



# AIIMS DIAMOND JUBILEE CELEBRATIONS



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# Dr. V. Ramalingaswami

## ABSTRACT

*The collected works of Prof Ramalingaswami<sup>1</sup>, in 3 volumes of nearly 3000 pages, depict the work of a unique individual whose story continues to inspire. As Prof P.N.Tandon says, "he acquired an iconic status in his lifetime. Endowed with a brilliant mind, highly cultivated communication skills, a passion for teaching and research along with deep commitment to public welfare he chartered an uncompromising course to achieve excellence in whatever field he chose to follow." Prof M.G.K.Menon<sup>2</sup> says "Rama was undoubtedly one of the greatest biomedical scientists of recent times in India." He was Director AIIMS for a decade, Director General ICMR and President Indian National Science Academy. The Government of India conferred him with the Shanti SwaroopBhatnagar Award, the Padma Shri, the Padma Bhushan and the Padma Vibhushan. In his memory the AIIMS Board room has been named after him. This paper is a tribute to a man who has committed his entire lifetime to the service of the Nation, and delves into his leadership role as Director AIIMS in shaping the future of the premier Medical Sciences University of India.*

1. Rama applied for the post of Associate Professor in AIIMS in 1957, but was selected for the post of Research Professor in Pathology. He was only 36 years old when he was appointed a Professor in AIIMS in 1957. Prof P.N.Wahi was selected as the Professor and Head of Department, and when Prof Wahi declined the post, Rama was formally made Head of Department of Pathology. Along with Dr. H.D.Tandon and Dr. NabeenNayak, Rama laid the foundation of one of the most outstanding Departments of Pathology in India. In Rama's own words "*I joined AIIMS in 1957. During my stay at AIIMS from 1957 to 1979, I developed an intense interest in Medical Education. I introduced the case methods of teaching in pathology and the clinico-pathological conference as practiced at the Massachusetts General Hospital. I introduced student evaluation of teaching methods, as a corrective tool, at the end of every teaching session. During the early part of this period, three men – Benjamin Castleman<sup>3</sup>, Hans Popper<sup>4</sup> and Hans Smetana<sup>5</sup> – were great influences on my life and I learnt a lot from each of them.*" Following 18-20 years of research work in the Kangra Valley, Rama confirmed that a very small dose of iodine or iodate could prevent endemic goiter, cretinism and deaf mutism. The information provided formed the basis of the National Goiter Control Program.
2. Rama's contribution to research work in AIIMS covered the areas of nutritional pathology, thyroid goiter and iodine deficiency disorders, nutritional anemia, liver diseases and cardiovascular diseases. While there is significant documentation of Rama's research contributions on nutritional pathology, malnutrition, goiter and iodine deficiency disorders as also his work as a teacher and medical educationist giving medical education a community orientation, his work as Director AIIMS does not seem to be adequately reflected. The collected works of Dr. V.Ramalingaswami says that<sup>6</sup> "*as Director of the Institute, he relentlessly tried to expand the Institute's activities in diverse disciplines. It was during his stewardship that several specialized centers – the Rotary Cancer Centre, the Cardio-thoracic Centre, the Neurosciences Centre, Centre for Community medicine – were established. A number of new departments like departments of gastroenterology and human nutrition, endocrinology and metabolism, biomedical engineering, haematology, nephrology, paediatric surgery and biotechnology were created during his leadership. There were several others who had their capabilities and scope enhanced.*"

## A Very Challenging Tenure

3. During his long tenure as Director AIIMS, Rama worked with 5 Health Ministers namely K.K.Shah, Uma Shankar Dixit, K.K.Khadilkar, Karan Singh and Raj Narayan. His tenure covered 6 Health Secretaries namely B.P.Patel, K.K.Das, C.S.Ramachandran, Kartar Singh, GianPrakash and Rajeshwar Prasad. Between January 13<sup>th</sup> 1970 and 20<sup>th</sup> September 1978, Rama as Member Secretary of the AIIMS Governing Body attended 28 meetings, the largest by any Director of AIIMS in the past 60 years. AIIMS is a complex organization for governance, and Rama's tenure was full of challenges. The

<sup>1</sup> Collected works of Professor V.Ramalingaswami Volumes-I - III editor P.N.Tandon, Ranbaxy Science Foundation and Indian National Science Academy

<sup>2</sup> Prof M.G.K..Menon is the Chairman of the VulmiriRamalingaswami Foundation

