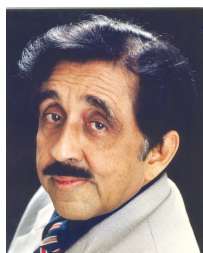


## Ravi Martanda Varma (1922–2015)

Professor Ravi Martanda Varma who passed away in Bangalore on 10 March 2015 was one of the handful of pioneers who developed the speciality of neurosurgery in India.



He was born on 7 September 1922 in Mavelikara which is the only place in Kerala to bear the name of its legendary king who visits his erstwhile subjects on *Onam* day. He was a great grandson of Raja Ravi Varma who had married from the royal family in Mavelikara known for its traditions in scholarship, literature and music. Varma was taken as a child by his parents to Thiruvananthapuram where his aunt had lived as the Queen Regent of Travancore. He had his early education in the SMV School and 'Inter-Science' in the University College which were prestigious institutions in Travancore. He graduated in medicine from the Madras Medical College in 1947 and was drawn to surgery even while serving as a house officer. This was no surprise because surgery attracts individuals whose interest in medicine is humanitarian rather than scientific and who love one's fellow beings. The fascination grew as he sensed the excitement of the operating room and toiled in the wards of the General Hospital, Chennai because Varma was at heart a craftsman who loved using his hands and an artist whose mind worked on visual images (Figure 1). He moved to UK for surgical training which began in general surgery and culminated in the highly sought after speciality of neurosurgery. Over a nine-year stay, Varma served in several hospitals in the UK but the Frenchay Hospital in Bristol was the pre-eminent centre which provided him intensive training in neurosurgery and the confidence to set up a centre on his own initiative. As a senior registrar at the Frenchay, he was responsible for running a large neurosurgical service including emergencies and supervising

the training of younger surgeons under the guidance of a Senior Consultant. He became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and was fully ready and bursting with enthusiasm to set out on his own in India when an unexpected offer came from the All India Institute for Mental Health (AIIMH) in Bangalore of a Readership in neurosurgery with the implicit understanding that he would also build the Department! Varma accepted the offer with gusto and looked on it as an opportunity to return to India where neurosurgery was in a state of infancy with no more than three or four centres devoted to the speciality exclusively. Varma's effort against odds in the AIIMH soon blossomed into another noted centre for neurosurgery thanks to his technical panache, relentless effort and a species of natural goodness which made colleagues at all levels to join hands with him. Even as the surgical and teaching activities grew and expanded, Varma became Professor and Head of Neurosurgery at AIIMH, a position he held for eight years. This was a surgical phase marked by innovation when he devised a topometer-guide scaled technique of percutaneous chemothalamotomy for relieving the tremor and rigidity in patients with Parkinson's disease. The technique was simple, safe and cheap, sans imported equipment and hospitalization. Though superseded by newer technologies, Varma's contribution was a landmark which won professional recognition in the nineteen sixties.

Varma's tenure at AIIMH climaxed in 1974 when his prolonged effort to amalgamate the Institute and the State Mental Hospital into a single institution succeeded despite much scepticism, and the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS) was



**Figure 1.** Queen Regent Setu Lakshmi Bayi, portrait by college student Varma.

born with Varma as the Director. While sceptics questioned the scientific basis of joining a Central Institute focussed on teaching and research in neuro sciences with a state mental hospital and dismissed it as a chimera, Varma's philosophic mind rebelled against the duality of brain and mind and saw instead a single reality expressing in two interacting modes of existence. The pursuit of neuroscience and treatment of the mentally ill, according to him, were a vivid demonstration of complementarity. He rejoiced when NIMHANS grew in stature and became an Institution of National Importance in later years. He served briefly as the Deputy Director General of Health Services in Delhi prior to his retirement. Distinctions such as Padma Shri, Fellowship of the Indian Academy of Sciences, Karnataka Rajyotsava Award, Visvesvaraya Award and honorary doctorate from Mysore University sat lightly on him.

Varma was admired as a surgeon, institution builder, administrator, innovator, and patriarch of his family in Mavelikara. He was all this, yet he was more. He had a genius for friendship and for reaching out to the goodness in everyone, friends and strangers alike. No one saw him in a temper, and no harsh words, leave aside taunts, ever escaped from his lips even under provocation. A nephew recalled an eye witness experience of the warmth of his personality. Varma ran into a friend whom he had not met for many years in the Chennai airport even though they both lived in Bangalore! They chatted excitedly for hours over cups of coffee in the restaurant when the friend suddenly exclaimed 'that announcement said my flight has just departed. When is your flight?' The unperturbed answer came from Varma 'Oh! mine left an hour ago!'. Both laughed heartily.

Bhartrihari wrote 'Few are the good souls who soak their mind, words and deeds in virtue; who please the three worlds by doing good to others; who make a mountain out of the atomic virtues in others; and who, in that process, fill themselves with consummate happiness'. That would sit well with Varma.

He is survived by his wife Malathi and two sons Ravigopal and Sashigopal. Ravi is a neurosurgeon.

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