could enter the interesting field of medical history. He presented me with books from his large collection of English, German and French books on the subject which are now unavailable. I was the class Assistant of pathology. I creditably passed through the fourth year and fifth year classes. While was a student in the fifth year class, some photographs on brain injuries which appeared in the British Journal of Surgery, fascinated me. I used to think that one day I would become a surgeon opening the skull cavity !

During the middle of the fifth year class, I volunteered to serve in an organisation in the riot torn districts of East Bengal. The troupe was headed by Mahatma Gandhi. I went to the island of Sandwip to supervise the riot torn Hindu people of the place. Later I went to Phirozpur in the Punjab and accompanied a large contingent of refugees from Punjab to the Kurukshetra camp in UP. I came out in the final MBBS examination with blazing success, with honours in three subjects, over a dozen of medals and few scholarships.

After graduation while I was undergoing internship, I met an American Photo Journalist, named, Everitt Replay, stationed at Calcutta. There was a big American hospital near the lakes of South Calcutta. One day Everitt said that a

famous brain surgeon was coming to the hospital to visit and perform some brain operations. He also said that the surgeon was from the Montreal Neurological Institute of Canada. His name was Prof. Wilder Graves Penfield, a past student of Harvey Cushing. On the specified morning I dressed up like a white robed doctor and silently followed the footsteps of Everitt and entered a cool operating room of the hospital. A group of surgeons wearing green cloaks and masks were standing around the patient alongwith the Doctor who was a tall man.

He operated upon the right frontal region of the patient and removed a globular fleshy tumour tinged with fresh blood. It was a red letter day in my life as I could witness one of the greatest of Neurosurgeons of the world at work, only a few yards in front of me!

After the operation the professor talked to me for a short while and said, "If you want to learn neurosurgery, you should take your intital. training in an European hospital to learn from the masters in the field." At the end of the same year, another American surgeon named, Col Naffziger also demonstrated at the Lake Hospital. To be frank the workmanship of Dr. Penfield was far superior to that of Naffziger. In 1956 Dr. Penfield revisited Calcutta and came to my department in the SSKM Hospital.

When I finished my internship training I was determined to learn neurosurgery.

Before the completion of my internship I started communicating with various well-known centres for neurosurgery in the USA. Some of the addresses never replied, but few replies were received from places like, Portland (Oregon), Los Angeles, pasadana (California) and Standford, but all of them almost equivocally said that in the immediate post-war condition one has to wait for quite some time for the home-coming military medical doctors who were eligible for further medical education. I wrote to some European and British Medical centres. I received a very interesting reply from Prof. Dr. Leopold schoenbauer a reputed central European neurosurgeon working as the chief of neurosurgery in the famous vienna General Hospital at vienna.

The professor succeeded Dr. Anton von Eiselsberg who was a student of Dr. Theodor c. Billroth. Dr. Eiselsberg was the first person in history to make a successful transfrontal operation-on a pituitary Adenmo patient. Before the second world war Dr. Schoenbauer worked under Dr. Harvey cushing and his able student Dr. walter Dandy in USA.

The background of his training appeared to me most. So I agreed to join him in the third week of r95l as his first Indian student in neurosurgery after the second world war! I worked under him and his first assistant Dr. Herbert Kraus in the vienna General Hospital; a legendary institution having 1400 beds and surgeons of international repute, of the past and present.

My training was arduous, as I had to learn German and Latin languages besides having my continual training in Anatomy, physiology, Pharmacology and occasional didactic lectures in Neurology and Psychiatry. I had to learn theory and practice of neurosurgery and neuroradiology and attend biweekly seminars and occasional orations by masters. In about six months my personality as a basic surgeon mutated to that of a neurosurgeon.

Prof Kraus my beloved .Gum, always used to say, "Bagchi ! you are mutating into a Neurosurgeon out of a General. St be careful and attentive. you also need to be a regular writer of your activities and experiences which should be published in Indian national journals to orientate the large medical profession of India. If you do not let yourself known, then you would remain a half-known brain-cutter instead a neurosurgeon".

Dr. Kraus took me to some well known European Neurosurgical hospitals and clinics like, Prague, Zurich, Basel, Cologne, Bonn, Budapest, Stockholm and few other small centres in district towns. With his affectionate help I could attend three inter-European conferences to enrich my knowledge. As my period of training was gradually reaching its end, I was ordered by him to attend the Didactic Training School for learning how to deliberate, the training was a boon to my future. I was writing mostly to American Neurosurgical hospital for a job. A very welcoming letter arrived from the Director of the Henry Ford Hospital at Detroit, Michigan, USA. The Director of the hospital wrote in his letter in response to my application for the post of a Junior Resident in the department of Neurosurgery of his hospital that, I could join. I was very much delighted at his letter and discussed the matter with my Guru, Prof Kraus who opined that I should accept the job to further my knowledge and experience and ultimately the work at Detroit may help me to join other academic institutions in the country.

