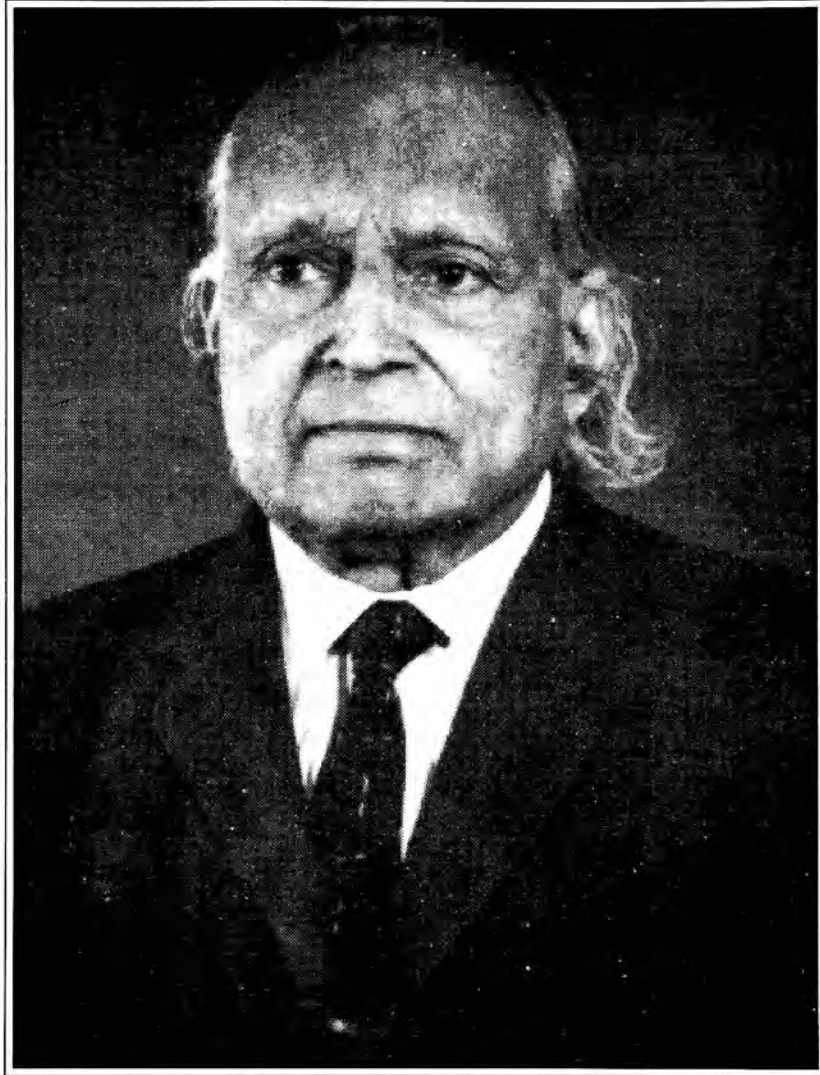


RAMAN VISWANATHAN

(08 September 1899 - 14 July 1982)

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R. Narasimhan



RAMAN VISWANATHAN

(1899-1982)

(Elected Fellow 1968)

RAMAN VISWANATHAN was an outstanding physician, a distinguished teacher, an eminent researcher in chest diseases and an administrator par excellence. He has been aptly regarded as the father of Chest Medicine in India because of his pioneering work and extraordinary contribution to the advancement of this specialty. He breathed his last on 16th July, 1982 in New Delhi after a brief illness. His glowing contributions and hallowed personality will be an inspiration to the coming generations of students and researchers committed to the alleviation of sufferings of an ever-increasing population of patients affected with bronchopulmonary diseases.

BIRTH, PARENTAGE AND CHILDHOOD

Raman Viswanathan was born in an orthodox Brahmin family on 8th September, 1899, in Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu. His father had served in the Excise Department of what was then the Travencore State, and his grandfather was the chief patriarch of their native village, Mahadanampuram. He had only one sibling, an elder sister, of whom he was very fond of. He was always fascinated by travel in country boats and looked forward to such travels. As a child he was taught to pray and do 'Suryanamaskar' (prostrating before Sun-God). He hated studies till he was six. He learnt the alphabet by writing with the index finger on a layer of sand placed in front of him. He struggled in his studies with an oil lamp till his tenth year when he was afforded the luxury of a hurricane lantern. His mother died tragically at his tender age of 9 years which was extremely shocking. Following this traumatic happening he stayed with his sister and brother-in-law. He had primary and secondary education in Nagercoil. At the secondary school level he studied Chemistry and Physics. He got particularly interested in Physics and developed a fascination for scientific research under the influence of his Physics teacher. He was also motivated in studies by his Geometry teacher and by the disciplinarian headmaster, Mr. Padmanabha Iyer. He was a precocious student, very studious with little interest in extra-curricular activities and an introvert. He graduated with Physics and Honours in Biology and was awarded First Prize in English literature by the Maharaja College, Trivandrum.



PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION AND CAREER

Viswanathan graduated in Medicine at the Madras Medical College in 1926. He was awarded MD (General Medicine) by the Madras University in 1931. As a medical student, he could not afford to buy any text books but this constraint did not deter him from achieving his goal of becoming a highly qualified doctor. By dint of sheer hard work, determination and single-minded devotion he rose to be India's leading specialist in Chest Medicine and an eminent medical scientist. He became a Member of the Royal College of Physicians, London, in 1932, and obtained TDD (Diploma in Tuberculosis Diseases) from Wales (UK) in 1938. He served as an Assistant Professor of Medicine in Madras Medical College (1928-32), Lecturer, Tuberculosis and Infectious Diseases and later as a Professor of Clinical Medicine, Andhra Medical College, Visakapatnam, 1934-41. From 1942 to 1946 he served as Medical Specialist and Officer-Commanding, Medical Division, and Adviser in Medicine to the Indian Army. After relinquishing service in the Army, he joined as Adviser in Tuberculosis (1946-48) and later he served as Deputy Director General of Health Services, Government of India, up to 1957. During this period he concurrently functioned as Head, Department of Medicine (Tuberculosis and Chest Diseases) and Dean, Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Delhi. He held these prestigious academic positions for 17 years.

From 1953 to 1957, he also functioned as Professor and Honorary Founder Director of the newly established Vallabhbhai Patel Chest Institute, University of Delhi, followed by its full-time Director up to 1964. He had widely travelled in Europe, America, Asia and Australia to participate in conferences, deliver lectures and for professional discussions. He himself organized many conferences and symposia in chest diseases. After superannuation he continued his active research, postgraduate teaching and participation in patient care service as an Emeritus Scientist of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, Govt. of India, and as an Honorary Professor of the Chest Institute until his demise in July, 1982. In fact he had much more time during this period to devote to academic pursuits because he had been relieved of his bureaucratic and administrative responsibilities. His devotion to patient care was exemplary as he made himself available for consultation every day and he seldom left his OPD until he had examined the last patient. The common folks revered him for making no distinction between a VIP and an ordinary patient. During the superannuation period he also accepted an additional responsibility as Honorary Research Director-cum-Consultant of the Rajendra Memorial Research Institute of Medical Sciences in Patna. This enabled him to initiate and successfully execute several important research projects dealing with prevalence of chronic bronchitis, pneumoconiosis, asthma, pulmonary eosinophilia, helminthic infections, etc., in Bihar State.



HONOURS AND AWARDS

Viswanathan was recipient of many honours and prestigious national/international awards. This included Presidentship of the International Congress of Diseases of the Chest, New Delhi, 1963, and Annual Conference, Tuberculosis Association of India, 1968. He was President, Association of Physicians of India, 1968, and a Plenary Lecturer in International Congress on Diseases of the Chest, Washington, USA, 1968. He was Chairman, Indian Association for Chest Diseases, subsequently reconstituted as the National College of Chest Physicians (India), of which he was a Founder Fellow. He held membership of many medical societies such as American Thoracic Society, the British Thoracic Society, Indian Association of Pathologists, Associations of Physicians of India, Indian Medical Association etc. In recognition of his outstanding research contributions, he was awarded Eugeno Morelli Prize by the National Academy of Sciences, Italy, 1969, and Dhanwantari Prize by the Indian National Science Academy, New Delhi, in 1971. He was elected to Fellowship of the American College of Chest Physicians (FCCP) in 1947, Indian Academy of Medical Sciences in 1964, Indian National Science Academy in 1968 and Royal College of Physicians, London (UK) in 1980. He had been a Visiting Professor to the University of Illinois in 1958 and to the University of Chicago, USA in 1964. He was a Regent of the American College of Chest Physicians in India. He had been an Honorary Physician to the President of India. The Government of India honoured him with its coveted state award of Padma Bhushan in recognition of his significant contribution to promotion of Chest Medicine and medical research in the country. The author of this memoir and a former faculty colleague, Professor R S Sandhu, named a new yeast species isolated from clinical material as *Candida viswanathii* in his honour to acknowledge his pivotal role in the promotion of Medical Mycology in India.

