

Obituary

Professor Bhupinder Kumar Kapoor (1936-2018) : Witty and Wise



Prof. Bhupinder Kumar Kapoor
(1936-2018)

I remember an e-mail once doing the rounds in which a quiz had been set up asking about the names of the greatest achievers and top scorers in various fields, but before one felt too ignorant came the consolation that most people fail the test. And then came the punch line, ‘do you remember someone who lent you a helping hand, wiped your tears, or was just there for you when all seemed lost?’ Professor Bhupinder Kumar Kapoor was one such person who would be remembered by many, even if they have forgotten who won the ‘Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine’ last year.

Born on 30 July 1936, Dr. Kapoor was just a young boy when his parents were forced by the partition of India in 1947 to move from Rawalpindi to Delhi. Like most refugee families, his family too was confined to a one-room apartment. But being a studious child, he found a way to study, even if it meant sitting under a street light to read. He got into Amritsar Medical College, where he completed his MBBS in 1959. He taught Physiology as a demonstrator and studied for his MD in Physiology at Maulana Azad Medical College, New Delhi, from 1961-1963, and continued teaching there till 1966. After a stint as a lecturer at Snowdon Medical College, Shimla, where he established the Department of Physiology, he joined the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi, as an Assistant Professor in 1967. He continued at AIIMS without a break till he retired as a Professor in 1996.

Handsome and well-dressed, Dr. Kapoor had a presence, be it in a postgraduate seminar, or during the coffee break. In the seminars and teaching meetings, he gave evidence of his scholarship, sharp intellect, clear thinking, courage, candour and sound commonsense. He called a spade a spade, and was so good at playing with words that he could describe the spade with just the right adjectives. During the coffee break, he came across as a jovial but decent; witty, wise and pragmatic, and at the same time an honest man; well-versed with current affairs as well as societal norms, notions and conventions around the world. He had a fine sense of balance, and although meticulous by nature, he could strike the golden mean between being detail-oriented and gist-oriented, and swerve towards being one or the other as and when appropriate. Being blessed with both a good vocabulary and the wisdom to put it to good use, he could make a point briefly but very effectively. One could learn from him how to explain a physiological mechanism as well as how to tell a joke. No matter whether he spoke to educate, entertain or admonish, he could use just the right words, speak in just the right tone, wear just the right expression, and create just the desired and desirable effect. He was an asset whom undergraduates could turn to for clarifying concepts, postgraduates could look up to for inspiration, colleagues could bank upon for support and guidance, and the institute could call upon to deal with a crisis such as a strike. “I valued his candid comments and fair judgement”, says his colleague and friend, Professor Usha Nayar. To his students, he was not just a teacher but also a father figure, who could help them to develop a balanced view of life.

As a professional, Prof. Kapoor’s forte was medical education. The rich collection of multiple choice questions

and the Objective Structured Practical Examination (OSPE) question bank that the Department of Physiology at AIIMS is proud of today acquired its present contour and character only after going through his scrutiny. He would always give the most relevant suggestions, both in terms of what to ask and how to ask it.

While Dr. Kapoor spent much of his professional life at AIIMS-New Delhi, he had a few stints at Dehradun, in the middle-east and Nepal. Among his last assignments was as an Advisor, deputed by the Ministry of External Affairs to the B.P. Koirala Institute of Health Sciences (BPKIHS), Dharan, Nepal (1997-2008). In 2009, he joined as a Professor and Head of the Department of Physiology at Dhulikhel Medical College, Nepal, where he continued till his bodily frame gave way. He fell ill while working there, for which he was eventually moved to AIIMS-New Delhi, where his body succumbed to a recalcitrant respiratory infection on 11 October 2018 after a few weeks' stay in the ICU. One can say that he kept teaching, giving to the medical students what he could give best, almost till his last breath.

While he was a great support at the workplace, he was a pillar to his family. As a son, he looked after his parents like the legendary Shraavan Kumar. As a husband, he looked after his first wife, Urmil, through her battle with breast cancer with great love and fortitude. As a father, he guided and supported his children, but let them be themselves. He truly followed Kahlil Gibran's advice to parents, "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, And though they are with you yet they belong not to you." Being a highly sociable person, after Urmil left this world, Dr. Kapoor must have felt very lonely, but never showed it. However, while working at BPKIHS, when he spotted a suitable person in Dr. M.A. Naga Rani, Professor of Pharmacology, he married her, which gave both of them much deserved companionship for about 20 years.

To me, he was not just a teacher who taught me physiology, and the art of teaching and administration, but also the teacher who taught me driving in just two lessons. He drove me to Chanakya Puri early in the morning, and taught me there on the service lanes in front of embassies how to keep the car going straight, how and when to change the gear, how to reverse the car, and a countless other things including how to keep the foot diagonally across the accelerator and the brake when starting from standstill at a slope where the car has a tendency to slip backwards. One of his aphorisms, expressed in his inimitable style was, "Never drive at a speed faster than that at which you feel the car fully under your control. The more experience you have, the faster that speed will be. But when you are truly experienced, you will not drive fast anyway." When we were together at BPKIHS in Nepal, he taught me how to make *pulao* in a pressure cooker, a tasty rice and vegetable dish, which is so easy to cook and takes so little time to make. Around the year 2000, when I was invited to BPKIHS to speak on yoga, I had the privilege of being introduced by him. Without bothering to look at my biodata, he gave me such a glowing introduction with a personal flavor that after the session I told him, "Sir, when I die, I would like you to write my obituary." It is the irony of fate that I am having to write his obituary. May his soul reside peacefully in the midst of beauty and harmony wherever it is, and when it decides to get embodied again, find in this world the best environment for further spiritual progress.

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