

### Arun Chitale

(28 February 1937–27 February 2021)



Photo courtesy: Subhash Jirange

#### 'YA SAMA HA'

On 27 February 2021, a day before his 84th birthday, Professor Arun Chitale, doyen of surgical pathologists in India, passed away after a brief illness.

'*Ya sama ha*' loosely translated from Marathi means 'You are one of a kind'. It is the title of a collection of tributes and reminiscences of family and friends published by his wife on his 75th birthday.

Arun was born in Dapoli, a small town in the Konkan, the son of a school principal. His parents encouraged and valued higher education. His older brother elected to become a surgeon, and Arun wanted very much to follow in his brother's footsteps. However, unlike surgeons, pathologists in training were paid a stipend. This lessened the financial burden on the family and decided Arun's professional career as a pathologist. And what a career it was!

Arun enrolled at B.J. Medical College in Pune. His years at BJ, as the institution is commonly referred to, were eventful. He was fortunate to be mentored in pathology by Dr Y.M. Bhende, who, to this day, is revered as a father figure by countless pathologists who studied under his tutelage. At BJ, Arun developed his skills as a debater, an actor, a tabla player of repute, a table tennis star and a formidable chess player. BJ was also where he met Shobhana Joshi, his wife to be, and his companion for over 55 years, until his death.

Arun was very keen on studying in the USA. Like most men who left the shores of India to study abroad, he was expected to marry before he ventured overseas. This was a pleasant 'duty' as he had already met Shobhana, the girl of his dreams. He began his training in surgical pathology at Brockton under the benign and appreciative eye of Professor G. Richard Dickersin, who treated him as a son. He completed his training at the University of Virginia in Richmond, but unlike many of his fellow expatriates, he decided that his destiny lay in India.

Arun burst upon the pathology scene in Bombay (Mumbai was still in the future) in 1969. He overawed the pathology community with his uncanny diagnostic acumen and the fluency with which he articulated his knowledge. He did this with an air

of confidence and panache which had hitherto defined our surgical colleagues. Within a short while, his opinion was sought by pathologists and clinicians alike. His was the final diagnosis.

As a young pathologist, who was about to embark on my own career, I was inspired. I left for the UK in 1976, and after a stint in the USA where I first encountered surgical pathology. I returned to a Bombay which was 'pathologically' transformed. Surgical pathology, a discipline hardly recognized, let alone practised, was burgeoning. A monthly slide club of 'senior surgical pathologists' that still meets with great regularity had come into existence. The meetings were eagerly anticipated not only because the fare was good but also because 'Dr Chitale' would attend. Arun was as accomplished a diagnostician as he was a showman. He had a commanding presence and people hung on to his every word. He was also feisty. He never let an opposing point of view go unchecked. Heady days, they were indeed!

Arun chose to practise in Bombay rather than Pune because he felt the energy of the city. Within a short while, he had earned the trust of his clinical colleagues. He set up a bone tumour registry at the Maharashtra state-run J.J. Group of Hospitals, a cytopathology service at the Municipal K.E.M. Hospital and an electron microscopy service at the privately managed Jaslok Hospital. This last was a remarkable feat. Persuading the trustees to part with funds for a rare and expensive bit of equipment that was unlikely to pay for itself, stands as a tribute to his growing stature and the influence he wielded in the public sphere. The nephropathology service at Jaslok Hospital was the envy of other less fortunate departments.

His busy schedule of diagnostic work at several hospitals did not preclude other commitments. His country-wide slide seminars were legendary. Dr 'C', as he was affectionately referred to, mentored some of the most prominent surgical pathologists of Mumbai and wrote well received books, all the while maintaining a highly regarded private surgical pathology practice. He was a pathologist's pathologist, much sought after for his insightful second opinions.

Arun believed that the problem ailing surgical pathologists in India was a lack of documentation of the large amount of material that they were fortunate to receive. He was a great cataloguer of his cases. In the days when digital pathology was unknown, he had thousands of gross pictures and photomicrographs stored on 35-mm black and white and colour film. Towards the last years of his life when he was semi-retired, he had all his Kodachromes converted into digital form. Most of this, he did himself as a labour of love. His collection of over

20 000 cases is a veritable treasure trove of carefully curated material, some of which has been published in four volumes titled 'Diagnostic problems in tumours'.

Arun is survived by his wife, Shobhana, a busy family physician, his sons Ashutosh and Dhananjay, both of whom are pathologists. Dhananjay is Vice Chairman of the Department of Pathology at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, and the head of its Molecular Pathology division.

A man of boundless energy and persistence, he will be remembered as a dynamic figure who stood tall in the field of surgical pathology, a discipline that he, more than anyone else, helped to establish in this country.

*'Ya sama ha.'*

ANITA M. BORGES  
*Centre for Oncopathology  
 Wadala  
 Mumbai  
 Maharashtra  
 India  
 anitaborges@gmail.com*

#### MEMORIES OF PROFESSOR ARUN CHITALE

Dr Arun Chitale stood out from among his contemporaries. As undergraduates, the first thing we noticed about him was that he was always impeccably dressed in a suit, even in sultry Bombay (now Mumbai). His teaching style was unique too. In 1984, he took a couple of lectures for us (II MBBS students) in Grant Medical College, where he was an honorary professor (alas, a system that no longer exists). I and some of my friends were impressed, even then, by the fact that he used his own epidemiological data from his private practice and Jaslok Hospital data, rather than data from standard textbooks. In my lectures over the years, I have followed this principle—use your own

data, not the material from textbooks. It adds a personal flavour to the talk and adds to the credibility of the lecture.

One of the topics that Dr Chitale delivered a lecture on was on pathology of the stomach in perhaps, July 1984. His statement 'Gastric cancer is the national cancer of Japan' was a much better way of saying 'Gastric cancer is common in Japan' and is something I have shamelessly modified and used in my talks to undergraduates!

As postgraduates, we were struck by the repertoire of his knowledge. He practised general surgical pathology, which included tumour pathology, nephropathology and parts of neuropathology as well as electron microscopy—all of which are distinct and unique fields, where the twain ne'er met—except in Dr Chitale's mind and laboratory! A constant feature at every national pathology conference in India was the histopathology teaching slide box, which comprised a variety of mind-boggling lesions—all from his own practice. His collection always surpassed those of most institutions in India. Because he made most of his diagnoses on haematoxylin and eosin (H&E), unlike his counterparts in the West who had immunostains; he had once humorously referred to himself as a HE-man! Of course, in keeping with his approach, he soon incorporated immunohistochemistry in his practice as well.

But, HE-man is how all of us who were taught by him, formally or informally, will remember him.

SANJAY A. PAI  
*Department of Pathology  
 Columbia Asia Referral Hospital  
 Bengaluru  
 Karnataka  
 India  
 sanjayapai@gmail.com*

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### *Obituaries*

Many doctors in India practise medicine in difficult areas under trying circumstances and resist the attraction of better prospects in western countries and elsewhere. They die without their contributions to our country being acknowledged.

*The National Medical Journal of India* wishes to recognize the efforts of these doctors. We invite short accounts of the life and work of a recently deceased colleague by a friend, student or relative. The account in about 500 to 1000 words should describe his or her education and training and highlight the achievements as well as disappointments. A photograph should accompany the obituary.

—Editor