

**Uneventful reminiscences of a very
ordinary person**

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President, Neurological Society of India, 1972.

I was born in Madurai on October 18, 1928, second of three sibs, the other two being sisters. My father was a very renowned physician in Government General Hospital, Madras and died at a very tender age of 48 years while occupying the post of Professor of Therapeutics, Madras medical College and Physican, General Hospital, Madras. He was a disciplinarian, Principled ethics and strict financial rectitude were two corner stones in his life. He was a storn nationalist in the pre-independence era and we had the privilege of Mahatma Gandhi visiting our house to see my ailing father in 1946. He was a brilliant clinician, research worker and a very erudite teacher. His list of students includes our own great Dr. B. Ramamurthi.

Taking the story down from such esoteric heights to mundane levels is very simple. The classical example is the undersigned. After a reasonably distinguished (?) medical education from Madras Medical College, by which time my father had died, I finished my MD in general medicine in 1956 and worked as an assistant Professor of Medicin in Madras Medical College and Assistant Physician in General hospital, Madras in 1956--57. Greener pastures beckoned me to Bangalore very much due to the prodding (or should I say being kicked our?) by Dr. B. Ramamurthi. My initial interest and training in neurology were under the and the only multifaceted Dr. Ramamurthi. I learnt from him the importance of discipline, writing one's observations on paper and most important an introduction to scientific temper - the ever present thirst for knowledge and questioning. Though he had a very rough exterior and sharp tongue-which I have inherited-he has also a heart of gold and an astute brain. which alas I have not.

When I joined the All India Institute of Mental Health, Bangalore in April 1957 it was a mental hospital and nothing but a mental hospital. There was a WHO consultant and neuropsychiatrist by name Dr. Lieber man from UK and I was inducted as his understudy. I never aspired to be a qualified neurologist in that I did not appear for the usual MRCP or DM Neurology examinations. I was a self taught neurologist with tips from Dr" Lieberman. Likewise EEG was also self taught from whatever books were available in those days and sitting with Dr. Liebennan while he was reading the EEGs.

One can thus see that there was no formal training in neurology which was available in those days unlike at present and many of us were self taught. We tried to walk and run, fell down cursed, made mistakes. but continued to walk if not run-hopefully not away from the perfect.

There was a two year stint in UK during 1960-62 under the Colombo in when instead of the usual standing in the queue for an MRCP I spent the time trying to learn intricacies of clinical neurology, neuroradiology, EEG and most important neuropathology. I recall those days in Queen Square and Maida Vale Hospital, London with a sense of nostalgia two of my colleagues at that time being Dr. Balaparameswara Rao, Neurosurgeon from Hyderabad and Dr. K. Jagannathan from Madras. In fact Jagan had his only child in UK. What I mean is the child was born in London and I still remember my visiting his wife with a bouquet. How elated Jagan was at the event, the birth of the child not the handing over of the bouquet.

I returned to Bangalore in April 1962 by which time Dr. Varma had joined the Department as a Neurosurgeon, it was a grind to start a department from scratch which commenced in 1957. We had to start out patient services, plan in patient wards, operation theatre and neuroradiology. By this time I managed to hijack the late Dr. Mahadevan Pillai an

outstanding neuroradiologist of India from General Hospital Madras and very much to the annoyance of Dr. Ramamurthi. (Years later the hijacking became a habit-Dr. H.V.Srinivas from Gulbarga, Dr. D. H. Deshpande from Bombay and Dr. M. Gourie Devi from Delhi). Dr. Varma and I like many others of our era built the department brick by brick with very little extra help. It was a real challenge more so working in a mental hospital environment which initially was a damper for the public to come to the out patients lest they be mistaken for having mental illness. Over a period of time the pendulum swung to the other extreme. Service from two satisfied "reasonably paid" full timers coupled with generous referrals from the local professional colleagues in the state and neighbourhood formed the basis for the "dedicated service" to the public. As we all know once public goodwill has been obtained there is no dearth for their affection.

While I kept mainly in the background keeping to patients, teaching a little bit of research and lectures to the medical profession, my colleague Dr. Varma filled in admirably as a master diplomat who could wring whisky out of a stone. Such was his patience, tact and art of communication skills mostly by the hands ! Obviously this left him very little time for research in spite of the fact that he is an extremely gifted individual in terms of originality of thought. He is an extraordinarily gifted right hemisphere dominant individual, while I am a mere ordinary left hemisphere dominant slogging type of person. We complemented each other extremely well and not once in our 40 years of association have we ever quarrelled though differences of opinion we did have. We were known as 'strange brothers'. The late Dr. Denis William during his visit to India called each of us separately and said that under no circumstances should our partnership be broken. Such was the complementary relationship between two of us. The concept, the plan, the details and the realisation of NIMHANS with minimal bloodshed is his brain-child and could well be a standing monument for his far sighted vision for several years to come. Public adulation was his forte.

Another thrilling example of one such was witnessed by me during the 75th Birthday Celebrations of Prof. Dr. B. Ramamurthi in Madras in January 1997. The love, warmth and affection showered on him by the public from all walks of life-intelligentia, musicians, scientists, politicians, religious heads from all faiths and most importantly the common man of all hues and colors ! It was an amazing and unforgettable experience. These are instances of powerful beacon lights to follow-perhaps not 100%, though !

In 1978 Dr. Varma and I felt that we should follow Lord Tennyson's dictum in Morte de Arthur "the old changeth yielding place to new". To put it in another way we wanted to leave NIMHANS so that people should ask "why" and not "when". From that time which was separated barely by an interval of 11 months we both started private practice in a small way in which satisfaction has been the main stay.

