

### A living legend with an extraordinary vision who changed the perspective of ophthalmology in India – Padma Bhushan Dr. Sengamedu Srinivasa Badrinath



**Padma Bhushan Dr. Sengamedu Srinivasa Badrinath**

The current practice of ophthalmology in India owes a great debt to Dr. S. S. Badrinath's passion for science, which revolutionized ophthalmic practice by combining clinical practice, academics, community eye care, and eye research. Dr. Badrinath founded "Sankara Nethralaya" (SN), a tertiary eye care institute in 1978, to provide comprehensive eye care of highest standards to all sections of the community. It is worth mentioning that the subspecialty practice in ophthalmology was nearly nonexistent in the year 1978. Due to Dr. Badrinath's vision to develop separate subspecialties within ophthalmology, he could create a team of highly skilled professionals who could work for a common vision.

Born on February 24, 1940 in Chennai (then Madras), Dr. Sengamedu Srinivasa Badrinath had his schooling in Chennai. As a child, Dr. S. S. Badrinath observed blindness up close when one of his relatives who was blind in both eyes came to stay with his family. The helplessness of a person without eyesight became deep-rooted in the young child's memory. According to Dr. Badrinath, this childhood impression of blindness lingered in his subconscious mind and led to his decision of becoming an ophthalmologist. Having graduated from the Madras Medical College in 1964, Dr. Badrinath pursued his graduate studies in ophthalmology in the USA

at Grasslands Hospital, New York University Postgraduate Medical School, and Brooklyn Eye and Ear Infirmary until 1968. He worked as a fellow in the vitreoretinal services of Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, Boston, under Dr. Charles L. Schepens, the "father of modern retinal surgery," from 1968 to 1970. He passed the examination for the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons (Canada) and the American Board in Ophthalmology in 1969 and 1970, respectively.

Following his return to India in 1970, Dr. Badrinath worked for a period of 6 years at the Voluntary Health Services (VHS), Adyar, Chennai, as a consultant. He set up his private practice in ophthalmology and vitreoretinal surgery at the H. M. Hospital (1970–1972) and Vijaya Hospital, Chennai (1973–1978). His spiritual journey began in 1974 when His Holiness Jagadguru Jayendra Saraswathi Swamigal, the Acharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Mutt, met a group of young doctors and spoke to them about the need to establish hospitals in India that provide world-class care for our citizens at affordable costs. These hospitals, he suggested, should be run with a missionary spirit, with the objective of providing quality care equally to the haves and have-nots. Dr. Badrinath's association with Maha Periyava started when he performed a cataract surgery on his spiritual guru Sri Chandrasekerendra Saraswathi Swamigal.

At the age of 38, in 1978, Dr. Badrinath founded SN as a unit of the Medical Research Foundation, as ordained by His Holiness Sri Jayendra Saraswathi Swamigal, and since then, there has been no looking back. For over four decades, Dr. Badrinath has been tirelessly working to improve the lives of people not only in India but from several other countries as well [Figs. 1-3]. For his outstanding contributions, he has been honored with some of the most prestigious awards, including the Padma Sri (1983) and Padma Bhushan (1999) by the Government of India.

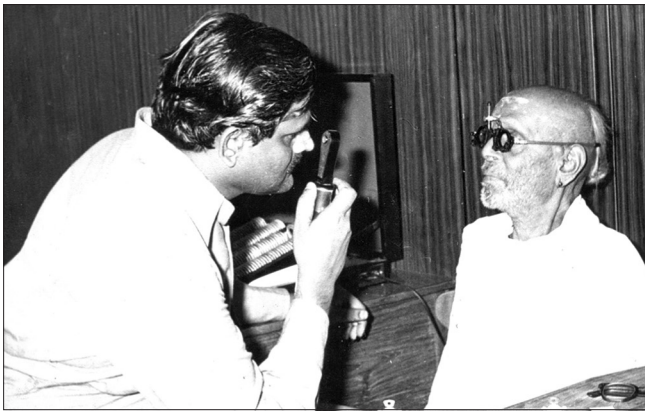
Dr. Badrinath belongs to a different generation of medical men, difficult to see in today's times. He simply will not compromise on his values, come what may. Besides, he is compassionate, humble, a perfect taskmaster, and a master strategist, all on a moral high ground. Assisted by the team at SN, he has taken the institute to unseen heights of excellence. The following "Navrathna" qualities of Dr. S. S. Badrinath, fondly called "Chief," have helped him create an international center of excellence, a model hospital, a cutting-edge research center, a dedicated postgraduate institute, and a compassionate charitable institution, all rolled into one, that is, SN.