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

Viswanathan's pioneering research work in bronchopulmonary diseases has received a wide national and international recognition. He has about 230 publications which include research papers, reviews and editorials in reputed peer-reviewed journals as well as several books and edited conference/symposium proceedings. His major research areas were tropical eosinophilia, pathogenesis of cerebral malaria and basal tuberculosis, mechanism of lung atelectasis, etio-pathogenesis of bronchiectasis and emphysema, baggassosis, byssinosis, mechanisms underlying high altitude pulmonary oedema, effect of drugs on pulmonary artery pressure, epidemiology of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, asthma, occupational diseases, role of endocrines in respiratory allergy, chemotherapy of tuberculosis, etc. He developed a new method of bronchography and also innovated a simple technique of tomography. Being a prolific writer, he generally kept his steno typists on tenterhooks with the voluminous dictation work given to them. He was complimented as an author in the following words by KPS



Menon who reviewed his book, *While the Light Lives – Reminiscences of a Medical Scientist* “This is a book by an expert but few experts write with such gaiety, clarity and vivacity as Dr. Viswanathan does.”

OTHER SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS

(a) Vallabhbhai Patel Chest Institute

Raman Viswanathan was a great institution builder. The Vallabhbhai Patel Chest Institute, University of Delhi, owes its origin, establishment and development primarily to his initiative and exceptional drive. The institute’s foundation stone was laid in 1949 by the late Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Deputy Prime Minister of India, and it was formally opened in 1953 by the then Health Minister, Government of India, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur. It was nurtured by him with utmost dedication and meticulous care, initially as its founder Honorary Director (1953-57) and later as full-time Director up to 1964. His visionary qualities, inspirational commitment to medical research, postgraduate teaching and patient care, combined with extraordinary administrative acumen, attracted a talented faculty for the institute which rapidly gained a national and international stature as a leading centre of research and training in chest diseases.

He was solely responsible for activating the Faculty of Medical Sciences in the University of Delhi by persuading the authorities to institute a postgraduate Diploma Course in Tuberculous Diseases (TDD) in 1946. Until then, the University of Delhi had neither any undergraduate nor any postgraduate course in Medical Sciences. The faculty made rapid strides during his stewardship for 17 years as its Dean and Head of the Department of Medicine.

(b) Indian Journal of Chest Diseases and Allied Sciences

The Indian Journal of Chest Diseases and Allied Sciences (IJCDAS) was founded by Raman Viswanathan in 1959 as an official joint publication of VPCI and the Indian Association of Chest Diseases which was reconstituted in 1981 as the National College of Chest Physicians (India). The first issue of the journal was brought out in July 1959 with Raman Viswanathan as Editor-in-Chief. The journal was known as the Indian Journal of Chest Diseases for many years until 1976 when the suffix ‘and Allied Sciences’ was added to the title in order to widen the journal’s scope to include papers pertaining to subjects allied to chest diseases. The publication of a journal in those days was a truly Herculean task considering that there were no computers and the other currently available modern technologies. Also, the field of Chest Medicine in India was in its infancy and it was an uphill task to attract quality manuscripts for a new journal. The journal was steered through its critical early phase with an exceptional input and ceaseless efforts of Viswanathan. His foresightedness in bringing up this journal is quite apparent from the fact that IJCDAS



came to be recognized as the most important Indian periodical in Chest Medicine that is abstracted in Index Medicus, MEDLINE and PubMed. Viswanathan continued to guide the destiny of this journal as Editor-in-Chief until his demise in July 1982. Besides, he had served as Chief Editor, Journal of the Indian Academy of Medical Sciences, and as an Editorial Board Member of *Excerpta Medica*.

(c) National College of Chest Physicians (India)

Viswanathan was closely associated with formation of the Indian Association for Chest Diseases in 1959. The Association was established with a view to promoting the study of chest diseases and allied sciences. As a part of the association's aims and objectives, a new journal, namely, the *Indian Journal of Chest Diseases* was started. In the late 1970's, Viswanathan spearheaded a move to emend the association's name to review and revise its statutes and by-laws. Consequently, the National College of Chest Physicians came into being in January 1981 with Viswanathan as its first president. The head-office of the College is permanently located at VPCI and there are 5 zonal offices to represent the North, South, East, West and Central part of the country. The College holds one national conference every year to review the latest developments, to update the practitioners of chest diseases with recent developments in diagnosis and therapy and thus promote the chest specialty.

