

## An outstanding nutrition scientist

*An obituary of B. V. Ramasastrri*

Dr Bulusu Venkata Ramasastrri, former Deputy Director of National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad, passed away on 13 December 1997. In his death the nation has lost an outstanding nutrition scientist, and for many of us, a very dear friend. He was among the few iconoclasts and intellectual rebels that ICMR could ever boast of and has charmed many with his abiding good will and friendly advice. His general interests in matters of music, science, horticulture and a good evening conversation are remembered very fondly by his friends. We remember late D. Krishnamurthy, the pathologist, elaborately and pointedly groaning in the corridors of National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) whenever Ramasastrri started yet another episode of 'When I was in Australian National University ...'.

At a time when nutritional biochemistry was the major theme in biochemistry, Ramasastrri contributed significantly to the science and its application in this country. He was born on 24 April 1924 in Amalapuram, East Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh. His early education in Andhra University led him to obtain a Masters degree in chemistry of foods and drugs in 1946. He joined the then Nutrition Research Laboratories situated at Conoor in 1947 on a prestigious Parlakamidi Research Fellowship. He continued in these labs subsequently at Hyderabad and became a Deputy Director of the National Institute of Nutrition in 1978. He retired in that capacity from the ICMR.

A major area of his work started with R. L. Blakely in Australia. During his tenure with nutritional laboratories, he had unique opportunity to go to Australia National University, Canberra, Australia, to work for his doctorate degree. His

doctoral work on folic acid metabolism with Blakely has attained international recognition for the discovery and purification of 5,10-methylenetetrahydro folate dehydrogenase. Even today the Sigma Company of USA supplies this enzyme purified as per the procedure of Ramasastrri and Blakely. His work on oxida-



tion-reduction was on par with the best of biochemical work anywhere. He did not rest on these laurels when he came home and went whole heartedly into what would be the mainstay nutritional research.

Ramasastrri's contributions to nutritional biochemistry have been significant and socially relevant. His work was mainly concerned with folic acid metabolism, calcium absorption and analytical techniques for easy assessment of thiamine, choline, etc. His book (with co-authors) on *Nutritive Value of Indian Foods* is generally considered to be a bible for reference purposes by nutritionists, clinicians, and planners. One of us (V.S.) had the occasion to meet Indians abroad, in as distant place as Brazil, using this book

as the ultimate reference point on all matters culinary. A major value of this book has been that it gave a compendium of various words used in different Indian languages to describe the same plant or vegetable. In his later years at NIN, he failed to convince the ICMR hierarchy on the need to create a food encyclopaedia as the second stage of this book, a task yet to begin in this country even today.

Ramasastrri could perhaps be considered by outsiders as an introvert but his colleagues know him to be otherwise. He was known particularly for his antipathy for compromise be it science or otherwise. His commitment to science and his insights in applying science were unique. It was not above him to participate in discussions on food standards with the central government and good-naturedly advise his fellow committee men that '... percentage contamination permissible in food grains is not the main concern. We should figure out what the contaminants are since cyanide and cow dung have different toxicological connotations.' He was fond of classical music. He leaves behind his wife, a son and a daughter.

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