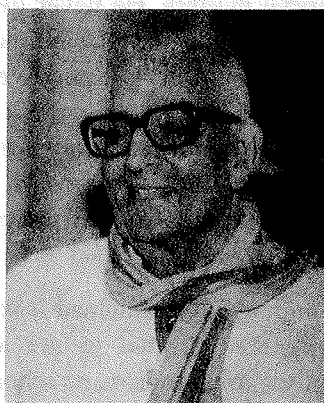


A personal homage

Emeritus Prof. Baldev Singh



(1903 - 1908)

When he died at the age of 95 years, Prof. Baldev Singh had already become a legend in his own life time. It is inconceivable to imagine a historical narrative of the 20th century Indian neurology without Baldev Singh emerging as one of the truly great professors of neurology. Indeed, it not only applies to India but rather to the whole Indian sub-continent where he was fondly called the 'Father Neurone', only to be replaced later by the more reverential 'Grandfather Neurone'. For nearly half a century, he strode across the country as an intellectual giant, generating awe and admiration amongst generations of medical students, residents and more importantly fellow neurologists and neurosurgeons. Whether on the bed-side, or in any one of the investigative and research laboratories devoted to electrophysiology, experimental neurology, tissue culture or neurochemistry, Baldev Singh left an indelible mark of his personality both as an academician, and as a human being with warmth and compassion for his patients, colleagues and students.

Many of us remember him, and shall continue to do so, with ever-lasting affection and immense gratitude for his teaching, his farsightedness, his common sense, his humour, his zest for life and living, and above all, his ability to be at ease, equally, with the highest (Jawaharlal Nehru was one of his admiring patients following the stroke that he suffered at Bhubaneshwar in January, 1964), and the lowest (even the lowest ranking employee of the

department of Physiology, AIIMS could share his or her personal burden with him and seek his help and assistance). Of course, as a human being he had some frailties-but these were exceptional. The generosity of his heart contrasted in an extraordinary manner with the thrift in his personal life and caution even in small financial matters. He never owned any vehicle during all of the nearly forty years that he spent in Delhi; there is an unsubstantiated but almost certainly a true anecdote, although not without subsequent embellishment, about his being found travelling in a DTC bus when wireless messages were being flashed all around to locate him because the then Prime Minister of India needed him for health reasons. In any case, all this added to the aura of romance and fascination which he continued to generate all through his life.

In his heart, Baldev Singh always remained a student with an insatiable quest for knowledge. Once he narrated to me an incident of his early childhood: he had failed in the annual primary school examination. Weeping bitterly, he told his mother about his intention to discontinue his studies and devote time to farming. His mother, either out of belief or tradition, consulted the village astrologer for 'vocational guidance'. Dr. Baldev Singh recalled with a chuckle; the astrologer told his mother 'the young boy will never leave study of books and even at the time of his death, few books will be found under his pillow'. Indeed, in the last five years of his life when he was visually handicapped, it was the duty of his doting daughter-in-law, Indu, to read to him the latest advances in neurology from the National and International journals that he continued to subscribe, even after donating his entire library to the AIIMS.

Although customary, but in the case of Dr. Baldev Singh the least necessary, a few important milestones of his life may be mentioned. He was born in village Gandasingh Wala (named after his grandfather who served in the sikh army) of district Amritsar on April 13, 1903. As he recalled years later in an intimate personal conversation, it was a most eventful day recorded in the family archives; he was born, his elder brother got married, and his grandfather Sardar Ganda Singh died on the same day within a span of a few hours!

After his early education in the village school, he did his F.Sc. (Medical) from DAV College, Lahore, securing the top rank. Admitted to King Edward Medical College, Lahore, Baldev Singh graduated in Medicine in 1927, with several medals and prizes. He proceeded to England in 1929, qualified

MRCP (London) in 1930, and was inspired by the great clinical teachers of that era. The complexity of central nervous system had always excited him since his student days. He enrolled himself at the National hospital at Queen Square which had already built a formidable reputation, thanks to the genius of Brown-Sequard, one of the original members of the staff at the time of the opening of the hospital in 1860, Hughlings Jackson (who died in 1911 but was immortalised as Plato of neurology) and Sir William Gowers. Although all three had died long before Baldev Singh entered the hallowed portals of Queen Square, he immediately 'came under their spell' as if 'they were still there, beaoning and encouraging, quizzing and demanding'. In particular, it was the marble bust of Hughlings Jackson which always 'transfixed his gaze at me'. Perhaps, this subconsciously initiated Dr. Baldev Singh's interest in epilepsy. Of these who were consultants at this hospital in 1929-31, Dr. Baldev Singh had nostalgic memories of the lecture demonstrations of Macdonald Critchley, although he was much more enthused by Derek Denny-Brown who was then an Assistant Physician at Queen Square but spent much time in the Department of Physiology at Oxford. Perhaps this combination of practice of clinical neurology and research in neurophysiology impressed the young mind of Baldev Singh and the image of Denny-Brown blending with ease the two assignments became etched in his memory and served as a role model in the later years of his life. It was also around this time, that the first paper describing electroencephalography in the humans had been published by Hans Berger in 1929, and in 1932, Nobel prize in Physiology and Medicine was awarded jointly to Charles Scott Sherrington and Edgar Douglas Adrian for their studies on 'Function of Neurones'.