The thoroughness which I learnt from Dr. Ramamurthi was put into practice by maintaining excellent case notes written either by me or my wife, Dr. Geeta Rangan, who is a qualified neurologist unlike me a hoax. To this day we have case notes of over 10000 files over a period of 20 years-admittedly and ashamedly a very small number – approximately 70% of whom are patients with epilepsy. Follow-up data have been scrupulously maintained and ever since Dr. Geeta Rangan left the clinic to start her own independent career, about 5 years ago, I have slowly shifted more and more from a self styled neurologist to a self styled epileptologist. I hardly ever see any case other than epilepsy and each new case takes at least an hour. This is the secret for the very small number of cases. But all are thoroughly documented individually and not by changing batches of house surgeons, senior residents, registrars, and what not. The buck starts with KSM and stops there. Most importantly this gives me ample time to talk to and not at patients and explain about the illness, try and clear their doubts as much as possible.

To look back over the last 4 decades of neurology from the early 50s is a very thought provoking and amazing experience. Investigatory tools were at minimum and one had to rely almost exclusively on clinical methods with limited

help from EEG which it was capable of, and invasive radiological procedures. As we all know imaging studies had made a mark in India only in the 70s. Since then we have made remarkable progress and as of today we have in the country 2500 EEG machines, 600 CT scanners, 57 MRI units. Spect scans are available in 4 centres and Mdeo EEG monitoring in another 11. PET scan, magnetoencep-halography and MRI spectroscopy are not available yet. Tremendous advances have been made in knowledge and investigations of demyelinating disorders, disorders of nerve and muscle, the so-called degenerative disorders, geriatric neurology, and of late attention to neuro-rehabilitation. These are extremely hopeful signs and go to show how vast and complex the field has become.

While neurology branched off from general medicine, the time is already on the anvil wherein the specialist interests are directed towards epilepsy, peripheral nerve and muscle disorders, demyelinating disorders, movement disorders not to mention allied various fields in neurosurgery, neuropathology, imaging studies and neurochemistry. Last but not least are the strides made in micro biology of the nervous system including neuro viorology and the new excitin-q fields of neuroimmunology and neuro genetics. Looking back one is happy that I took to neurology in the late 50s rather than in the present era when my ignorance - after all I was a Professor of Ignorology in NIMHANS for several years – would have become much more obvious than it is today.

This small piece will be incomplete without reference to two stalwarts of Indian Neurology. I refer to the late Prof. Baldev Singh and Prof. T. K Ghosh. Having known them from 1957 onwards - 40 years – I must confess I miss them, their warmth, humanism, erudition and infectious capacity for hard work. Prof. Baldev Singh was a silent worker shunning away from controversies and medical politics. Many may not be aware that he had a very good private practice as a consultant in Lahore in the thirties when he dared to do craniotomies and remove brain tumours I On the other hand Dr. Ghosh had to face considerable difficulties in the early days of his professional career. However, later he became the blue eyed boy of the late Dr. B. C. Roy, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal. I am sure Prof. Dr. Ramamurthi, Dr. Anil Desai and Dr. Prakash Tandon will recall with nostalgia our -glorious moments in the PL 480 meetings- along with the late Dr. Earl Walker - and also at the ICIVIR Neurology Expert Group Meetings - all in the sixties and seventies.

Finally amidst all these developments we as neurologists cannot remain isolated and live in ivory tower of our own creation. We must be able to provide cost effective service to all segments of the population including the oft neglected rural sector which constitutes 70% of our population. It is here that under graduate education and refresher courses for general practitioners and primary care physicians should emphasise on practical neurology rather than esoteric high level teaching. I quote from an editorial in the Lancet 349: 1851,1997 - "what disease affects 14 million worldwide yet three quarters are untreated?

Paradoxically the same disease, with early diagnosis and treatment, can be controlled in about three quarters of those affected. The disorder is epilepsy, the commonest brain disorder in every country in the world". It has been estimated that there are 40 million patients with epilepsy world wide - 75Vo from developing countries. 5.4 million in India have active epilepsy -70Vo being rural . Is it not time to spare a thought for these unfortunate individuals?

Editor's note :

It is rather difficult not to write an epilogue for this extraordinary write up of an extraordinary neurologist!. Prof. K. S. Mani is an unusually gifted and versatile teacher though his appearance and squeaky voice are misleading. His achievements are enviable. He has however highlighted his shortcomings in this article.

when he initially talked about 'South Indian paraplegia" his peers ridiculed him by saying that they too had seen North Indian and west Indian paraplegias! They took his publication seriously only after Sir John Walton quoted his paper in his

text book of myology (of all the publications!). Even then they were more conversant with the African variety of Tropical Spastic Paraplegia, Konzo etc. The very concept of Hot water epilepsy was hard to sell to our colleagues for a long time. Now of course it is a well established entity. His non-institutional epidemiologic study of epilepsy is a far better organized than those of the 'centres of excellence' where unwilling bored youngsters are sent out to see [8 to 20 patients already worked up and under treatment in semi urban settings once in a week or so.

He has underplayed his role in building up an excellent department of Neurology in a dilapidated mental hospital in Bangalore. His entry, stay and exit from NIVTHANS were equally interesting. Though he has called himself as a Professor of Ignorology all of us consider him as the Professor of Epileptology in India. He has never compromised on his views and opinions and he proved himself to be right in the long run either in research or in organizational matters, the best example is his long drawn battle in the Indian Epilepsy Association'

I have been fortunate that he and Dr. Geetha Rangan are quite close friends to me, though he is very much senior to me.

K. R. Nair