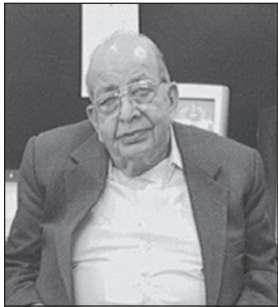


Krishan Chand Mahajan
(12 June 1923–18 January 2015)

Science is not only a disciple of reason but also one of romance and passion.

—STEPHEN HAWKING



Leadership among surgeons is usually confined to the self-congratulatory circles of surgical or clinical associations. Rarely did a surgeon shine beyond such circles to become a beacon of guidance for society beyond clinicians. Professor Krishan Chand Mahajan was one such rare scientist who indulged in surgical reasoning with a passion that can be aptly called his romance

with society at large. He was born in Lahore (presently in Pakistan) to Dr Ram Chand Mahajan and Mrs Shakuntla Mahajan. He graduated from King Edward Medical College, Lahore and obtained his Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons (FRCS), England ahead of the mandatory minimum period. He was beyond usual human beings from the very beginning. During the riots of August 1947 when most Hindu medicos were killed, Dr Mahajan was miraculously saved. His whereabouts from 15 to 26 August 1947 were not known to his family. Later it was found that after being rescued from marauders on 14 August and packed into a secure vehicle, he got away and went back to the hospital to rescue Hindu nurses, evacuating them to the border till all of them were transported. He finally travelled on 26 August 1947 to join his family. To be a do-gooder to others even putting himself in personal jeopardy was the hallmark of this great soul.

There are supersouls who visit this planet earth once in an era. Professor Mahajan was such a soul. He was like a spark that touched ordinary and unimportant people like us. A spark that ignited, a realization of potential, in those touched, a realization of what they could become. Not only was he rescued from death like his mythological namesake Lord Krishna (the Hindu God), but like him, he outshone his contemporaries in a very short span of time. After reaching Delhi, he joined as a Registrar in Surgery at Irwin Hospital and soon became an international doyen of surgery. He became a living legend as a surgeon, a teacher, a philanthropist, an administrator and an institution builder. It was due to his personal efforts with the then Prime Minister, that Delhi got its first gender-neutral medical college, i.e. the Maulana Azad Medical College.

Precision is a word married to surgery, along with the vows of discipline and punctuality. His passion for discipline indulged no compromise, howsoever competing the circumstances might be. As a Registrar, he was instructed to welcome an 'important' new house surgeon who came with recommendations from the highest offices of the country and happened to be the daughter of the Cabinet Secretary. The new house surgeon, Dr Vasumati, reported at 8.30 a.m. and was asked to report the next day as she was late, being unaware that the reporting time was 8 a.m. Dr Vasumati later became Dr Mahajan's wife and his most precious jewel and, in his own words, his strongest pillar of strength. When asked by NDTV (an Indian news channel) of his greatest achievements, he mentioned resurrection of Sir Ganga Ram Hospital (SGRH), New Delhi as one. He took over the hospital when the Trustees had decided to close it down because of lack of funds. He became its first Chairperson and revived it with a personal financial contribution of ₹15 000 (a princely sum in those times)

apart from shifting his established private practice to the institution. He built the institution brick-by-brick. He invested his personal resources and assets to start the Diplomate of National Board (DNB) programme in 1984; a unique Department of Academics in 1996; one of the most endowed libraries in any private institution; a state-of-the-art medical illustration unit; telemedicine and above all was the catalyst for the success of the liver transplantation programme. The living donor liver transplant programme at SGRH is Dr Mahajan's single parent child that has trained most of the liver transplant surgeons of India.

