

The Founder President of the SMA

G Baratham

I knew the founder president of the SMA well. I should. He was my father. Baratham Ramaswamy Sreenivasan, known popularly as BR or Sreeni, was born on 14 June 1909, in Gemas on the border of Johor and Negri Sembilan. His parents, who were Tamil Brahmins, had migrated to these parts early in the century and his father was a clerk in a rubber estate. When he was five, his father was transferred to Rawang, a village, an hour's train-ride from Kuala Lumpur. This is how it came to be that aged nine he went to school at Saint John's Institution in KL.

His mother was illiterate but his father saw to it that he could read and write English and Sanskrit. He also taught him to count. In the Malay school he attended before going to Saint John's he learnt Jawi, the Arabic script, which preceded the Romanised Malay that is now used. At home he spoke Tamil, the mother tongue. At Saint John's he was taught Latin and, in the periods when Catholic boys were at Catechism, a kindly priest taught him French, both of which he offered as subjects for his Senior Cambridge examinations, the equivalent of 'O' levels today. This early exposure to a multiplicity of languages and cultures may explain the unrelenting liberalism that characterised his life.

At 15, he sat for his exams and got nine 'excellents', P1's today, which won him a scholarship to the King Edward VIIth College of Medicine. This scholastic flourish did not change the country bumpkin in him and he told me how uncomfortable he was in a tie and jacket being interviewed by Dr J M McAllister, the Principal of the College, who is remembered in a road behind the Medical Faculty Building. Sreenivasan graduated at 21 and joined the Colonial Medical Service as an assistant doctor. This meant that though he was registered as a doctor by the General Medical Council in Britain, he was paid \$50 a month and had to take orders from a white superior whose knowledge was often less than his own. He had been brought up in the hierarchical Hindu caste system but had an unshakeable belief in parity. This was given to him by the Christian brothers, who had imbued in him the faith that all men are the children of God and should be treated equally.

He fought for this ideal with little success. With the powers the Colonial Medical Service had at its disposal and the lack of support from local colleagues who feared the wrath of the establishment, the cards were heavily stacked against him. Then something happened which changed the whole picture: the



Dr B R Sreenivasan.

Japanese conquered Singapore. The local, then called "Asiatic", doctors were called upon to run the entire medical service and do so under conditions of extreme deprivation. There was a severe shortage of drugs and equipment, and malnutrition was common. Even bandages and gauze swabs had to be washed, sterilised and re-used. It took all the energy and ingenuity of the "Asiatic" doctors to keep the medical service going but run it they did. At the end of the war it was clear that "Asiatic" doctors had proved they could manage with or without the whites and the existence of two medical services was untenable.

While this was the general feeling, few were prepared to stick their necks out for the cause. Sreenivasan did and had his head immediately chopped off. The exact issue was equal terms for doctors within the service irrespective of race. One important limb of parity was the award of scholarships for overseas studies so that locals could obtain post-graduate degrees and qualify for consultant positions. As is not unknown, those in power reward the cowardly and the connected. Sreenivasan did not fall into any of these categories and was refused a scholarship.

He resigned from Government Service at the end of 1947 and set up practice in down-market Serangoon Road. He was an immediate success, not I suspect, because of his medical skills, but because he never relinquished the habit of the country bumpkin with whom the poor were comfortable. Malaya Clinic was always packed and Dad worked from early morning till after dark, often seeing as many as 130

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patients a day. He did his own laboratory work and, though a physician by nature, sutured wounds and opened abscesses. He balked at obstetrics and whenever a pregnant woman turned up on the doorstep, enlisted the help of former President Benjamin Sheares, who never failed his friend in need. After dinner, he visited the ill patients he had seen during the day. I accompanied him on these trips to carry his bag, keep him company and ask the unending stream of questions I had accumulated during the day. Dad never tired of these. He was obsessed with teaching and often quoted from the Latin: "More than the calf wishes to suck does the cow yearn to suckle". He encouraged doubt and dissent and supported his stand with the American humorist, James Thurber's aphorism, "It is better to ask some of the questions than to know all of the answers." This attitude which coloured our lives absorbed us on those long drives in our little Austin Eight to visit Albert Chong. Albert lived in a small flat beside the fire station on Aljunied Road. He had tuberculosis and was the first patient in these parts to be treated with the new antibiotic, streptomycin. The fire station still stands and, half a century later, I cannot pass the spot without remembering those days. Within a year of being in practice, Sreenivasan had earned enough to go to England. He obtained the London Membership in five months but could afford to stay another seven to learn more than just passing an examination.

