

# GB Nair: The scientist Calcutta adopted

**ABHIJIT CHOWDHURY**

Calcutta has too often belonged, scientifically, not only to those who were born here, but also to some whom the city adopted, only to harness the fragrance their spirits emitted.

We lost Gopinath Balkrish Nair — GB, as he was to me and to many here — this Tuesday, September 8.

He had been down for almost a decade with a protracted illness that had taken a toll on his brilliant mind and cognition. He was only seventy-two when he left us.

The young man who arrived in Calcutta from Kerala in 1977 made this city his home. Through diligence, merit and scientific insight, he enriched its remarkable traditions of inquiry.

His last years were spent in Thiruvananthapuram, but his scientific life belonged, in large measure, to Calcutta.

I met him in the late 1980s, when I was seeking a place in this city that would give something more to my cortex than what my job alone dictated.

Medical professionals in this country are trained to write good prescriptions, but are rarely taught to raise the questions that frame research — unless curiosity becomes a personal necessity.

I came to know that the National Institute of Cholera and Enteric Diseases (NICED) might quench that thirst, and I landed up knocking on the door of his laboratory. He taught me. More importantly, he introduced me to a brave new world. He did the same for hundreds of young scien-



**Gopinath Balkrish Nair**

tists who passed through his laboratory.

There was a gentleness about GB that drew you back to him — sometimes because you needed him, sometimes because you had an excuse, and sometimes simply because you wanted to talk.

He possessed what I would call assertive humility: the quiet confidence that comes from knowledge, without any need to display it.

GB belonged to one of Calcutta's most remarkable scientific traditions.

He meticulously followed the footprints and carried the mantle of the great lineage of Sambhunath De, S. K. Pal and Dilip Mahalanabis, who helped make Calcutta a world centre of diarrhoeal disease research.

GB carried their tradition into a new age. His achievements were formidable. He played a major role in the discovery and characterisation of *Vibrio cholerae* O139 Bengal, a new cholera serogroup that emerged in the early 1990s.

He made important contributions to the understanding of *Campylobacter* as an enteric pathogen in India and to the study of pathogenic lineages

of *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*.

His work helped illuminate how microscopic organisms evolve, move through populations and emerge as threats to human health.

His scientific contributions brought him the Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Prize, India's highest scientific honour, and international recognition, including election to the US National Academy of Sciences.

Yet honours are an inadequate measure of GB.

What he gave his students was something harder to quantify: the trait of asking questions. He taught that science begins not with an answer, but with the courage to be dissatisfied with the answer already available.

A bacterium under a microscope was never merely a bacterium. It could be the beginning of a question about disease, evolution, society and human survival.

The city has had a peculiar generosity towards science. It has allowed people from elsewhere to become part of its intellectual memory.

GB was one of them. That is how great teachers survive. Their laboratories acquire new occupants. Their discoveries enter textbooks. Their students move on. But something of them remains in the questions their students continue to ask.

GB came to Calcutta from Kerala. The city adopted him. He, in turn, gave the city something precious. And somewhere in the long scientific memory of Calcutta — from Ross and Raman to De and Mahalanabis, and now to G. B. Nair — his name will remain that of a man who came from elsewhere, stayed, and helped make this city a little more intelligent.

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