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Castleman was an American Physicist and Pathologist best known for describing Castleman's disease and worked at the Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston

<sup>4</sup> Hans Popper was a pathologist, hepatologist and teacher. He is widely regarded as founding father of hepatology worked at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York

<sup>5</sup> Hans Smetana was the pathologist in chief and director of laboratories at Delta Primate Center of Tulane University, New Orleans

<sup>6</sup>Page XXI of Volume I of Collected Works of Dr.V.Ramalingaswami

frequently changing leadership at the top, scarcity of finances, sharp personal differences with Prof L.P. Agarwal Chief Dr. R.P. Center for Ophthalmic Studies and intra-faculty differences in several departments like Pharmacology coupled with the Junior Doctors strike in 1974 made it an extremely challenging tenure. That said, the broader vision of Rama outlined the development of the Institute as a center of excellence, collaborating with International Institutes and Agencies, Training Quality Hospital Administration personnel, Improving Cleanliness and Upkeep of the Institute and formulating the Institute's development plans to fit into the broad national health sector goals find resonance even to this day, 37 years since he demitted office. The Collected works says that "*During this period the overall academic and research activities of the Institute acquired a new dynamism. Distinguished medical scientists from within the country and abroad were invited to invigorate these activities. There was multiplication of symposia, seminars, workshop and CME programs virtually around the years. The Institute became a showpiece of what was the best in the bio-medical field in India.*"

### The Residency Scheme

4. There is one standout incident for which Rama is still remembered<sup>7</sup> – the 95 days strike of Junior Doctors from January 1, 1974 to April 4, 1974 in which AIIMS Junior Doctors also participated. Newspapers<sup>8</sup> said the strike was caused by demands for suitable and acceptable grade pay, along with better working and living conditions. As part of the post-strike negotiations, on May 28, 1974 AIIMS introduced the Residency Scheme in replacement of the system of House Surgeons, Post Graduate Students and Registrars in Central Institutions/ Hospitals. The scheme envisaged that the 4-year system consisting of one-year house job, followed by 3-year registration as post graduate student, be replaced by a 3-year junior residency scheme with separate selections at the first year, and second year of the Junior Residency. The Senior Residents were considered on par with class II officers and their selection was to be conducted by the Standing Selection Committee. Uniform non-practicing allowances to Junior and Senior Residents were introduced and higher basic pay was approved. The AIIMS Residency Scheme was one of the significant policy changes of Rama's tenure as Director AIIMS.

### Development of Centers

5. Dr. Ramalingaswami, the great visionary, conceptualized the development of major Centers of Excellence at AIIMS. The Dr. K.L. Wig Center for Medical Education and Research, the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Center for Ophthalmic Sciences, the Cardio-Neuro Sciences Center, the Rotary Cancer Center were all conceptualized and promoted with his untiring efforts. The Development Plans of the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Center for Ophthalmic Sciences were taken up in 1970. The RP Center was envisaged to have 90 beds with separate budgets. The issues concerning the Institute – RP Center relationship created sharp divergence in views in the AIIMS governance model in the later years. The CN center was conceptualized subsequently. The Institute's collaboration with the World Health Organization resulted in the establishment of the Educational and Technology Institute at AIIMS with WHO funds. The Center was subsequently named as the Dr. K.L. Wig Center for Medical Education and Training. In 1972, the newly constructed library building of AIIMS was named as the Dr. B.B. Dixit Library.
6. One of big strengths of Rama was his capacity to develop international collaborations. AIIMS collaborations with World Health Organization in Human Reproduction was a huge milestone. Rama was also closely involved with the UNICEF, the Canadian International Development Agency and the National Institute of Health Bethesda, Maryland USA. He was also a visiting Professor of International Policy Harvard School of Public Health Boston. In 1973, AIIMS established the WHO Research and Training Center in Human Reproduction. Prof Halder recalls it was the Department of Reproductive Biology which identified some savings from this project to enable the construction of the world class AIIMS swimming pool. AIIMS entered into several bilateral collaborations too. Equipment procurement at the Institute was financed under the Indo-Danish and Indo-Swedish Technical Assistance Projects. The Institute pursued collaborations with the University of Basra, the Child Care Center Kabul in West Asia. The AIIMS-New Zealand collaboration was vigorously pursued.
7. The Institute accepted a donation of Rs. 5 lacs from Chauthmal Rajgarhia a donor from Bombay for construction of a suitable Dharamshala in the AIIMS campus in mid-1970. The Dharamshala was to be jointly utilized by AIIMS and Safdarjung hospital. The Estate Committee identified a suitable site in the AIIMS West Ansari Nagar campus and allocated it to the Chauthmal Rajgarhia Trust for construction of the Dharamshala<sup>9</sup>. The Rajgarhia Vishram Sadan at AIIMS provides shelter for over 1100 inmates who are either patients or attendants of AIIMS.
8. There were some initiatives that were attempted but could not materialize. The Institute sought loans from State Bank of India, Life Insurance Corporation, Syndicate Bank, HUDCO for additions to the Hospital, Construction of Nursing Home and residential quarters. After preliminary discussions, the proposal was dropped as it was felt that it was neither possible nor

