

Prof. L. P. Agarwal: *The Father, the Son, and the Spirit*



Prof. L. P. Agarwal (1922–2004)

"First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win." – Mahatma Gandhi

"A rare combination of clinician, teacher, researcher, public health advocate, consummate planner and a visionary leader who pioneered many new directions for Indian health care. He was a true patriot who worked relentlessly to place Indian ophthalmology in global leadership. He paved the path for generations of ophthalmologists to realize their full potential and excel." – Dr. G. N. Rao, Founder-Chair, L V Prasad Eye Institute, Hyderabad, India and alumnus of Dr. Rajendra Prasad Centre for Ophthalmic Sciences, New Delhi, India.

On the 25th birthday of Netaji, a cold night of January 23, 1922, another leader was born in the city of Lucknow. Although one waged a war against colonialism and imperialism, the other fought for the independence of our nation from the clasp of blindness and the need for doctors to be trained abroad. Professor Lalit Prakash Agarwal was the light from the beacon that seems to grow brighter in the face of the approaching storm clouds, the flag that stands tall in defiance of a raging army, and a battle cry louder than the clamor of shields.

Prof. Agarwal completed his MBBS in 1946 from the prestigious King George Medical College (KGMC), Lucknow.^[1] Despite opposition from his father, a government employee, he joined the cause of independence, in support of the '*Bharat Chhodo Andolan*', while in his second year of training.^[2] When he expressed his desire to go abroad for further training, his father refused to support him. "*This will be the last time I ask for anything,*" he implored. A black sheep of the family, perhaps, his father knew the conviction and determination in his heart and gave a sum of 10,000 Rupees to his son. With that, he set to sail for London.

He earned his Diploma in Ophthalmic Medicine and Surgery from the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons in London and Diploma in Ophthalmology from Oxford in 1947.^[1,3] To support himself, he worked as a porter aside from his ophthalmic training. There were days without hot water and nights without ration adequate to sustain the bitter cold, and on one such night, in angst, he wrote to his father, wondering if he should return home without finishing his program. He received a single line in reply that saw him through many trials throughout his life, "*I did not know my son was a coward.*" He toiled and pursued, and at the end of his training, his mentor, Robert Cecil Davenport (1893–1961), the Dean of the Moorfields Postgraduate Institute, wrote, "*Of all the Indian postgraduates who have been at the Moorfields since the war, there has been no keener man, no man who has done better in his examinations or work harder to gain experience in every branch of the subject.*"^[1] Prof. Agarwal returned to India and finished his MS from KGMC in 1949.

He joined Provincial Medical Service and started his career in Bijnore as a doctor and later moved on to S N Medical College, Agra, as a Lecturer and then to G. S. V. Medical College, Kanpur as a Reader. He often improvised with instruments and published notable papers during this time. His wife, Dr. Savitri Agarwal, was an accomplished gynecologist, and together, they had a flourishing practice in Kanpur, with a comfortable home and horse-driven carriage. However, he was meant for greater things, and he knew that. Being more than qualified for the post, he tried for 7 years for Professorship since his time in Agra. He was finally selected at the age of 37 to become the founder Professor of Ophthalmology at All India Institute of Medical Sciences (A.I.I.M.S.). The family moved to New Delhi, accepting a much harsher and constrained lifestyle.

He built the Department of Ophthalmology, brick by brick, paving the road to his final destination [Fig. 1]. In 1962, he was inducted as a fellow of the National Academy of Medical Sciences and a life member of the elite International Academy of Ophthalmology.^[1] Prof. Agarwal wanted to build a center for excellence to train doctors so that they did not have to seek

"Prof. LP Agarwal was a great visionary, an excellent teacher and administrator. He made the first super speciality centre at AIIMS, creating Dr. Rajendra Prasad Centre as the apex centre for national training in ophthalmology. He sent his faculty for training under the best experts in the world and then provided facilities to create the same level of expertise at Dr. Rajendra Prasad Centre for both basic and clinical sciences in each subspeciality of ophthalmology. He was instrumental in establishing the name of the centre as a key research hub with international scientific publications. His key contribution in nation building was the development and implementation of the national programme for control of blindness which has helped to restore vision, alleviate suffering of millions in our country. My humble salutations to this great 'karam yogi'" – Prof. V. K. Dada, Former Chief, Dr. R. P. Centre for Ophthalmic Sciences, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, India.

it in foreign shores. On March 10, 1967, his vision took shape as he established Dr. Rajendra Prasad Centre for Ophthalmic Sciences (RPC), named after the first President of India [Fig. 1]. The center was built to achieve the goals of eye health planning, academics, and clinical care, keeping in mind the needs of the country while inculcating the best from leading eye institutes from around the world.^[4]

