

## **Dr. Baldev Singh (1903-1998)** **Reminiscences and Personal Vignettes**

Dr. Baldev Singh, the founder fellow of the National Academy of Medical Sciences, was born on 13th April 1903, at Zaffarwal Dutta (now in Pakistan), in a family of aristocratic rich landlords. His elder brother persuaded him to choose medicine as his career. He did his graduation from King Edward Medical College, Lahore in 1927 with honours. He got married in 1928 and then left for U.K. where he obtained the Membership of the Royal College of Physicians in 1930.

After returning to India, he started his general practice in his village near Amritsar in 1931. Within a few years, he developed a lucrative practice and lived an aristocratic life. Despite this luxurious lifestyle he was deeply committed to academics. The urge to learn was so deep in him that he decided to study further at the age of 45. He wound up his practice and left for Chicago, towards the end of 1949, to learn electroencephalography from Prof. F.A. Gibbs. On his return to India in 1951, he joined as Associate Professor in Neurology at Vellore. At the same time, Dr. Chandy was working as a neurosurgeon in the same institute. In a short time, as a result of the combined efforts of Dr. Chandy and Dr. Baldev Singh, Vellore became the main centre of clinical neuroscience in India.

In 1954, Dr. Baldev Singh was invited to join Tirath Ram Shah Hospital in Delhi. Never satisfied with patient care alone, he also started his research in collaboration with Dr. B.K. Anand, who was then heading the Physiology Department at Lady Hardinge Medical College. This fruitful association continued even after both of them shifted to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS). In 1964, Dr. Baldev Singh was invited to establish the Department of Neurology at AIIMS. In the three years that he was in active service at the AIIMS, he managed to establish a good Department of Neurology. Even after his retirement, he played a role, behind the scene, in the establishment of the Neurosciences Centre at AIIMS. After his retirement from the department of Neurology, Dr. Baldev Singh joined as an Emeritus Professor in the Department of Physiology at AIIMS. It is very rare for a professor of a clinical discipline to opt for a position in a basic science department. In the Physiology department, he had his room next to that of Dr. G.S. Chhina, with whom he was closely associated in most of his research work. There he conducted research in areas like high altitude, yoga, biofeedback, sleep, consciousness, cerebral oedema, epilepsy and heat hyperpyrexia. During that period, collaborative research and teaching by the Department of Physiology, and clinical departments, became the order of the day.

Many seminars in the department of Physiology were moderated by the faculty members from clinical disciplines. All the seminars in the department of Physiology were attended by several postgraduates from clinical disciplines. The vertical integration in teaching and research in medical disciplines was actually practised without much hype and publicity.

During his stay in the department of Physiology, AIIMS, he actively participated in lectures and seminars. He always prepared his lectures very meticulously, and rehearsed them several times before the actual presentation. In his preparations, he never differentiated between an important oration and an undergraduate lecture. His personal library had books which were not available even in good medical institutions. He kept himself abreast with the latest developments in science, especially neuroscience. But he was never too eager to 'show off' his knowledge, and was never ashamed of admitting his ignorance. The tenacity with which he followed the problems was a good example for the students of follow.

Dr. Baldev Singh was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1971 by the President of India. He was a recipient of several awards and recognitions including the Basanti Devi Amirchand Award, Air Marshal Subroto Mukherjee Award, Sir Nilratan Sircar Oration, the National Academy of Medical Sciences Oration, and Chandy Oration. In addition to being a Founder Fellow of the National Academy of Medical Sciences, he was also the Honorary Fellow of Aeromedical Society of India and the Indian National Science Academy. He was also an Honorary Brigadier of Indian Army.

More than his research and other achievements, his life itself was an inspiration to his friends, colleagues and students. He led a simple life, and had his meals at the students hostel at AIIMS. He was a highly cultured person, with an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. He had a deep love for poetry and philosophy. At any function, one could count on him for an apt Urdu couplet. He maintained a low profile in public life, and had virtually no social life.

He never tolerated injustice and dishonesty around him. He was known as a "no-nonsense man" and never hesitated in calling a spade a "spade". He believed that honesty is an essential trait, and that a person who is not honest in personal life cannot be honest in science too. He shunned praise, publicity and popularity. He was visibly angry when the young postgraduates of the department of Physiology once decided to celebrate the birthday of their beloved "grandfather neuron", as he was popularly referred to. He had always shown deep concern for the younger members of the department. He used to reach the department before anyone, and leave the place by late in the evening, when it was time for his dinner. Before leaving the department, he would go around and say "good night" to the young postgraduates

who would be working. For him, science was not something which was just confined to the laboratory and books. The human being who pursues science is as important as science itself. He had always played a major role in diffusing tension amicably and in building good relationships between scientists, students and teachers. The sincerity with which he approached the problems, always convinced everyone concerned. The department of Physiology, at AIIMS owes a lot to him for this contribution too. His failing eyesight compelled him to leave AIIMS in 1992. He spent the last six years of his life at Amritsar under the affectionate care of his daughter-in-law, Indu, who also catered to his first love, academics, by reading out to him. She had also appointed one person to read out to him from newspapers and magazines.

Dr. Baldev Singh, left for his heavenly abode on 2 February 1998 after a brief illness. I would like to end this note with a personal vignette. My most memorable encounter with him happened a few days before his sad demise at his home in Amritsar. He lives in a traditional aristocratic home, which could be best described as a "Haweli". He was totally blind, and it was a shocking sight for me. I was finding it difficult even to greet him. But he laughed and talked about everyone in the department and the institute. I was surprised to find that he had kept himself abreast not only with the happenings in the scientific world but also with everything concerning the individuals with whom he had been associated. After spending about an hour with him, I had to take leave. I was overwhelmed and finding it difficult to say "bye" to him, but he, on the other hand, showed no emotion. He was all smiles and enthusiasm. He had no fear, no hesitation and no sorrow to express. On that day, I learned some very important lessons in life. Dr. Baldev Singh will ever remain a source of inspiration to a very large number of his admirers, friends and students.

May his soul rest in peace !

**Dr. V Mohan Kumar**  
Professor of Physiology,  
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The Babbar Singh, for his heavenly mode on 2 February 1998 after a brief illness. I would like to end this note with a personal reminiscence. My most memorable experience with him happened a few days before his end. I was in his house in Anandpur, he lived in a traditional aristocratic house, which would be best described as a "Bungalow". He was terribly ill and it was a shocking sight for me. I was finding it difficult even to greet him. But he laughed and talked about everyone in the department and the Institute. I was surprised to find that he had kept himself almost not only with the happenings in the Institute but also with everything concerning the individuals with whom he had been associated. After spending about an hour with him, I had to take leave. I was overwhelmed and finding it difficult to say "bye" to him, but he on the other hand, showed no emotion. He was all smiles and laughter. He had no fear, no hesitation and no sorrow to express. On that day, I learned some very important lessons in life. Dr. Babbar Singh will ever remain a source of inspiration to a very large number of his students, friends and students.

May his soul rest in peace!

Dr. V. Mohan Kumar  
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Son of Babbar