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<sup>7</sup> From the oral narratives of Prof V.K. Paul, HOD Pediatrics and Prof C.S. Pandav HOD Community Medicine

<sup>8</sup> Pg 1 and 8 The Hindustan Times dated January 1, 1974

<sup>9</sup> Governing Body decisions dated 7<sup>th</sup> August 1970

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practicable to raise loans from banks or other public sector financial institutions for the building residential quarters for the staff and a nursing home as these works are not financially remunerative. There was a proposal called "Educating the Humanist Physician" which considered the role of humanities in the teaching of medical sciences. While the introduction of Humanities in teaching of medical sciences was considered, it wasn't pursued. There were proposals like the reservation of seats for medical graduates from backward areas and for those who have served in rural areas, which were considered. The Institute could not implement area based reservations in its admission procedures.

9. The separation of the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Center for Ophthalmic Sciences from the Institute was a big challenge. Prof L.P.Agarwal the Chief of the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Center for Ophthalmic Sciences also served as the Dean of AIIMS. A separation of the Center from the Institute meant that the posts of Chief and Dean would be separated. The 1977 Governing Body meetings<sup>10</sup> record these extra-ordinary discussions between Dr. L.P.Agarwal and Dr. V.Ramalingaswami.
10. The verbatim of the minutes said "*Dr. L.P.Agarwal Chief Organizer Dr. Rajendra Prasad Center for Ophthalmic Sciences stated that he was opposed to the separation of the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Center for Ophthalmic Sciences from the Institute although he was pleading for it for a number of years. He also did not think more autonomy was needed for the center. He added that he was working as Dean for the last few days and assured his fullest cooperation to the Director. The Health Secretary explained that with the expanding role of the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Center as an apex institution for the implementation of the National Program for Prevention of Blindness, and his additional duties as Advisor to the Ministry, the Chief Organizer had already had plenty of work on his hands. The Health Secretary felt that it would not be advisable for the Chief Organizer to be given additional duties as Dean of Institute. Instead he may be given a suitable designation as Dean or Principal of the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Center. Furthermore, the Health Secretary doubted from his past experience, if the present Director Prof Ramalingaswami and Prof L.P.Agarwal would be able to work together amicably. Prof V.Ramalingaswami said that as a disciplined person, he would carry out the decision of the President and the Governing Body and he had nothing personal against Prof L.P.Agarwal, but he was of the opinion that it would be in the best interests of the Institute if the first alternative suggested by the Health Secretary viz., more autonomy and separate Deanship for the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Center were accepted.*"
11. The Governing Body continued to deliberate on the difficult relationship between the Institute and the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Center for Ophthalmic Sciences in pursuance of the report of Health Secretary and Director for separation of powers for almost 2 years. It was only in 1981 that the relationship was notified by the Institute, which stands to this day.
12. To conclude, as Prof V.K.Paul says Prof Ramalingaswami catapulted AIIMS to the global stage as a leader in medical education and biomedical research. I wish to quote from the Collected Works of Dr. V.Ramalingaswami that he epitomized George Bernard Shaw's vision "*I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I love. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle for me, it is sort of a splendid torch which I have got a hold of, for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.*" That's what Rama was – an inspiration to one and all.

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Author is a senior civil servant, an IAS officer of 1989 batch, presently serving as Deputy Director Administration, AIIMS New Delhi.

The views expressed in the Article are his personal and based on research done from the Collected Works of Dr. V.Ramalingaswami and the Official AIIMS documents.

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<sup>10</sup> Verbatim of the minutes of 72<sup>nd</sup> Governing Body Meeting dated August 29, 1977