His passion and romance for surgery recognized no barriers. Being an international leader in surgery, he would attend international conferences regularly and bring the latest technologies to India. When laparoscopy was introduced, even surgeons in their forties were skeptical of the fresh training it entailed. But Dr Mahajan, in his seventh decade of life, after attending a laparoscopic conference in the USA, brought with him an operating laparoscope to do the first laparoscopic cholecystectomy in Delhi at his nursing home. Enabling others and giving them credit was his primary trait, hence he let his juniors walk away with the glory of laparoscopic surgery. He continued to guide youngsters in innovations in laparoscopic surgery and publishing the same. During another NDTV interview he expressed his pride in these innovations by saying 'while in most of the fields we have matched or bettered the best anywhere in the world, but in the field of laparoscopic surgery, we have given to the world what is considered to be the best and most innovative'. He was referring to the development of laparoscopic navigation along avascular planes avoiding the need of potentially dangerous energized dissection, which was otherwise thought to be a necessary evil. Being associated with him in this and his appreciation made him more than a hero to me. Every hero has his own hero. He revered Professor S.K. Sen as his surgical mentor and Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, India's first home minister as his ideal. Imitation is the best form of flattery and to impress Sardar Patel he took to playing bridge and became an excellent player of that card game.

He mentored three generations of surgeons and all his students are holding positions of eminence in top most institutions in and around Delhi. The contemporary surgeons of stature acknowledge that their stature is due to the giant shoulders of Dr Mahajan lifting them up. Not only did he lift individuals out of ignominy but helped create many world-class institutions. He was the founder of the 'Delhi Surgical Club' which presently is the Delhi State Chapter of the Association of Surgeons of India (ASI). He was either the organizer or the spirit behind organizers of all the national surgical conferences held in Delhi. He set up the 'ASICON Surgical Education and Research Foundation' under the ASI, Delhi State Chapter, with funds saved from conferences. This body continues to carry on his vision of surgical academics. His passion for academics was relentless and unmatched by any other passion of his. His impromptu updates on any topic were the envy of all. This is truly reflected in the words of his past students—Dr Amitabh Gautam, an organ transplant surgeon at Boston, USA who remembers him 40 years later. 'He was an engaging presence in the Delhi Surgical Forum, usually more up-to-date with the current surgical knowledge than many full-time teachers in various academic departments of surgery. This was in the pre-internet era where most journals arrived in the library after a delay of few months. This was partly because of his position on the Editorial Board of the *British Journal of Surgery*, but largely due to his approach to academic surgery. His academics were not purely theoretical, but spiritually infectious. He inspired, engaged, encouraged and challenged you simultaneously. He demanded excellence and preached a Mantra for the same. He would say 'Excellence can be achieved if you care more than others think is wise, risk more than others think is safe, dream more than others think is practical, expect more than others think is possible.' His advice to

the surgical academician was comprehensive from the history of surgery to basic and clinical research and continued innovations with pre-emptive assimilation of technological advances. He believed a surgeon had to be a well-read person in aspects others than medicine, a person of the literature, arts, possessing leadership qualities in non-technical subjects such as emotional skills, communication skills and resilience. He would often quote Sir William Osler 'One who only knows medicine, not even medicine knows.' He would encourage reading non-science books, watching movies, etc. His passion for academics was reflected in his pain at the dearth of good teachers, his anxiety about 'bridging the skill and wisdom gap' and his agony at the talented not getting their due. He endeavoured relentlessly to find stability of an uncontroversial script for geniuses to find an equitable balance between their self-estimation and the role they were given. He tried to achieve it by giving his personal self to the core to those he loved, engaging in their betterment, involving himself with their families and never asking anything for himself and never found wanting in his presence in any manner to them. He would keep their excitement in academic pursuit alive by allowing them to rub shoulders

with the social glitterati *et al.* I wish to share one such moment when Dev Anand handed him his autobiography *Romancing with life*. Dr Mahajan called me, and giving the book in my hand, asked me to write something on it, as if I was gifting it to him. And I wrote 'To Sir With Love—Brij'. His social repertoire transgressed the boundaries of any expressive vocabulary.

We will carry forward your dreams as perceived in my last encounter with you hours before your departure echoing Shakespeare

'What dreams may come,
When we have shuffl'd off this mortal coile,
Must giue us pawse.'

We will wear your dreams as our second skin.
Love you Sir.

BRIJ B. AGARWAL

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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