It was Sherrington, the British neurophysiologist, who had coined the term synapse to describe the functional gaps between neurones and muscles and between individual neurones. Indeed within a short span of the preceding two decades, Pavlov, Golgi, Ramon Y Cajal and Sherrington had won Nobel prizes unravelling the mysteries of neurones and how they 'talk to each other'. Baldev Singh had sat 'mesmerized' when Sherrington delivered a talk at the Royal Society in London. A combination of these events perhaps set the course of his life's academic sojourn in neurosciences. He returned to India to practice academic medicine at Amritsar, but maintained his interest in neurology through an honorary attachment to the local Medical college. With his growing fascination for neurosciences, Baldev Singh decided to discontinue his lucrative practice and proceeded to the USA in 1950 to learn

electroencephalography and for further training in neurology. The rest is history.

With a neurosurgeon, Dr. Jacob Chandy, he laid strong foundations of Neurosciences at the Christian Medical College, Vellore, (1951-54) returning to New Delhi in 1954 as the Consultant Neurologist at the Tirath Ram Shah Hospital with clinical attachments for teaching and research at Lady Hardinge Medical College whose Principal at that time was Col (later, Major General) Amir Chand, an old teacher of Baldev Singh from Lahore days; His association with the Lady Hardinge also initiated a collaboration with the Department of Physiology where a young Professor, Dr. Bal Krishan Anand, had taken over as the Chairman. The initial collaboration matured into a life-long friendship and launched Bal and Baldev and Gulzar Chhina, on a voyage of neurodiscovery.

On a personal request by Prime Minister Nehru, and with a most persuasive effort by the then Director, AIIMS, Dr. K.L. Wig, Baldev Singh accepted the foundation Professorship of Neurology at the AIIMS in 1964, at the 'ripe' age of 61 years (which was already beyond the prescribed age of retirement). His reputation attracted amongst others, a youthful neurosurgeon, Prakash Tandon, to the AIIMS where Dr. Baldev Singh nurtured his young talent with care and concern. A DM course in Neurology and an MCh. course in Neurosurgery were soon started. Following his formal retirement in 1967, Dr. Baldev Singh served as Emeritus Scientist, ICMR and later as Emeritus Professor, with conjoint assignments in the departments of Physiology and Neurology. The death of his only son, Birinder (who was a Professor of Radiology at Medical College, Amritsar) for once shattered his equanimity and old age suddenly began to grow on him. With rare courage and fortitude, he continued to serve the AIIMS till 1991, when he finally left Delhi to spend the autumnal years of his life in the ancestral house in his village near Amritsar.

Several times, after visiting him in the serene environment of his study-cum-bedroom in the ground floor of the ancestral 'haveli' which like him, had seen better days and better times, one came away somewhat sad and depressed seeing his failing health, although he always made a special effort to compensate it by his soaring spirit, booming voice, and above all, an infectious enthusiasm. Nevertheless, it was clear that the once great intellectual 'luxury liner' was gradually sinking. The end finally came, after a short

illness, on February 2, 1998 when he departed from this mortal world, leaving behind two daughters, Tripta and Sudesh, a daughter-in-law, Indu, several grand and great grand children and a large circle of friends, admirers and students, some of whom having already become 'great' in their own right.

From amongst such a galaxy of scientists, constituted by his students and younger colleagues whom he nurtured with care and devotion, only a few were present at his last rites in his village. Nevertheless, it was not difficult to discern amongst them the reflected glow of their instructor and mentor, Dr. Baldev Singh. Issac Newton once said of himself, "If I have seen further than other men, it is because I have stood upon the shoulders of giants". Indeed, there are several in the country today who became great only by standing on the shoulders of Dr. Baldev Singh. Alas! most of them were not present when the last prayers for the departed soul were said on February 5, in the simple and dignified ceremony at his village, with the backdrop of the rays of setting sun providing a befitting aura to the chant of Vedic hymns.

Unlike some of those scientists of today who opt to become more competitive in their gush for individual rewards and glory, Dr. Baldev Singh all through his life had a singular devotion to, and gust for, knowledge and truth. He may not have made vital new discoveries but he certainly never failed to recognise the rare spark amongst some of the eager young minds assembled around him, and ensured the growth and development of their full intellectual potential. The crowning glory of Dr. Baldev Singh's odyssey through the exciting biomedical advances of the twentieth century does not lie in more than 250 scientific papers or numerous chapters in monographs and text books that he published; it lies in the simple fact that Dr. Baldev Singh knew how to recognise and nurture the talents of others, and admirably succeeded in doing so - always.

Throughout life, it was always that he honoured awards rather than the awards honoured him. The President of India decorated him with the coveted 'Padma Bhushan' for his outstanding contributions. The rank of Honorary Brigadier was conferred upon him by the AFMC which he served as senior Honorary Consultant Neurologist and Advisor for research in neurosciences. He was a Founder Fellow of the National Academy of Medical Sciences, and a Fellow of the National Science Academy. He was the reluctant recipient of

several academic distinctions, medals and awards but could never be persuaded to accept any elected office of a professional association. His scientific contributions are being commemorated in this special number of the Annals of NAMS.

Once during an intimate conversation, I asked him what epitaph he would prefer for commemorating his life's contributions. A lover of Urdu poetry as he was, he recited the following couplet:

*'Bade shauq se sun raha tha zamana
Hum hi so gaye dastan kehate kehate'*

*'It was with great enthusiasm
that the world stood enthralled
listening to my discourse: it is only
I who went to eternal sleep while a
part of my narration was still unsaid'.*

Yes, Sir! you were so prophetic
even in the choice of your own epitaph!

J.S. Bajaj