Obituaries

Ramdas M. Pai
(20 January 1931–22 August 2014)

Ramdas Pai (no relation of the Pai family associated with the Manipal group of institutions) was, for much of the late 1960s to the early 1990s, considered to be among the best zoology teachers in Bombay (now Mumbai). After completing his MSc in marine zoology in 1954, he taught at Ramnarain Ruia College, Mumbai until 1961. He then moved to K.J. Somaiya College, Mumbai, where he retired as professor of zoology in 1990. Until 1977, he was also an efficient captain of the National Cadet Corps (NCC), in which he was immensely popular.

He was perhaps the most content man I have ever come across—he had no desires, beyond his wish to teach as many people as possible. He declined an opportunity to study abroad for a possible PhD in the 1970s, saying, ‘Let a younger person take it up.’

Professor Pai’s system of teaching was successful because he showed that there was a logic to biology, something that was not obvious initially. Students of Standard XII (premedical) sought him out for tuitions. It was partly as a result of being under his tutelage that numerous doctors, especially in Mumbai and other parts of Maharashtra—many of them holding top positions in their fields today—fared well in the crucial examination. Given his incredible patience, he was willing to explain a concept over and over again to someone who could not understand it. However, he was also a disciplinarian because, as he put it, ‘I have to be harsh to be kind.’ A particularly striking example of his success as a mentor was when he chose to focus on the college rowdy and put him on the right path. This boy went on to join the NCC and, subsequently, the army, where he sacrificed his life in an act of valour in the war in 1965. Professor Pai wrote a touching short story about this in a serialized form in a Marathi newspaper.

He did not lack a sense of humour, though. For practically his entire career, he was the master of ceremonies at college events, especially for the popular Fishpond (alas, no longer a feature of the NCC), in which he was immensely popular.

His wife, Geeta, who was a splendid example of acharyini, supported all his activities. He could not have lived without his wife—and as it turned out, she passed away one week before he did.

As is obvious by now, R.M. Pai was not a medical doctor. The obituary pages of this Journal have thus far been reserved only for Indian physicians. Yet, there are reasons for this seeming infraction. The first is that by honing the students’ skills in biology, Professor Pai played a major role in getting them into medical schools. More important was his final act.

When I received the news of his passing away on the morning of 22 August 2014, I was preparing for a lecture that was to be delivered the next day at a pathology conference. My first thought was that I would need to go to Mumbai for the last rites, which meant that I would have to miss my lecture. I knew that if he had been asked for an opinion on the matter, he would have said emphatically, ‘Teaching comes first; forget the rituals.’ However, he had no sons and I would have to be the one to perform the rites. I called his daughter, my cousin, to ask her what would be the appropriate thing to do. To my surprise, she told me, ‘There are no rites. In his will, he has donated his body for anatomy dissection.’ My uncle’s final act was to teach medical students even in death.

He must have been aware of the decline in the number of bodies donated for anatomy dissection and must have decided to do his bit. (I must state that subsequent to this, I have learnt of two other people who have willed their bodies for dissection. This will hopefully contribute to an improvement in medical education and help us create better doctors for tomorrow.)

Most of us do not give a thought to the sacrifices that patients in teaching hospitals make. They are poked and prodded and examined and practised on, all because they do not have the finances to go to private hospitals. Rarely are we grateful to them for their contributions to our education. Likewise, while we have clearly never disrespected the cadavers, we have not actively respected them either. However, I understand that St John’s Medical College, Bengaluru, holds a prayer service, in accordance with all religions, on the first day of the anatomy dissection class, when the students are told about the cadavers they will dissect and learn from—their first teachers in medicine!—over the coming year.

The media rightly praises individuals and their families when they donate organs—after all, kidneys, livers, heart valves and corneas save lives. However, little or no mention is made of those who donate every organ—to many people and for posterity. It is likely, of course, that many of these people who will their bodies to science are self-effacing and would like to avoid the limelight. It takes tremendous courage and understanding for people to perform this last act of absolutely selfless and altruistic donation. Let us bow to them and learn from them.

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