On his return, despite his busy practice, he found time on Tuesday and Thursday mornings to teach undergraduates at the General Hospital. At one point he was offering evening classes as well. The cow, indeed, yearned to suckle.

The end of the forties was a period of political turmoil. In the jungles of Malaya, a war was being fought between the British and their erstwhile allies, the communists. Sreenivasan was a determined anti-communist and scorned the term non-communist, which many adopted. He considered them fence sitters and whatever else he might do he never hedged his bets. Nevertheless, he supported the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU), which was a broad front communist organisation that had among its ranks liberals and nationalists. Among his friends were John Eber and P V Sharma, who later fled the country, Eber to Britain and Sharma to Beijing. Sreenivasan was never a politician but he believed that everyone, whether a communist, fascist, or rapist, was entitled to justice and a hearing. With the collapse of the MDU he returned to his passion: education.

There were, at that time, two institutions of higher education: The King Edward VIIth College of Medicine and the Raffles College. Neither had the status of a university. Sreenivasan and his close friend, Yong Nyuk Lin, were the two locals represented on the Council of the colleges. They fought for the formation of a university, which would bring us into the international mainstream of higher education. I remember long evenings when Dad and Nyuk Lin schemed on the veranda of our rented bungalow as to how this could be

accomplished. Their conversation was punctuated by the tinkle of ice cubes in glasses of whiskey and soda, which was my duty to replenish. Finally a commission was sent from England, under the Chairmanship of Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders, and the University of Malaya was established. The institution was controlled and staffed mainly by 'whites'.

On the medical front was the Alumni Association, which undertook social as well as teaching functions. Its members had to be graduates of the King Edward VIIth College of Medicine or the University of Malaya. Graduates from other institutions though licensed to practice in the country, could not be members. There was also the Malaya Branch of the British Medical Association, whose only function was an annual social event. Its members were mainly expatriates and it was a non-starter. Sreenivasan wished for one organisation to represent all doctors on the island and together with a few stalwarts formed the Singapore Medical Association (SMA) in 1959. Membership was however paltry. When I graduated in 1960, Dad decided on a membership drive. An inaugural dinner was to be held in a Chinese restaurant above the old Capitol Cinema. All who attended were to be offered membership at the door. Every registered practitioner was to be invited. There was a two-week gap between the passing of my exams and the beginning of my housemanship. It was my duty, Dad said, to telephone every doctor in town and insist that he be present. A brash 24-year-old, I did just that, asking those who refused why they could not turn up. Most did turn up and the association was off to a flying start.

The PAP was then in power and Yong Nyuk Lin was Minister for Education. Sreenivasan was keen to be in charge of shaping the new university. In May 1961, he was made principal of the Singapore division of the University of Malaya and in January the following year, became its first Asian Vice-chancellor. He was deliriously happy and began dreaming about integrating the system of higher education in the whole country. He felt that students from the Mandarin stream were not being given a fair chance to acquire an internationally recognised university education. They had, at the time, the option of attending Nanyang University, a privately run institution with Mandarin as its medium of education. Sreenivasan felt that such an education would have no international currency. They would have to study in English and he began to work out crash courses for these youths so that they would be able to join the mainstream. The visits he made to the Chinese Middle Schools only strengthened his resolve. He wished to repeat with Mandarin youths what the Christian Brothers had done for an under privileged, Tamil boy from a rubber estate.

