

Obituary

Professor Narayanji Krishnaji Bhide (1928-2017) :

Exceptional, Eccentric and Extraordinary



Prof. Narayanji Krishnaji Bhide
(1928-2017)

The year was 1966. Imagine a first year medical student absorbed in reading something on a notice board in the department of Physiology on the second floor. He receives a light touch on his back. He turns around and discovers that that the hand that had touched him belongs to a middle aged man. The man asks him, “Young man, are you aware of the fact that your right shoulder is at a slightly lower level than the left?” The boy, still recovering from the surprise, just manages to say “No sir”. And soon the man starts walking away to climb the staircase. I was the medical student, and the man who had touched me was Dr. N.K. Bhide, as I discovered after passing my first MBBS examination when he started teaching me Pharmacology. A few years later, after finishing my MBBS, once I reminded him about this episode and asked him about the significance of the lower level of the right shoulder. He said, “It means your right leg is probably shorter than the left. It won’t do you any harm now, but gradually the spine may start curving, and by old age there could be symptoms due to pressure on the nerve roots.” I asked him, “Sir, what can be done about it?” He said, “You may need a special shoe,

in which the right heel is higher than the left heel”. This episode tells many things about Professor Narayanji Bhide (1928-2017). He was a very good observer. Nobody else has ever pointed out to me the difference in the levels of my shoulders. His knowledge went far beyond Pharmacology. The treatment that he suggested was based on commonsense, an uncommon commodity, of which he had plenty. And it taught me three general things about the art and science of medicine: the importance of good observation, the place of logic and commonsense in diagnosis and treatment, and the limitations of medicine as a science.

Dr. Bhide was a remarkable man, who might have given me at the most 20 classes in Pharmacology in 1967-68, but the impression that he left on me led to a lifelong intimate relationship. In one of his classes, he asked “What is a poison?” I replied, “It is a substance that kills even when consumed in small amounts”. He said, “That is what the popular view about a poison is, and I am glad you articulated it. But, broadly speaking, a poison is a substance which has an adverse effect on protoplasm. And, in that sense, almost anything can be a poison in certain circumstances. A food can be a poison and so can water be in some situations.” His way of looking at a poison was not based on a textbook definition. It reflected his originality and breadth of vision, which he inculcated through such interactions. The same applies to his definition of research: “Research is original and critical intellectual activity”. I have yet to come across a more comprehensive definition, one that can encompass even research in languages or literature. It was Dr. Bhide who in his classes sometimes dwelt upon George Bernard Shaw and his play *The Doctor’s Dilemma*, or Paul de Kruif’s *Microbe Hunters*, and students like me would go and hunt for these books in the library. In his class on antihistaminics, he said, “You students have an enormous capacity to misunderstand the teacher”, and then went on to justify the allegation. He said, “I asked a full question on antihistaminics in an exam given to one of your senior batches. The students came and complained, ‘Sir, in your class, you had said that antihistaminics are not important, and then you have asked a full question on antihistaminics’. What I had said in the class was that the antihistaminics had not fulfilled the high expectations that had built up

soon after their discovery regarding their value in the treatment of allergies. But that does not mean that you cannot get a question on antihistaminics in the exam. There is a big difference between the two". This was a lesson in precision in the use of language, and clear thinking.

After finishing MBBS, I joined physiology but my interactions with Professor Bhide continued. I went to him whenever I needed the advice of a wise man, and such occasions were by no means rare. On his side, he passed on to me material on a wide range of subjects including, but not limited to, history of medicine, medical education, public speaking and scientific writing. He gifted me a set of books on the philosophy of science, as well as Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* and Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*. After his retirement, he moved to Pune but continued to write to me and send me material by post, as well as recommend books that I may read. In the last such letter he offered to send me a biography of Pythagoras, which he said he would get photocopied and post it to me if I wanted it. He wrote that Pythagoras was not just a mathematician but also a musician and a philosopher with a mystic bent of mind, and that many of his ideas resembled Vedanta. I did a Google search on Pythagoras, and just on Wikipedia I found more than I could read, but was happy to discover, thanks to Prof. Bhide, more about a person whom I had so far identified with just the Pythagoras' theorem. I was amazed that at almost 90, Professor Bhide still had the stamina to get a book photocopied, pack it in an envelope and post it to me. So, very politely, I told him that I would never have the time to read the book because now I am also 70 and read very little, and so he need not take the trouble. Further I told him that times have changed. Now in one second I can find out a lot about Pythagoras by turning to Professor Google. But he did not give up, and wrote again on 3 May 2017 that I must accept his offer, to which I again replied politely and at length saying why I did not want him to go through all the trouble of posting the material to me. These were the last letters we exchanged, and I regret that I disappointed him. I do hope he will forgive me wherever he is.



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3-5-2017

My Dear Profs Ramesh & Loveleen,
I have received your kind letter of April 5.
on 8th of April - Not bad.