#### **Vision**

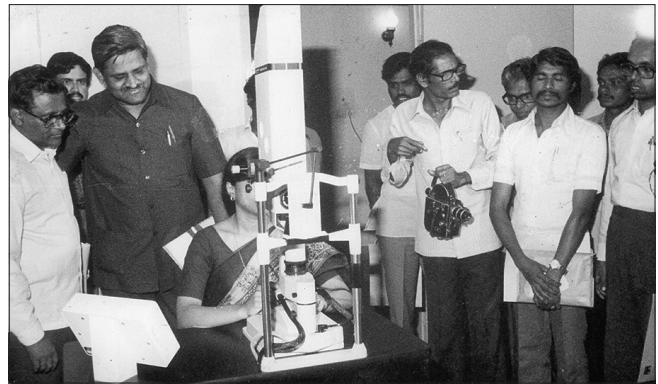
Dr. Badrinath is a true visionary. He could identify the hidden talents in his teammates and students. As a head of the institute, he nurtured those talents that resulted in building of an excellent team of ophthalmologists, which took SN and Indian ophthalmologists to greater heights.

#### **Inspiration**

Equally important as having a vision is the ability to convey that vision to others and get them excited about it. This means maintaining a positive, yet realistic, presence within the organization, helping the team members stay motivated and engaged and constantly reminding them what it is that they are working for. He inspired each and every member of SN family and its vast alumni. Many of the alumni have now created their own institutes, which are centers of excellence throughout the country.



**Figure 1:** Dr. S. S. Badrinath examining a patient



**Figure 2:** Dr S S Badrinath with the first Nd:YAG (Neodymium-doped yttrium aluminium garnet) laser in India



**Figure 3:** The evolution of Sankara Nethralaya and its branches over the years

**Self-discipline**

Self-discipline is the ability to push yourself forward, stay motivated, and take action, regardless of how you are feeling, physically or emotionally. In the latter years, even when Dr. Badrinath was not keeping the best of his health, he refused to let his spirits down and continued to strive for the betterment of eye care. This sense of discipline got imbibed in the processes followed at SN and by his students who continued to practice it even when they finished their training. He always led the team by his own example. His personal integrity and hard

work drew attention of many philanthropists, who helped SN at various stages of its growth.

**Excellent Clinician**

Dr. Badrinath’s clinical skills were par excellence. This drew patients from across the country and neighboring countries. He strived to get the best instrumentation which was available, many a times by generous donations of well-wishers, patients, and donors. He was a very meticulous surgeon, a compassionate clinician, a very good counselor, and a rapt

listener. He created the environment where best of ethical patient care could be practiced.

He practiced and taught the concept of meticulous attention to details and adopting an uncompromising attitude when it came to patient care using a humane and sympathetic approach.

### Strategic Thinking

He believed that creating good clinicians would improve ophthalmology in India. He developed the training programs for various ophthalmic subspecialties. Based on the curriculum of optometry in Berkley, he created one of the first optometry schools, Elite School of Optometry. He believed in India-centric research and created a state-of-the-art basic science research facility in ophthalmology, Vision Research Foundation, at SN. He realized the importance of electronic medical records (EMRs) and collaborated with Tata Consultancy Services to create an in-house EMR system. SN was probably one of the first centers in India to become paperless way back in 2007.

### No-Nonsense Man

Dr. Badrinath is a taskmaster whose commitment to work was 100%. Also, he set the same standards for his staff and students. He was hard on negligence, but very patient if genuine mistakes were made. This improved the overall quality of eye care at SN. The same standards were also ingrained in the alumni.

### Open-mindedness and Creativity

He always believed in out-of-the-box thinking. It may be just creating a rural folk song (Villipattu) on diabetic retinopathy to create awareness among the rural folks or collaborating with the Indian Space Research organization (ISRO) to start the country's first teleophthalmology van or in collaborating with Indian Institute of technology (IIT), Chennai to create the first mobile surgical van to do cataract surgeries in rural India. He strongly believed that through technology, one could reach the unreachable.

### Generous Mentoring

Of more than 1500 ophthalmologists who have been trained at SN, nearly 300 had a direct opportunity to be mentored by Dr. Badrinath. He is a very patient and an excellent mentor. He taught the nuances of vitreoretinal surgery to his students, who themselves are recognized as great teachers today. He had the power to convert an ordinary student to an extraordinary clinician. He was an example to all his students and taught an important lesson that hard work is the key to success and nothing in life comes easy.

### Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement, also called continual improvement, is the ongoing improvement of products, services, or processes through incremental and breakthrough improvements. He

implemented many ideas with a single purpose: *Improve patient care*. Not all ideas were successful, but all created an impact on the growth of SN. He encouraged his team to acquire new skills through overseas fellowships. His focus was on scrupulous and compassionate service, rather than the numbers and spreading the system too thin in the process. He believed in reciprocal work culture, where when given the best, they, in turn, give the best.

Today, Dr. Badrinath continues to inspire thousands of eye care professionals globally and in India. Indeed, there is no doubt that Dr. Badrinath's own personal life and the destiny of eye care industry in India would have been different, had he not chosen to abide by his commitment to the Acharya of Kanchi Mutt. It is a real privilege to pen this humble tribute to our Mentor, Dr. Sengamedu Srinivasa Badrinath, a living legend with an extraordinary vision who changed the perspective of ophthalmology in India, knowing fully well the limitations of words to convey the true persona and lifetime work of a giant in medicine in general and ophthalmology in particular.

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