He was also actively associated with the Tuberculosis Association of India since its inception in 1939. He was elected president of the national conference of the Association in 1968. He had served the Association as a Member of its Technical Committee and as Chairman of its Local Advisory Committee as well as of its Research Committee. In 1972, he founded the Asthma and Bronchitis Foundation of India in New Delhi, a philanthropic organization meant to promote research and to provide diagnostic and therapeutic consultation to patients suffering from these diseases. Created entirely through his sustained selfless efforts, this foundation was another noteworthy contribution of Viswanathan in the public health domain. Unfortunately, the Foundation could not pursue its hoary objectives for long after Viswanathan's death, because its managerial control passed into the hands of individuals who were possessed more by mercenary predilections than idealism and commitment to public service that characterized Viswanathan.

FAMILY LIFE AND PERSONALITY

Viswanathan was married in 1927 at Nagercoil. His wife, Dr. (Mrs.) Sharda Viswanathan was daughter of Shri B Srinivasulu, Chief Conservator of Forests in the former Central Provinces. She was a reputed gynaecologist devoted to patient-care who served in Delhi Government Hospitals for many years. Their son, Shri V Raman, was a public health engineering scientist, and daughter, Mrs. V Kamla was married to Shri BS Mani, Public Health Engineer in Kerala State. To the dismay and



apprehension of his friends, Viswanathan was known to be an impulsive fast driver; he could not tolerate anyone over-taking him although he recognized the irrationality and hazards of this habit. Once his well known economist friend, Dr. DR Gadgil, humorously remarked, "I am told that you drive so fast that if you cannot be contacted either in your house or in your Institute, you could be found in the police station".

Viswanathan's personal life was a glowing example of austerity, unassailable integrity and utmost dedication to academic pursuits and welfare of his colleagues, students and patients. He spared ample time for consultation by patients but refrained from private practice even after superannuation from the directorship of VPCI. He was a hard task master and a strict disciplinarian. He was a good team leader but also encouraged individual scientific initiative. He recognized talent and promoted high quality work. His stern looks belied a humane and compassionate personality. He detested hypocrites and sycophants. He had a lofty concept of the mission of the medical profession. In this context the following passage excerpted out of his book *'While the Light Lives-Reminiscences of a Medical Scientist'* is pertinent: "Why do you want to be a doctor?" "I want to serve humanity" was the prompt answer given by most students at Selection Committee interviews. Very laudable but most insincere and unconvincing. Suffering humanity, my foot! They want to live out of humanity's sufferings, fleece them till they are bled white. We are supposed to belong to the noblest profession in the world. There is no nobility if human suffering is commercialized. The patient-doctor relationship should not be polluted by monetary considerations".

Viswanathan was a staunch nationalist who abhorred regionalism and casteism propagated by some of our self-serving politicians. He was a perfectionist who was never satisfied with his accomplishments. He continued to work relentlessly despite his gradually declining health. In an epilogue to his afore-mentioned autobiography, he attempted to make a critical self-appraisal of his lifetime ambitions and actual performance. According to him, if an epitaph were to be written at all over his ashes, it might read something as follows: "Here lie the ashes of a physician who strove to be a scientist, who aimed high, who achieved not to his satisfaction, who listened and smiled, who spoke little, who loved and lived for the Institute of his creation, and who loved mangoes".

REMINISCENCES OF THE AUTHOR'S ASSOCIATION

I was privileged to first come into contact with Viswanathan in January 1957 when I joined his research team as an Asst. Research Officer (Mycologist) in an ICMR-funded major project on bagassosis, an occupational hypersensitivity respiratory disorder afflicting workers exposed to aerosols of bagasse used for manufacture paper. Apart from this primary assignment, I was associated with him



histoplasmosis survey conducted by skin-testing with histoplasmin our indigenous population resident in urban and rural areas of the Union Territory of Delhi. In 1959, I was appointed as a regular faculty member in the newly created Department of Medical Mycology which was then the first of its kind in northern India. This provided me a wider opportunity to work closely with Viswanathan, a visionary medical scientist, on various respiratory mycoses and nocardiosis, a bacterial disease which can clinically masquerade as pulmonary tuberculosis. I further consider myself fortunate to have worked with him as an Associate Editor of the *Indian Journal of Chest Diseases and Allied Sciences* for many years until his demise in 1982. But for the keen interest and active support of Viswanathan and his eminent successor, scientist Director of VPCL, Prof. Autar Singh Paintal, the Department of Medical Mycology of this institute could not have developed into a leading national centre of research in bronchopulmonary mycoses. Always highly supportive of colleagues and research students, Viswanathan served as an inspirational force and beacon light in their professional endeavors.

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