With best wishes
and apology for my deteriorating
~~hand~~ handwriting.
I remain
Sincerely NKR/Bhide

Your condolence about Mrs. Bhide's departure
was the finest and briefest one. Thanks

NKR

The beginning and the end of the letter dated 3 May 2017 from Prof. N.K. Bhide to the author.

After his retirement, while he was at Pune, I visited him several times during my visits to Kaivalyadhama, Lonavala – my last visit was probably towards the end of 2015. But my most lengthy interactions with him were in December 2001 when I had a few days to spare between two conferences that I was attending in Pune. I had gone prepared to spend those days on collecting material on Professor B.B. Dikshit, the first Director of AIIMS, for an editorial in the *Indian Journal of Physiology and Pharmacology (IJPP)* because 2002 was the centenary year of Professor Dikshit. And, I knew that Prof. Bhide was an ardent admirer of Prof. Dikshit. So, I brought the journalist in me to the front. I went prepared to spend a few hours with Prof. Bhide every day for three consecutive days to collect the material: a delicious lunch prepared by Dr (Mrs.) Vimal Bhide and Kamala, and served with great love, was an added bonus. The first day, Prof. Bhide spoke, and I took notes. The second day, I carried with me something that I wrote on the basis of the first day's notes, made corrections in my draft, and took some more notes. The third day, I carried a manuscript that had a clearer contour, read it out to Prof. Bhide, made some more corrections, and took still more notes. After coming back to Delhi, naturally there was some more writing and rewriting. But finally I had a decent biography of Prof. Dikshit, which appeared in *IJPP* (1). I am glad I did it, because a Google search shows that that article is the only article available on the internet that has something substantial about Prof. Dikshit, who continues to be remembered with great reverence by his students to this day (2). But for Prof. Bhide, this article would not have been there.

Prof. Bhide was a perfect synthesis of the East and the West, which he had achieved through a process that Sri Aurobindo calls 'critical assimilation' – a process in which you if you accept something, it is because you understand it; and if you reject something, that is also because you understand it. One could discuss with Dr. Bhide with great profit the systems of Indian philosophy and Ayurveda, or Greek mythology and the European Renaissance – he was equally at home with all these. He had all the volumes of *Charaka Samhita*, and he had read them. He was a great admirer of the British qualities of "profound scholarship, sound commonsense and philosophical equanimity".

Prof. Bhide was simple, original, and had the courage of conviction to swim against the current. He never bought a car; he had no air-conditioner at home or in his office, and had simple home-made vegetarian food, seldom going anywhere outside to eat. He was extremely reluctant to add to his possessions, much to the annoyance of his family. He travelled very little even in India, leave aside going abroad. His only trip abroad worth the name was a one-year stay in the US on a TCM Fellowship in the 1960s. After his return, he had submitted a detailed report, of which he had many extra cyclostyled copies. A copy of that highly educative report has been one of my proud possessions for about 50 years. But once he did confide in me that now he regretted having restricted his travel to that extent. That denied him exposure in scientific circles, which perhaps curtailed his scientific progress; much worse is the fact that his attitude deprived many other scientists in the world from learning more from this exemplary man. But even with his restrictive ways, he has a sizeable number of research publications, most of them in collaboration with pediatricians and dermatologists (3).

He had an extremely good command over the English language, and he wrote accurate, unambiguous and elegant prose, often with a touch of subtle typically British humour. I learnt a lot about writing by reading what he had written, and by sitting with him a couple of times while he edited research articles, I learnt a lot about editing. But sometimes he went to extremes. He wanted everything to be read twenty times before letting it go. The product at the end no doubt read as smooth as silk, but such obsessions restricted his output. If he had not gone to such extremes, he could have written a lot more from which the world would have benefited. He could have written books on a variety of subjects, but did not write even one. If he had chosen to write a textbook of pharmacology, he could have easily given the world an Indian book comparable in style to Laurence's *Clinical Pharmacology*.

He spent the last 26 years of his life in his house in Pune, where he lived with his wife, Vimal, and daughter, Kamala, her family, and a few cats. It was his ancestral home, and even some of the furniture was more than a hundred years old. His wife passed on about a year before he left his body on 28 October 2017 at about 6 pm, just a few weeks short of his ninetieth birthday. Not one for aggressive medical treatment, he would have liked to end this life peacefully at home. But his family did take him to the hospital, where the end came after a short stay. He is survived by his daughters Kamala and Kumud, and son Vasudev, and a large number of students and admirers scattered all over the world. May his soul be at peace in a place full of unmixed love and joy; and if it gets embodied again, let it get on earth conditions that are the most favourable for spectacular growth of consciousness.

Ramesh Bijlani

Sri Aurobindo Ashram – Delhi Branch
New Delhi – 110 016
Email: rambij@gmail.com

References

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