Dr. B. Ramamurthi 1922-2003

By the time I completed my residency program at the Grant Medical College and Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy Hospital in Mumbai, the name of Dr. Ramamurthi evoked a larger-than-life image in my mind. I knew of his pioneering efforts in setting up neurosurgery and, indeed, the neurosciences in the city of Chennai in much the same manner as Dr. Jacob Chandy had in Vellore. We knew of his many papers on subjects ranging from prevention of head injuries to complex neurophysiological observations during stereotaxic exploration of the thalamus and hypothalamus.

It was thus with great trepidation that I ventured into the lion’s den during a visit to Madras — albeit after having given the lion warning of my impending arrival. I expected a host of secretaries past whom I would have to negotiate my way. Instead, when I knocked on the door bearing his nameplate, I found it opened by a slim, bespectacled gentleman who greeted me with a smile and asked what he could do for me. I introduced myself and stated that I had an appointment to meet Dr. Ramamurthi. ‘Ah!’ beamed the gentleman, ‘Come in Dr. Pandya. And how are my friends Gaji and Noshir?’ You cannot imagine the thrill I experienced when he volunteered to show me — an unknown neophyte in neurosurgery — around the department himself.

At this first meeting, in response to my query on recent research, he handed me a list of publications from his department and asked me to place a tick mark against papers that were of interest to me. Ere I left his department that day, I had been unloaded and carried to the air-conditioned guest room on the first floor. You were, immediately on arrival, part of the family and were expected to behave as such with no formality. Participation in family reunions, ceremonies, outings and festive occasions was expected and facilitated. At a wedding of Dr. Ramamurthi’s niece, I was proudly introduced by Dr. Ramamurthi himself, to several near relatives and made to feel entirely at home. And when it was time to leave, their regret was sincere. Exhortations to visit them soon continued to ring in your ears as their car sped you to the airport or railway station.

At the annual conferences of the Neurological Society of India, it was common experience to see Dr. Ramamurthi sitting in the rear of the auditorium when youngsters presented papers and for him to get up to make favorable comments when discussion on the paper was permitted. Many have echoed the same refrain: Dr. Ramamurthi’s remarks provided invaluable stimuli to excel further. And so it was with me.

Many, like me, have experienced the legendary hospitality of Drs. Indira and B. Ramamurthi. Nothing was left to chance. They ensured that you were met on arrival and brought to 27, 2nd Main, CIT Colony swiftly. Before you knew it, your bags had been unloaded and carried to the air-conditioned guest room on the first floor. You were, immediately on arrival, part of the family and were expected to behave as such with no formality. Participation in family reunions, ceremonies, outings and festive occasions was expected and facilitated. At a wedding of Dr. Ramamurthi’s niece, I was proudly introduced by Dr. Ramamurthi himself, to several near relatives and made to feel entirely at home. And when it was time to leave, their regret was sincere. Exhortations to visit them soon continued to ring in your ears as their car sped you to the airport or railway station.

I had often wondered how he managed his enormous correspondence. During my stays at his home, the answer became
evident. A series of open boxes held his letters, journals, manuscripts and books. Whenever he had a little time to spare, he'd sit with these and make brief notes. Each evening and early morning, his secretary would come in and sit by his side. Dr. Ramamurthi picked up the already sorted items one by one and dictated rapidly. By the time Dr. Ramamurthi completed breakfast and was ready to leave for the hospital, the typed papers were ready for his signature. I am sure similar procedures must have been in place at each of his offices.

Disappointments were seldom expressed in public. His departure from the Institute of Neurology and its subsequent fall were very painful but this was kept hidden from most of us. Instead of venting his spleen, he preferred to move on to the next project and work to ensure its success.

It is interesting that he himself, needed encouragement and prodding to write his autobiography. He was well aware of his extraordinary experiences and the privileged positions that had made it possible for him to set up the Institute of Neurology and, later, the neurosurgery centre at the V. H. S. Hospital.

Even so, he seemed reluctant to pick up the pen to narrate an account of his life and work. We are fortunate that persuasion by many eventually bore fruit and we have ‘Uphill all the way’, an account that generations of future Indian neuroscientists will want to read.

Neurosurgeon, founder of institutions, teacher of many who are now respected teachers in their own right, man of letters, bibliophile and amateur medical historian whose efforts culminated in the foundation of the museum and library at the V. H. S. Hospital … all these and other labels can justly be applied to him. I feel he would have been proudest of yet another title: friend and facilitator of the young student of neurosciences.

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