There were strikes and riots in the town in which Chinese students were involved. Dad believed that they were Maoists because they were given no option to be otherwise. The government had different opinions. They required that students should have a certificate of political suitability issued by the Internal

Security Department before they were admitted to the university.

This, to Dad, was a travesty. The university was a sacred place: the temple of Saraswati the Hindu and Pallas Athenae the Greek, goddesses of wisdom. The pursuit of knowledge should be unfettered by political considerations. To make it otherwise would be a sacrilege. The politicians offered him evidence of student involvement with the communists. Dad refused to even look at these. "I am a Vice-chancellor, not a policeman," he retorted. He fell out with his dearest comrade Yong Nyuk Lin and they never spoke for over a decade.

After much acrimony, Dad resigned on 4 Nov 1963. It was the worst day in his life and the first time I had seen my father weep. The next day, the Straits Times ran a story, by a reporter called Jackie Sam, about the Vice-chancellor having a communist influence close to him. They gave no names but most people took that influence to be me. That, however, is another story that I will tell in my own memoirs.

Sreenivasan went back into general practice, not in Serangoon Road, but in the up-market Specialist Centre in Orchard Road. He was never happy about this though he pretended to be and enthusiastically talked of preventative medicine, which was the prerogative of the family physician. He was more accustomed to the life and death struggles of the poor than to be concerned with the longevity of the rich. Nevertheless, he persuaded himself that prevention was the bottom line in medicine. He founded the College of General Practitioners in 1974 when he was having numerous heart attacks. Such an enterprise would not have been possible without the efforts of Dr Wong Heck Sing, Sreenivasan's friend and doctor, who is one of the unsung heroes of medicine in Singapore.

Dad was no saint and this no hagiography. He would not like it to be otherwise. He had the arrogance to believe that his students would never betray the principles he had inculcated in them, would never forget what he had taught them. When I told him that they had done just that and provided proof of this, he called me a liar. We quarrelled frequently. The Brahmin part of his upbringing had given him an unshakeable confidence in mathematics and logic. Those who saw things differently, even friends, he considered 'fools or knaves'. Rationally, it could not be otherwise.

Only towards the end did he begin to have other perceptions. He began to see that love and charity

were a prerequisite to being human. He was then desperately ill. It was at about this time that Yong Nyuk Lin began to see him again. I was present at some of their early meetings. At first Dad and Nyuk Lin seemed a little shy of each other and glad of the presence of a third person. This soon passed and when Dad died, Uncle Nyuk Lin and his wife, Auntie Geok Lan, the sister-in-law of Lee Kuan Yew, were the first to visit our home.

In his last years, he took to alcohol, initially to still the pangs of angina, but later, out of self-indulgence. He became an alcoholic. Life became difficult for all of us, especially for Heck Sing, who turned up late at night after long sessions at the Public Service Commission. His eyes would be drooping, but he would muster himself to offer advice and medication for Dad so that all of us could have a peaceful night. The downward spiral had begun and there was no moving back. He died on 24 May 1977.

Dad had in his own way prepared me for his decline and death, not with verses from the Bible nor tracts from the Upanishads, but with a quatrain from Omar Khayyam.

*"The moving finger writes and having writ
Moves on. Nor all your piety nor wit
Will lure it back to cancel half a line
Nor all your tears wash out a word of it."*

Near the very end, Dad regained a quiet sobriety. He apologised that he should have at times been so unbearable and said that if I could not stand to see him suffer I should stay away. He asked me to remember that when he died, which would be soon, we should not grieve at his passing but rejoice at his having been alive. We should have a party. We did.

I feel that he would see the development of the SMA, its journal with a literary content, CME sessions and the audit of medical practice, with typical Brahmin arrogance, as the fruits of the tree he had planted. The seed had not fallen on stony ground.

He had an enviable confidence in the young. He believed that it was our duty to give to them all our own lives had taught us so that they would not fail. Fifty years after he taught me the lines, I still remember:

*"To you from falling hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If you break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep..."*

May I offer this thought to you.