

OBITUARY

**Professor Baldev Singh (1904-1998) :
not a man but a phenomenon**

Professor Baldev Singh, often referred to as 'grandfather neuron', left for his heavenly abode on 2 February 1998 after a brief illness. Born on 6 April 1904 in an affluent, but not intellectually oriented family, he demonstrated love for learning quite early in life. He won a scholarship in Class VIII, and topped in his school in Class X. His elder brother was very much interested in his going in for medicine. His wishes were fulfilled when young Baldev Singh entered King Edward Medical College at Lahore. He graduated with flying colours in 1927. During his stay at medical school, he won several medals, a process which continued till the end of his career. He got married in 1928 but his appetite for knowledge was not yet satisfied. He left for U.K. in 1929 and made a mark there as a very industrious student. He sailed through the MRCP examination in 1930 in the very first attempt. He returned to India and set up his practice in his village near Amritsar in 1931. In an era when every practitioner also had a pharmacy, he set up a purely consultation type of practice. Within a few years, he had a flourishing practice. Those who knew him only in his later days as a simple and humble man can scarcely imagine that as a successful practitioner, he was immaculately attired in pin stripes and a solo hat, sported a golden pocket watch, wore gleaming shoes and travelled in latest models. But few knew that his pompous exterior concealed an inner discontent. Somewhere deep within he knew that his destiny lay elsewhere. Something different, something intellectually more satisfying, kept haunting him. While he practised, he also kept visiting the medical school to collaborate in research projects. In 1949, after 18 years of busy practice, he took an unconventional decision: to stop the practice, and specialize further. He was 45 then; an age at which most people start making plans for retirement, he decided to become a full-time student again. The field in which he chose to specialize was a natural decision based on his long standing interest in nervous system. He traced his liking for nervous system to school days. In classes IX and X, he was inspired by a teacher, Mr. Mohan Lal Bhalla, who was particularly interested in nervous system. As luck would have it, when he joined medical school, he was taught by Prof. P. B. Bharucha, also a devotee of the nervous system. Finding in young Baldev Singh a bright and dedicated student, Prof. Bharucha appointed him Prosector and made him dissect the brain for preparing demonstration specimens for almost two years. That enhanced his fascination for nervous system. Therefore, when he decided in 1949 to specialize further, the choice of field was obvious.



In 1949, the speciality of neurology was yet to be born in India; even in U.K. it was in its infancy. Therefore, for finding a Guru, Dr. Baldev Singh used an interesting method.

He had just read a book on electroencephalography (EEG). He wrote to the author (in U.S.A.) that he was interested in learning about EEG. The author directed him to approach Prof. F. A. Gibbs at Chicago. Prof. Gibbs was somewhat reluctant to accept a student of 45. But perhaps he could visualize Dr. Baldev Singh's extraordinary abilities even through his letters; so he agreed to take him. Dr. Baldev Singh wound up his practice and left for Chicago towards the end of 1949. It was in USA that Dr. Baldev Singh got acquainted with Dr. B. K. Anand and the neurophysiological studies he was doing at Yale. This acquaintance was to lead to a long and fruitful association later in India.

On his return to India in 1951, Dr. Baldev Singh failed to find a suitable opening in Amritsar or Delhi but was offered Associate Professorship in Neurology at Vellore. He joined there, and teamed up with the famous neurosurgeon, Dr. Chandy. He was doing very well there, and was quite satisfied, but fate had yet more adventures in store for him. In 1954, it was decided to establish neurological service at Tirath Ram Shah Hospital in Delhi, and Dr. Baldev Singh was invited to do so. He agreed, at least partly under the influence of Gen. Amir Chand, once his teacher at medical school. Never satisfied with patient care alone, Dr. Baldev Singh soon created opportunities for teaching and research. He taught students of Lady Hardinge Medical College at Irwin Hospital, and later at Willingdon Hospital; and did his research in collaboration with Dr. B. K. Anand, who was then heading the Physiology Department at Lady Hardinge Medical College. One can imagine his devotion and dedication from the way he ran from place to place at the age of 50, to satisfy his different interests. But nature has its ways

of rewarding the deserving. In 1964, it was decided to establish the Department of Neurology at All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), and Dr. Baldev Singh was an obvious choice for the task. He was invited to join for three years as a very special case since he was already past the age of retirement. In these three years, he managed to get the Departments of Neurology and Neurosurgery going. The sound start that he gave has now culminated in a Neurosciences Centre at AIIMS. His stay at AIIMS also reunited him with his long time friend and collaborator, Dr. B. K. Anand. As he confessed later, it was at AIIMS that, for the first time in his life, he felt fulfilled.

After his retirement from Neurology, Prof. Baldev Singh was invited to join as an Emeritus Professor at AIIMS, and physiologists can be proud of the fact that he opted for the Department of Physiology. He continued to guide research in areas which were dear to him. His interests covered a wide spectrum ranging from high altitude to the depths of yoga, and included biofeedback, physiology of sleep and consciousness, cerebral oedema, epilepsy and heat hyperpyrexia. Even more than research, his life itself was an inspiration. He was in the department from nine to nine. He was a voracious reader and fond of books: his personal library could be the envy of any medical institution. In any lecture or seminar, one could count on him for learned comments. At any function, one could count on him for an apt Urdu couplet. He kept himself up-to-date with the latest developments and looked far ahead of his times. He had simple monotonous meals with the students in the hostel and kept a predictable routine which seemed completely immune to distractions. He lived the spartan life of a recluse. He shunned praise,