It was a Saturday, I had gone to the Indian Consulate to read old Indian newspapers. One of the secretaries informed me that within a few days, Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, the Chief Minister of West Bengal was to come to Vienna to meet Dr. Karl Lindner, his Ophthalmic Surgeon. On Tuesday next, I had a telephone call from Dr. Roy to meet him at the Hotel Mozart immediately. On Thursday morning I met him. He told me that he was up and doing for the early introduction of the first neurosurgical clinic at Calcutta. The government had already occupied the famous Presidency General Hospital of Calcutta (estd 1870) for the purpose. I told him that I had ventured out of India absolutely on my own to learn neurological surgery at Vienna in 1951. He seemed to have known the fact as he had enquired about me from the Consul-General of Indian Embassy at Vienna. He said, he would be very glad to have me working at that proposed department of Calcutta and establish a full-fledged Neurosurgical Unit.

I was very much thrilled as well as apprehensive. I told him, "Sir, I was already offered a job in neurosurgery at Detroit in USA; so I am at a loss, what I should do?" He quietly told me to come to him next afternoon for a lunch and if possible to bring the appointment letter from the Chairman of Henry Ford Hospital. He went on telling many nice stories out of his experience, and entered the topic of Detroit and wanted to see the letter from the Chairman. He went through the letter, folded it and kept in his own breast pocket.

He appeared somewhat philosophical and said, "Yes I admit, if you go to USA you will earn large sums of money. But as far as I guess that only few people in America will know you from among the largest number of neurosurgeons working in USA. Whereas, if you come to Calcutta, the virgin neurosurgical field, only a few successful operations on the human brain will glorify your identity and push it to the pinnacle, so please think over before you ultimately decide to go to America and face the unknown population." He added that "the salary offered by Bengal Government will be very little but it would be the corpus of your future".

He also added "you must be knowing that your grandfather, Dr. K.D. Bagchi was senior to me at the Medical College and he took clinical classes for us on Ophthalmology. Your father Dr. Dwijadas Bagchi was my student of medicine at the Carmichael Medical College where I was the professor. You should also never forget that when I decided to increase my activities in Indian National Congress I delivered my last chain of Lectures to you all on neurological topics, so you are also my student though for a flicker of time! I am sure my connection with three generations of your family is a strong bond which you should tighten up whenever you remember me".

I became spellbound at his clever way of talking and said, "Sir! I shall go back to India and do whatever you say. He never returned me the letter which was kept in his breast pocket.

In the next afternoon he left for Stockholm. I went to see him off from the war ravaged Schwechat airport, I returned home and all the way I was asking myself, whether I was correct in my decision to go

back to India leaving behind the allurements and prospect of an American life. Professor must have also realised that I would be depressed, so he wrote me a postcard from Stockholm the very next morning. Since after he was writing to me often to express his concern about my future. He returned to Calcutta after about three weeks and started writing to me more frequently. In one of his letters he expressed that it would be very beneficial for the first ever neurosurgical clinic in North and Eastern India, if I could tactfully allure my immediate superior Professor Herbert Kraus to join the new clinic just for one calendar year. He said, the skill and expertise of Dr. Kraus will certainly magnetize the Indian patients, who would make the clinic famous. I thought it to be an impossible task. One day when I went out with him to a place named Baden, where up in the mountains he had a wooden chalet for his hunting forays in summer. He was a keen sportsman and a very good shooter of permissible games. I told him, "Sir the Chief Minister of Bengal was here who called me and almost ordered me to return to India to establish the first neurological institute at Calcutta". After lots of thinkings and rethinking I consented to his order, but he added a condition to his proposal and said, "It would be the best if you could request your teacher Dr. Kraus to come to Calcutta just for a year". He also said that he would be given a fat salary, a permission for private practice outside office hours and accommodation in a posh residence with all living expenses. He further added that the expenses for his air travel to and from Vienna will be borne by the government. The government would allow the transfer of three-fourths of his entire income to a Viennese Bank in dollars.

He was a clever man and apparently showed no reactions. In the early afternoon he shot a white tailed deer, we disembowled it and started for Vienna. I did not raise any further conversations about Calcutta.

