

21st June

HOMI BHABHA- A "PRATAPI PURUSH"

Recently the memory of Homi Bhabha was brought alive, may not be for the right reasons. However, I and many of us would remember Homi Bhabha because of his very constructive and creative influence on us which led to far many changes in our lives and career directly and indirectly into the pattern of science that we were following and at some stage, our changes had a direct beneficial effect/impact to the nation also.

Many times I realise that it is a quirk of fate that drives careers and life.

I had done my post-graduation in Oral Pathology from Nair Hospital Dental College (NHDC) and I was giving a presentation at Bangalore on a scientific topic vis-à-vis bacteriology of dental caries and it just happened that a very renowned authority of the world, Prof. Jens J. Pindborg of Royal Dental School, Copenhagen, Denmark, was in the audience, in his capacity of visiting WHO consultant. And after the presentation he came over and we had a chat and interaction which led to further meetings in Bombay where he was a visiting professor at Government Dental College (GDC). That accidental meet was a turning point. At NHDC, I was involved with Dr. Fali Mehta, another giant of the dental profession in India, and he being attached to Bombay police, our interest got focussed on the tobacco habits in Bombay policemen and its ill effects. Oral cancer was then also a big issue and policemen were a kind of captive population. We could follow these cases to understand the significance of progression of leukoplakia lesions into probable cancer.

Dr. Fali Mehta, Prof. Pindborg and myself had close interactions for discussion on these cases as India faced a serious problem of oral cancer. So far all the hospital studies did point towards tobacco as the essential factor. But no prospective studies

were ever undertaken to follow up a tobacco associated lesion for a period of time, to see the eventual clinical picture.

Dr. Fali Mehta's interest was aroused and so also of Prof Pindborg because this study could provide wealth of information regarding this disease pathology. Preliminary discussions with Dr. Mehta resulted in a consensus thinking to establish a research protocol covering the study in different parts of rural India where there is a wide variety of tobacco habits in different forms apart from tobacco chewing and bidi smoking. We both were attached to NHDC and Dr. Mehta was a dental surgeon to Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), an institute widely acclaimed world over for basic studies in nuclear physics, mathematics and so forth.

Dr. Homi Bhabha was the director at TIFR. A suggestion was mooted by Dr. Fali Mehta that TIFR can be considered a base to undertake this ambitious and extensive epidemiological and histological study of oral pre-cancer and cancer lesions in rural areas of five different states in India to be followed up on a yearly basis for at least next 3 years.

The natural corollary after our meeting with Fali Mehta was that Homi Bhabha should meet me to assess the feasibility of whether TIFR be the base and if I can be accepted to carry on this work at TIFR with Dr. Fali Mehta, who would be the principal investigator for this study.

One fine Saturday morning, Dr. Bhabha sauntered in with his dog, and the meeting was at Dr. Fali Mehta's office. I vividly remember Dr. Bhabha coming in his shorts, from his residence at Hanging Garden. I was a youngster and had truly prepared for this interview of my life. I never realised that this interview can change my perception of the profession and my career in such a dramatic fashion, and that so many opportunities would open up.

We were in one of the rooms of Dr. Mehta's office and the meeting went on for about 2-3 hours, covering both oral pre-cancer and cancer, its various ramifications,

and all other facets of life, living and profession. In simple language, we touched many facets of academics as well as research and science.

By Monday morning I got a letter of appointment as an honorary oral pathologist at Basic Dental Research Unit (BDRU) of TIFR at a princely sum of Rs.300 per month. It was, in a way, a turning point, not so much in my career as a dentist, but in my evolution as a researcher in this important field of oral pathology, especially oral pre-cancer and cancer. Yes, the doors of research had opened and my journey of oral pre-cancer cancer was set into motion for the next 30 years. I can safely recollect what the Louis Pasteur aphorised, that chance comes to a prepared mind.

It was decided by us that we shall apply for a grant from National Institutes of Health, (NIH), Bethesda, USA for this important scientific work. The decision was implemented and we started working on the grant application. This extensive study contained the research protocol to study in simple language the study of the life cycle of leukoplakia and other oral conditions like Sub Mucous Fibrosis (SMF) and so forth. The scale of population to be examined in a house to house survey was 50,000 plus and the yearly follow up for the next 3 years to begin with. The states to be covered were Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Bihar and Maharashtra.

