

**Vallath Balakrishnan**  
(1935–2018)



**A MAN OF PASSION WHO  
FOLLOWED HIS GUTS**

It was an honour for me to have been closely associated with Professor Vallath Balakrishnan for over five decades. He was a dedicated doctor, teacher, scientist, researcher and family man; he worked tirelessly to further the cause of gastroenterology in India and was a source of inspiration to many.

Dr Balakrishnan and I met during my first year at the Medical College in Trivandrum (now Thiruvananthapuram) way back in 1955. He was two years senior to me in college. He was a day scholar, but during lunch-time, he used to come to our hostel mess, where we bonded instantly over afternoon meals. Later on, he married Sarala, my wife's best friend and college roommate, and our friendship grew as we met informally with our families.

After completing his MBBS, he did his postgraduation (MD, Medicine) in Delhi. During the 1965 war he enrolled in the Army as a short service commission officer. I had joined the Army during the 1962 war and our paths crossed again in 1969, when he was posted as medical specialist at Military Hospital, Khadakwasla, Pune, and I was a senior resident in the Department of Medicine at Armed Forces Medical College, Pune. We met often and had many interesting conversations about life and medicine.

After his service in the Army got over, he joined the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh, to complete his Doctorate in Medicine (DM) in Gastroenterology. He and Dr Habibullah were the first postgraduate students in gastroenterology in India, completing their DM under the supervision of the legendary Dr P.N. Chhuttani. Among others, he was influenced by Visiting Professors like Dennis Burkitt of Burkitt's lymphoma fame, whose thought-provoking lecture on the intimate relationship between inadequacy of dietary fibre and several diseases set him thinking. The stimulating atmosphere of academic medicine, the exchange of ideas and breath-taking advances in gastroenterology that he witnessed at PGIMER so impressed Dr Balakrishnan that he vowed to bring this superspecialty to his home state, Kerala.

When he started the gastroenterology department at Trivandrum Medical College in 1972 at the age of 37 years, he was the lone specialist in the state. Although he had to battle bureaucracy and disbelievers, it did not take him long to create an internationally renowned department, which he spearheaded for 18 years. Hard work, discipline and passionate commitment were his hallmarks.

A WHO fellowship in the UK early in his career was the

beginning of a series of accomplishments. His landmark studies in pancreatology were beginning to be appreciated. The new department in Trivandrum built academic bridges across the country and oceans. He was a visiting fellow at INSERM (French Health and Medical Research Council) in 1985. He was president, Indian Society of Gastroenterology (1987–88) and National Coordinator of the Indian Pancreatic study.

Dr Balakrishnan received the Dr B.C. Roy National Award in medicine from the President of India in 1989. He received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Indian Society of Gastroenterology in 2010 in addition to several other honours and accolades.

During his stint at Trivandrum Medical College, he published a classic book, *Chronic pancreatitis in India*, which laid emphasis on the prevalence of this disease in Kerala.

Later in life, he was troubled by health problems and required repeated hospitalizations for coronary artery disease and surgical interventions. He pushed on nevertheless and worked relentlessly despite his poor health to further the cause and development of the field of gastroenterology.

After he got better, he shifted to Kochi; though his 'retired' life was equally busy as he accepted a position of Professor of Gastroenterology at the Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences, Kochi. He continued to teach students, see patients and above all pursue his seminal research work in pancreatitis. I had also retired from the Army by then and was in Chennai. Dr Balakrishnan was instrumental in bringing me to Amrita Institute, handing over the administrative responsibilities of the department so that he could devote his time completely to teaching and research.

A man, who motivated many by his work, Dr Balakrishnan, was also great with words and, in addition to the four medical books he edited, he penned two inspirational memoirs—*A passion named life* and *Fire in my belly*. In these books, he looks back on his life—a large part of it as a doctor—as a series of experiences. They provide us with a clue on his philosophy of life and medicine.

He wrote about his battle with illness, 'Though I was a doctor and a scientist trained to think rationally, my science is underlined by the firm conviction that beyond all scientific laws the powers of nature reign supreme.'

This is the belief that allowed him to remain calm and untroubled amidst all the turbulence he faced. May his soul achieve Moksha.

V.A. NARAYANAN  
Senior Consultant Gastroenterologist  
M.A.J. Hospital  
Edapally  
Kochi  
Kerala  
narayananva@gmail.com