

Natesan Rangabashyam
(5 November 1933–15 July 2013)



Dr N. Rangabashyam passed away in his sleep in the early hours of the morning of 15 July 2013 at his residence in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. He was 79. He is survived by his wife and two children.

‘Some were born great, but others achieved greatness.’

Natesan Rangabashyam or NR as he was popularly known was a colossus in the field of surgery. I first met him in the

ante room of Operation Theatre 4 in the Government General Hospital, Madras (now Chennai) on one sultry day in October 1987 to report as his MCh postgraduate student. His reputation as a formidable, indeed demoniac figure that no one could approach preceded him. However, my own upbringing had pushed the element of fear from my mind, and although I looked and felt like a houseman on my first day in the hospital, I did the unthinkable and in my first breath, also requested for a couple of weeks’ leave for transferring my family from Chandigarh! He agreed without hesitation, and that was the first of many surprises that were in store for me.

Too often, a passage written about a celebrity tends to be either overly dramatic and eulogizes his/her praise in an unrealistic manner or a judgement on the life of the person. My sense of honesty does not permit me to do the former, and it is quite inappropriate for anyone to even attempt the latter, least of all I. However, some attributes of NR just stand out and must be mentioned. He was a Padma Bhushan awardee, a pioneer who was responsible for starting the MCh course in surgical gastroenterology in India for the first time in 1984, a teacher and trainer for over four decades, and the recipient of many professional and social accolades—The B.C. Roy award for National Teacher (twice), president of professional bodies, living legend awards of the Government of Tamil Nadu; the list is endless.

Many of his qualities have inspired me including the intensity of his actions and his commitment to what he considered important. Ever since he returned to India from the UK after his Royal College Fellowship, he was determined to make a mark on the surgical scene in India. It was most unusual to find an Honorary Surgeon commanding such a presence in a government hospital in Madras; indeed the commitment to teaching was quite remarkable—I have known instances when he returned early in the morning from an overseas trip, and an hour later, turned up for the undergraduate clinic in the hospital. His operation theatre

schedules would run on a different meter from the others in the hospital, largely due to his drive and passion.

Punctuality was his forte, and when a joint meeting of the Association of Surgeons of India and the British Association of Surgical Oncology took place in Madras (Chennai) with clockwork precision in 1986, it was certainly an eye-opener to the British that the Indians, at least some of them, could put together a great meeting.

Everyone I met before I joined his department cautioned me about his temper, and his outbursts, but I found him to be responsive to all my approaches. In fact, this prompted one of our departmental colleagues to remark that I had somehow survived without receiving any admonition from him! Till the end that had continued, and this in fact does not even surprise me.

His academic achievements are well known and any repetition would be unnecessary. However, he valued very much the international recognition he received, which he so richly deserved. What would one expect when a visiting luminary, be it Sir Wilfred Circus or Mr Barry Jackson, would be shown around Ward Number 10 at the Government General Hospital, rather than some doctored environment for the western observer? In fact, I may venture to say that he went to great lengths to introduce India to the world, and in doing so firmly placed India on the world map as far as gastrointestinal surgery was considered.

Foresight is a great virtue, and who would have thought that an MCh Gastroenterology subspecialty was viable? One of my mentors emphatically said so when I left him to join NR’s department, but future events have indicated otherwise. In the three decades thereafter, gastrointestinal surgery is at the threshold of further fragmentation, a fact that NR himself lamented during a conversation I had with him some weeks before his demise.

The huge number of excellent surgeons and academicians who have grown around him and who are his representatives in most parts of the world must have given him much happiness. One felt that his commitment to his passions often caused him to be seriously misunderstood, and even feared. Over the years, the mask fell, and it was clear that this was a warm, friendly person who actually enjoyed a lot of what was going on around him. Watching such a person from a ringside seat was a privilege I am thankful for, and especially so, for I felt I occupied a special place in his heart. Right from the start, I enjoyed a freedom of interaction that most did not. I shall carry the memories till the end and thank the Lord for this privilege.

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[For readers interested in more information, see Rangabashyam N. *Natl Med J India* 1994;7:97–100.]