We had subsequently few more meetings with Dr. Homi Bhabha but the one that has left an imprint on my mind was the one where I vividly remember that Dr. Fali Mehta and myself met Dr. Bhabha on a Saturday morning at TIFR as he was leaving by Kashmir Princess (Air India) for Geneva. The words were very clear. We had requested a grant for 35 lakh, and Homi Bhabha said "If NIH reduces even 1 paisa from your grant, do not accept the grant, I shall fully support you."

Never did we realise that these were the last words and the last interaction with Homi Bhabha because as we all know, the last journey was a fateful journey, and the plane crashed into the Alp's mountain range in Switzerland.

During the same period of time, the prime minister Lal Bahadur Shastri also died in Russia, and with the deaths of these two giants, the nation truly felt a heavy loss. I remember again more vividly, a gardener at TIFR commenting, "If this man (Homi Bhabha) were alive, he would have employed the entire nation." Such was the man, such was his vision, and such was the respect that he commanded. Such was the faith the common Indian had posited upon him.

For one moment I may want to reflect upon the deeper impact of our research that the dental surgeons, way back in those years (1966) initiating oral pre-cancer cancer studies and that too because of Dr. Fali Mehta's initiative and insight, along with highly acclaimed researcher Prof. Pindborg, associated with Dr. Homi Bhabha's appreciation of our vision and to back us up totally that this research saw the light of the day.

Those days dentistry as I used to describe was like 'Tooth and nothing but the tooth, and that was the truth'. Today we see dentistry has come up as a science and a great profession. The basic research of those yesteryears is reflected today as there is a ban on paan masala and gutkha in Maharashtra and the Govt. Gazette refers to the TIFR studies as one of the key scientific work leading to such bans.

The natural awareness on tobacco is being translated into the whole country at different levels. TIFR got known into many medical and dental universities the world over. The TIFR group became famous for their vision by way of books, chapters and so forth. They laid the foundation of a great research and individually many TIFR persons got recognised the world over.

Homi Bhabha had promised us that he shall give us a separate dental research institute. The man's vision can also be seen when he brought in Tata Memorial Hospital (TMH) under the aegis of Atomic Energy Department and today TMH is one of the institutes for cancer in our country, and highly recognised institute the world over.

Molecular biology unit of TIFR under Prof. Siddiquie is another example of Homi Bhabha's thinking and visionary mind.

I remember Dr. Bhabha for various reasons, but the visionary in him always and in all ways could see through the significance of the research proposal and its long range effect. He always thought beyond the confines of the departmental parameters. This can be reflected as seen in our oral cancer research as well as the molecular biology section of TIFR.

Many of us had felt that Dr. Bhabha would choose a man and build a department around him rather than have a department and then bring the man. Such is the quality of the people who were not just there at the head for the position but showed the leadership values and changed the scenario benefitting many people and the nation at large.

A visionary lives with new ideas. If he or she is detached enough, the same visionary does all to promote a new concept, a new idea, with all the forces at his command, without wanting even a small slice of name and fame out of it. Homi Bhabha was such a man- inspiring, detached, radical, and a man of vision and action. He contributed monumentally for atomic research and institutes in India, the outcome of which is too obvious for the empowerment in India. If he was a man of the moment for atomic science in India, he equally proved momentous for the study of oral pathology at the TIFR. People familiar with oral pre-cancer research, but not with TIFR, presume that the entire TIFR is engaged with dental and public health research. Such an honour was accorded upon this research where TIFR basked in the glory of the dental profession in many quarters. Even World Health Organisation (WHO) gave recognition to Basic Dental Research Unit at TIFR as WHO Center for Prevention of Oral Cancer. No mean achievement by any standard. Now, that science of oral pathology is in the forefront of an eminence, is in a great measure, a tribute to Homi Bhabha. That was Homi Bhabha for all of us.

Apart from science which was natural to him, his zest and appreciation and contribution to art, music and culture was no less. His aesthetic values and his regard and respect for environment and Nature is reflected in all that he did and accomplished. TIFR is one of the prime examples by its natural settings, landscapes in serenity, great architectural design with interiors, so well interacting with exteriors of TIFR, the sea, the garden and the natural sky light. He nurtured all he created, with the tenderness and care that one would give a growing tree.

Homi Bhabha left a legacy in many fields, in many places and in many lives, rightly regarded as a “Pratapi Purush” who continues to live in his legacy.

Dr.Dinesh K.Daftary

M.D.S FDS RCPS (Glasgow)

Former, Hon. Prof., Nair Hospital Dental College, Mumbai

Former, Consultant, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Mumbai

Prof. Oral Pathology, MGM Institute of Health Sciences, Mumbai

Member, Governing Council of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai

Practitioner, 49, Hughes Road, Mumbai- 400007.