The institute was his child, and he tended to it like a father. He was always available for the students, much to the woe of his wife. He was a hard teacher but brought out the best from his students [Fig. 2]. Even as a lecturer, he would stay up with the students writing their theses. At RPC, he introduced the concept of multiple ophthalmological sub-specialities. His contemporaries credit him with an aura unseen in any other, making them follow his novel ideas. His students have all etched their names in history; there can be no greater achievement for a mentor. In 2003, L. V. Prasad Eye Institute presented him with "Outstanding Teacher Award".^[1] He gave equal importance to the clinical and research aspects in the curriculum of doctors. He was on the editorial board of the journal *Ophthalmologica*. He wrote more than 20 books for residents, including *Principles of Optics and Refraction*, *Essentials of Ophthalmology*, and *Eye Diseases*.^[1] He achieved international acclaim with hundreds of important research works to his credit. Understanding the importance of paramedics in health care, he established facilities for the training of optometrists.^[1,3]

Professor Agarwal was the honorary ophthalmic surgeon to the President of India in 1962 and became the first ophthalmic advisor in the Ministry of Health. He drafted the first National Programme for the Prevention of Visual Impairment and Control of Blindness, now called National Programme for Control of Blindness, in 1976, making India the first country to do so.^[1-3] He was also the President of the National Society for the Prevention of Blindness. He was devoted to the cause of eye donation and set up the National Eye Bank in R. P. Centre. [Fig. 3] Realizing the shortage of cornea in the country, he



Figure 1: Prof. L. P. Agarwal with (a) in a conference in Egypt and (b) examining the proposed model of construction for R.P. Centre.

actively collaborated with Sri Lanka for donation of corneas. He was also an expert advisor for WHO for planning programs for prevention of blindness in the Afro-Asian region.^[1,3] His growth was meteoric, and in 1979, he was appointed the Dean of A.I.I.M.S. (1977–1979) and then the Director of A.I.I.M.S. from 1979 to 1984.^[2,4] Prof. Agarwal was the Vice President and member of the Executive Committee on Postgraduate

"Prof. Agarwal was arguably the first ophthalmologist from India who can be categorized as a "Clinician scientist" (a rare breed in India even today). He was passionate about excellence and worked relentlessly to sow the seeds for this at the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Centre. He perhaps, more than anybody else, created many academic leaders in ophthalmology from India. He was a passionate mentor who created opportunities to scores of youngsters to excel in their careers. He introduced the science of Ophthalmology in the country and shaped the way for modern ophthalmology practice in the country." – Dr. G. N. Rao, Founder-Chair, L V Prasad Eye Institute, Hyderabad, and alumnus of Dr. Rajendra Prasad Centre for Ophthalmic Sciences, A.I.I.M.S.



Figure 2: Prof. L. P. Agarwal was a fearless leader and an undisputed visionary



Figure 3: Prof. L. P. Agarwal drafted the first National Programme for the Prevention of Visual Impairment and Control of Blindness and set up the National Eye Bank in R. P. Centre

Ophthalmic Education of United Kingdom (1968–1978), an executive member of the International Council of Ophthalmology (1976–1986), and the President of All India Ophthalmological Society (1977).^[1]

His date of birth draws inevitable war imageries. Far from his public image was a man who was a father first to his only daughter, Kavita. Far from his towering persona was a man who raised a child while his wife was caught up with work, tying her hair, cooking, teaching her to knit, helping her with school work, and taking her with him to work even to Rashtrapati Bhavan because he could not leave her back alone and later indexing her book. Far from a formidable leader was a steadfast supporter of a child who wanted to stay up at night to read or wanted to pursue a field completely different from her distinguished parents. He enjoyed playing bridge and tennis. He was fond of *paan* and sweets at the end of his meals and was a firm believer in the principles of Bhagwad Gita, possessing a heavily underlined copy that he passed on to his daughter.

A passionate chess player, he was never the pawn but the knight on the checkerboard of life, always two steps ahead of his time. He was organizing a conference on October 9, 2004 when

time bellowed checkmate, just about louder than his booming laughter, all too familiar to his well-wishers. Dr. R. P. Centre, the apex government ophthalmological institute, is a timeless reminder of his legacy, with 300 beds, 24 hour emergency services, and caring for nearly 6 lakh patients annually, producing exemplary doctors since the time of its conception, achieving the top spot in the list of institutes for ophthalmic training year after year in India and matching, if not surpassing, the quality of teaching in institutes of developed countries.

The game might be over, but he lost not! The Ophthalmic Research Association library of RPC is named after Professor L. P. Agarwal, and every alumnus bows his head in gratitude and reverence to the Father, the Son and the Spirit of Ophthalmology in India. Amen.

"A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history." Mahatma Gandhi

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