The next morning after our first session of operations we were lounging in the surgeon's room in the underground theatre. Amidst his interesting conversation once he asked, "How frequently do you see wild tigers and leopards in the Indian forest lands?" I said, "It is not very frequent, but there are tiger infested areas in various parts of Bengal, Orissa, Assam and Bihar, where you could observe those animals in their open habitat from watch towers". He appeared to be quite interested as his instinct of a hunter was pricking from within.

I wrote a long letter to Dr. B. C. Roy with all details. In two weeks time he replied and made some points very clear. He said, "the financial matters will never become a problem to West Bengal government, if he decides to come". Time went away but the Chief did not firmly commit.

One morning I was taking a dictation from the director of the clinic, Prof. Schoenbauer, I casually mentioned the Calcutta topic. The fat chief made some grunts. After finishing the dictation while I was leaving, the Professor told me that he would give a patient thinking on it and let me know.

A few days later I was called to see him. As I entered the room, I saw Dr. Kraus was already there. The Director nodded to me and then said to Dr. Kraus, "Have you given a serious thinking about invitation to Calcutta"? Dr. Kraus fumbled for a while and demurely said, "Your honour! if I go to Calcutta, I may lose my seniority and position. Can it be officially confirmed that the foreign trip would not affect me in any way"?

I got the last chance to tell the Director, "Sir I looking from the other aspects, if he goes to Calcutta and work, the tradition of the great surgical school of Vienna will spread far and wide. Would you not think that a person descending from the line of Professor Theodor Christian Billroth will enrich the Indian medical profession"? Professor almost jumped up and said, "Kraus, I am standing as a guarantor for your future. I am sure you would prosper rapidly after the visit. And no harm will be done to your career if you go to India just for a year to establish the first neurosurgical unit of Eastern India at Calcutta along with Bagchi".

Next day Professor Kraus looked much quietened down and made easy conversations on Indian flora and fauna. As a hunter he nursed a craze to see a Bengal tiger in the open, hesitantly he said, "if I see one, I would like to shoot it as a trophy".

My days of training and education were almost nearing their end. The final viva-voce was not yet over. A date for it was announced by the academic council of the university. I was examined by a group of examiners presided by Professor Schoenbauer and the professors of the Graz and Innsbruck Universities and Professor Kruger from Bad Ischl Institute. On the first day the viva was based on neurological surgery. The questions and answers were recorded in a voice recorder. Next morning a study of neuroradiological films of plain x-ray, angiograms, and ventriculograms were conducted by Professor Eric Zaunbauer, was the Neuroradiologist of the hospital. On the third day I had to perform a spinal operation and the exposure of the cerebellar hemispheres upto the dural covering. I could satisfy the examiners. Next Monday I was admitted to the degree of MS and NS (Meisterschaft ins Allgemeine und Neurochirurgie - Mastership in General and Neurological Surgery) by the Wiener Medizinische Akademie fuer Arztliche Fortbildung. I was relieved of my anxiety and tension.

By the end of 1954 I came back to India with a huge container full of books on my subject. Meanwhile at the order of Dr. Roy, instruments were imported from Europe. Prof. Kraus personally supervised the purchase of those at Vienna and Munich.

Dr. B. C Roy the farsighted person had selected one of his favourite students Dr. T. K. Ghosh as the future neurologist of the P. G. Hospital. Dr. Ghosh left his initial career in Cardiology and went to USA. He joined the neurology department of the Mount Sinai Hospital of New York under Dr. Hanno Strauss. He was a pupil of Wernicke. Dr. Ghosh was trained in USA and came back to India. At the instance of Dr. Roy a department of EEG was established in the basement of the Woodburn Ward of the Presidency General Hospital. The initial EEG machine was from Dr. Grass of USA. having only two writing pens. It was natural for the future neurosurgeons to work in the same basement and start a neurosurgical centre.

After my arrival from Europe I was appointed a Junior Neurosurgeon and started the initial spade work for the future department. In the meanwhile Dr. Ramen Chatterjee was chosen out of the local health cadre to act along with me. He was a senior general surgeon of repute but owing to some factional feuds among the examiners of post-graduate surgery of the Calcutta University he was prevented, quite a number of times to be admitted to the degrees of Master of Surgery. After joining us he had achieved lots of satisfaction and became a Master of Surgery in short time. On the 5th February 1955 Dr. Kraus came to Calcutta and joined as the Professor and Director of the Department of Neurosurgery of FG Hospital. We three linked up our hands and became busy in the creation of the first neurosurgical unit of Eastern India at Calcutta.

