

BOOK REVIEWS

Uphill All the Way: An Autobiography, B. Ramamurthi. Guardian Press, 38 Venkatesh Naicken Street, Chepauk, Chennai 600 005, India. Price: Rs 150.

An institution is a lengthened shadow of one man (Emerson). An autobiography, like the one by Wilder Penfield, *No Man Alone or Reminiscences and Reflections* by Jacob Chandy, both renowned neurosurgeons like B. Ramamurthi, is often a biography of an institution they created. This no doubt is made more interesting by personal anecdotes, episodes of personal struggle and description of moments of triumph and tribulations, that ultimately led to the establishment of a reputed institution. This is inevitable since the life of such individuals is so intricately and often emotionally linked to the institution they were associated with.

B. Ramamurthi, one of the pioneers of Indian neurosurgery, was born in a reasonably affluent family, his father being a popular and flourishing medical practitioner, in a small peaceful town – Tiruchirappalli on the banks of the river Kaveri. He lost his mother when he was five and a half years old. His step mother, unlike the much maligned Indian step mothers, was an exceptionally affectionate and caring one, to whom he and his family remained deeply attached till her demise. He traces his ancestry to three great Rishis – Angiras, Puruhutsa and Trasada and proudly attributes to his becoming a physician to this lineage and being born under the star *Sathabisak* – ‘a hundred physician’. This detailed description reflects two of his personality traits, which pervade the whole biography – deep roots and pride in traditional culture and a sense of history. The biography is full of historical vignets about the many persons – family, friends, teachers, students and ‘innumerable persons who made success possible’. While he is not short of praise for all such individuals, he is brutally blunt in criticizing those who in his opinion were impediments in his journey to the top. He is equally frank in describing the manner in which he unhesitatingly exploited his family connections and grateful patients in achieving his goals. As an example having passed the premedical examination with second or third rank in the University, it was no problem to get admission to the medical college. But on discovering that instead of the renowned Madras Medical College (MMC), he was admitted to the

newly-created Stanley Medical College, he immediately approached the Health Minister of Madras Presidency, a close friend of his father, and promptly got transferred to MMC. The biography is replete with such examples, whether it was to obtain specialized equipment or the seed money to initiate a dedicated institution. It is probably these episodes, which made him comment that he has known many people more brilliant and competent (*than himself*) not getting the success they deserve. Circumstances, opportunities, help from friends and divine help are real basis of achievement. While this may be so, going through the biography one cannot but perceive the other side of the coin, the unique personality traits, that must have contributed, equally if not more, to his achievements, which have made him a legend in his life time. A brilliant mind, unflinching confidence in himself, a pride in his country, an ability to pursue his goal with tenacity of purpose, an untiring quest to keep abreast of the latest developments in his speciality and allied fields and an unquenched thirst for doing better and better and moving higher and higher. The unstinted, and in many respects the unique support he got from his wife Indira Ramamurthi, herself a distinguished gynecologist, comes for repeated praise. What is, however, a distinctive feature of this biography, are the numerous thumb nail sketches of his many colleagues, both nationally and internationally, which virtually includes many of the important neuroscientists of the last 50–60 years, with whom he had personally interacted. His many students are likewise included in this narration. Interwoven between these accounts is the story of the beginning of neurosurgery at MMC with just four beds and limited operating facilities by courtesy of one of his many mentors, Col. Sangam Lal to an internationally known Madras Neurological Institute. The role of the lowliest clerks to that of his colleagues, grateful patients, the engineers, helpful bureaucrats and the politicians is described with an historical perspective of the time. For the reviewer these descriptions bring back nostalgic memories, reminding one of the many similar trials and tribulations encountered a *de-jà-vue*, during the pursuit of an identical goal of establishing an emerging speciality, building an institution of excellence, in the face of administrative road blocks, obstructions by jealous colleagues, and perpetual paucity of resources so common in our country. It

would therefore, be of great interest to the countless young aspirants struggling to fulfill such dreams.

This brings me to one painful aspect of the country's current malaise, which has been repeatedly referred to by the author. Everyone who wishes to create an institution of excellence, anywhere in the world, goes through a hard struggle, interspersed with moments of hope, despair, agony and ecstasy, during the journey. In this respect one can say that the task is even more arduous, the march more halting and demanding greater efforts and fortitude in our country. Nevertheless success is possible as has been repeatedly demonstrated in all walks of life by a galaxy of dedicated individuals. However, the tragic part of the story, which should be a subject of study by sociologists, educationists and administrators, is how the tireless efforts of years in achieving such goals are destroyed virtually overnight by wrong administrative decisions, faulty system of selection, promotion of mediocrity in the name of democracy. Ramamurthi and his achievements will no doubt be admired, envied and be a source of inspiration for the younger generation. But the fate of the excellent institution he created which he saw crumple with his own eyes will only generate cynicism and distrust in the current administrative milieu. To succeed in this environment is no doubt an uphill task but to witness its fall is unbearably painful. The agony is reflected towards the end of the biography, ‘A small help rendered years earlier created the Institute of Neurology and a small mistake committed twenty years earlier (s.c. later) destroyed the Institute. Amazing are the ways of providence’. No doubt Madras Neurological Institute acquired a global recognition as a centre of excellence. Regrettably it would be hard to count it amongst the top few in the country today.

I have enjoyed reading this book and I am sure it will be of immense interest to the medical professionals in general, the neuroscientists in particular and all those who are concerned with creation and maintenance of institutions of excellence.

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