Adjacent to the existing EEG room we got a small place where myself and Dr. Chatterjee sat on two rattling iron chairs, always thinking about our great department of the future. After his arrival, from the next morning Dr. Kraus started coming to the hospital and we gradually insinuated trim into the air-conditioned EEG room. Poor Dr. Ghosh had to leave the professor's seat to Dr. Kraus as a mark of respect. Gradually more medical personnel joined us and the nucleus of neurosurgery anchored deep into the soil of Bengal.

On 7th March 1955. I improvised an angiography injection set and performed the first ever carotid angiography clone at Calcutta.

I belonged to North Bengal; from time immemorial the relationship between the North and the South Bengalees were strained in respect of some disputable superiority attributed to each other. Chatterjee and I were also involved in the same melee. I being a northern foreigner to Calcutta, the local people started a whispering campaign about my eligibility to become a neurosurgeon vis-a-vis Chatterjee who was a southerner by birth. We had a quota of two house officers, both southerners and there was the already Dr. T. K. Ghosh also a southerner among them I Sometimes my position became unbearable because of frequent occurrences of obstructions among the north and the south. Sometimes I felt miserable and thought of resigning the job and going back to USA. But I had a mentor who was a saintly person practicing in chest diseases. I confided everything to him but he always said, "Do not let loose a bird, it will vanish forever and will never be seen again, instead you should try to excel your performances as a neurosurgeon which will smother the mean attitudes of others". I shall never forget him and his inspirations which helped me in future. I always remember him. He was a bachelor who lived alone in an attic. At the prime of his career of over 50 years he denounced the world and lived the rest of his life in the city of Banaras.

I became more and more intent on my profession which resulted in over two hundred papers, four books on neurological aspects and frequent visits to International Conferences to enrich my knowledge. I always stuck to the advice of Dr. Kraus to publish as well as to deliver lectures. My significant articles were gradually known to contemporary publishers of the world. Some of my articles were requoted in English, German, Hungarian, Polish journals. I published four books pertaining to Neurosurgery of which two were on Head Injuries, one on the surgery of human pains and the last one was on Neurosurgical Diagnosis.

In 1984 I stopped writing text books because of the modern diagnostic and therapeutic methods which are far advanced than my knowledge. I had always been a follower of Cushing and Dandy's tradition along with those of Krause, Bergmann and Foerster. I retired in 1984, but long before the same I began writing on various subjects and mostly in history. One of my first books was comparative Philology which earned me a Doctorate of Literature from the University of Burdwan in West Bengal.

In 1987 my Encyclopaedia entitled "The Encyclopaedia of Nobel Laureates" was published which earned great commendations all over the world including Dr. Lars Gyllensten, the Chairman of the Nobel Foundation of Stockholm. It had four reprints and supplemented editions subsequently and is being printed as the second edition which may appear to the public in the middle of February 1998. My book "Medicine in Medieval India" came out in 1997 and has been well received by the medical historians of the world and has been recommended for a D Litt to me in relation to its Alternative of Medicine, now in vogue.

One day in 1985 I saw both my books on Head Injuries on the shelf-table of a reputed German Neurosurgeon. I was feeling elated and had a desire to exclaim loudly, but remained quiet and thought that it may be the greatest honour of appreciation to me. I understood that my works were in the near vicinity of heritage.

Editor's note :

Prof. Bagchi is one of the very well read neurosurgeon of India. His achievements are far too many to narrate. His interests are quite varied from Neurosurgery to history to philology to philosophy to philately. When I published a small book on Neurosemantics I sent him a copy of the same. In the return post he sent me a copy of his book titled Sanskrit and Modern Medical Vocabulary - A comparative study. (Published by Rddhi-India 28, Beniatala lane Calcutta 9- First edition 1978) with his personal note "To Dr. K. R. Nair from your pioneer Anna - Dr. Asoke Bagchi."

He is a versatile writer' (in fact I an bit surprised why his autobiography is not as spicy as I thought it would be) and his short paper' "The entry of English Medicine into India" in Journal of the Association of Neuroscientists of Eastern India (1997; 2: 5-8) is an excellent paper in history of medicine of our country. In fact I have tried to write a paper like that about Travancore and I know the amount of difficulty to get such references. He wrote to me in June I 997 that another book of the same type (Rabindranatha Tagore and his medical World) would be published soon.

Prof. Bagchi is Prof. Jacob Chandy orator in the Annual conference of NSI at Trivandrum in Dec 1998. He has asked me some details about the early history of Kerala including the date and port of entry of Vasco de Gama. We are sure that his oration would be an excellent one.

K. R. Nair. Sept.'98