

Prof Lalit Prakash Agarwal (1922-2004)—The Planner of the First-Ever National Blindness Control Program of the World

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ABSTRACT: Prof Lalit Prakash Agarwal drafted the National Programme for Prevention of Visual Impairment and Control of Blindness (now called National Programme for Control of Blindness) in India in 1976, first of its kind in the world. With his vision well ahead of his time, he brought the concept of super-specialty in Indian ophthalmology. He founded Dr. Rajendra Prasad Centre for Ophthalmic Sciences, the apex governmental ophthalmological center of India. His contributions to modern Indian Ophthalmology were so profound that we may not be mistaken by calling him “the father of modern Indian Ophthalmology.”

KEYWORDS: National Programme for Control of Blindness, Dr. Rajendra Prasad Centre for Ophthalmic Sciences, retinitis pigmentosa, corneal blindness, corneal ulcer, glaucoma, trachoma, entropion

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Prof Lalit Prakash Agarwal was a visionary who planned the first-ever blindness control program of the world. He was the founder chief of Dr. Rajendra Prasad Centre for Ophthalmic Sciences (RPC), All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi—the apex governmental ophthalmological institute in India.

An Astute Academician and Teacher

Dr Agarwal was born in Lucknow on 23 January 1922.^{1,2} He completed his Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery (MBBS) from King George's Medical College (KGMC), Lucknow, in 1946. Then, Dr Agarwal went to the United Kingdom for further studies where he earned a Diploma in Ophthalmic Medicine and Surgery and a Diploma in Ophthalmology.² He returned to India to complete Master of Surgery (MS, Ophthalmology) from KGMC in 1949. He was the founder professor of the Department of Ophthalmology of AIIMS, New Delhi, in February 1959 which he served until February 1984. Under the dynamic leadership of Prof Agarwal, RPC, named after the first President of India, was established on 10 March 1967 as a national center for ophthalmic science.³ Dr Agarwal was an enthusiastic teacher and a meticulous clinician. He was awarded the “Outstanding Teacher Award” on the foundation day of LV Prasad Eye Institute, Hyderabad, in 2003.

A Visionary and Leader

Dr Agarwal's visions and concepts about training, leadership, and research were well ahead of time. He brought the idea of multiple subspecialties of ophthalmology in India.² A very energetic and hardworking human being, Prof Agarwal strived to create his dream ophthalmology center in RPC



Figure 1. A portrait of Prof Lalit Prakash Agarwal by the optometry students (2013-2016) of Dr. Rajendra Prasad Centre for Ophthalmic Sciences.

within India itself so that Indian ophthalmologists could get the state-of-the-art training without the need to go abroad.² He was the Dean of AIIMS, New Delhi, from 1977 to 1979, and Director of the same institute from 1979 to 1984.

The Planner of the First-Ever National Program to Control Blindness

He was such farsighted and visionary that he envisaged the need for a national program by the Government of India (GOI) to prevent avoidable blindness. He was the first



honorary Ophthalmic Advisor to GOI, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in 1975.¹ It was his advocacy, guidance, and vision that made India the first country in the world to start a National Programme for Prevention of Visual Impairment and Control of Blindness⁴ (now called National Programme for Control of Blindness, NPCB) in 1976. He highlighted the economic overburden of avoidable blindness and benefits of controlling, curing, and preventing blindness in India and in the world. With his astonishing far-sight and practical planning, he led the Steering Committee of World Health Organization (WHO) for development of global program for prevention of blindness. From his vast clinical experience, he noted that corneal blindness was an important cause of avoidable blindness in India. He established the National Eye Bank in RPC, AIIMS. The mastermind of NPCB realized that world-class training of optometrists and paramedical personnel was very important in delivering holistic care of ophthalmic patients. Courses for teaching and delivering competent optometrists to the nation were created in RPC under his leadership.

A Prolific Writer

Prof Agarwal was a prolific writer and a dedicated researcher. He authored several books (around 22), including *Principles of Optics and Refraction*, *Essentials of Ophthalmology*, and *Eye Diseases*. He published more than 350 research papers in various professional publications. His research interests included cataract,^{5,6} corneal ulcers,^{7,8} fundamental research in vision,^{9,10} glaucoma,^{11,12} microbiology,^{13,14} pharmacology,^{15,16} retinitis pigmentosa¹⁷ and trachoma.^{18,19} He described a new surgical technique for entropion.²⁰ Prof Agarwal served on the editorial boards of various international peer-reviewed esteemed journals of ophthalmology, including "Ophthalmologica" in 1975.

An Inspiration

Dr Agarwal received the most prestigious awards in ophthalmology. He was the honorary Ophthalmic Surgeon to the President of India in 1962. He was also the vice president and executive member of the Executive Committee on Postgraduate Ophthalmic Education of United Kingdom for 10 years from 1968 to 1978. He was an executive member of the International Council of Ophthalmology from 1976 to 1986. Prof Agarwal became the President of All India Ophthalmological Society (AIOS) in 1977. He was awarded Gold medal for research in trachoma eradication from WHO in 1982. Dr Agarwal received lifetime achievement awards from AIOS and Delhi Ophthalmological Society. He was an energetic organizer and enthusiastic worker. Even on the last day of his life, he completed a conference at India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, on 9 October, 2004, just 1 hour before his death.¹ He was awarded All Time services award from GOI in 2005. He was an inspiration to many ophthalmologists. 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."² Prof Madan Mohan, ex-Chief of RPC and the Director of Mohan eye institute says,

"Dr Agarwal was a dynamic person. He always planned to make us self-sufficient and to reduce our dependence on foreign countries. He worked very hard and always thought of development and improvement of the Department. He inspired us to work diligently too."²

According to Dr G N Rao, the founder of LV Prasad Eye Institute, "Professor L P Agarwal is among the gems of Global Ophthalmology. In Indian Ophthalmology, his record is unsurpassed. Prof Agarwal was a superb clinician and an outstanding teacher."

A Family Man

Prof Agarwal got his inspiration from his better half Dr Savita Agarwal, a renowned gynecologist and obstetrician. He is survived by his daughter Kavita A Sharma, granddaughter Molshree Sharma, and grandson Parijat Sharma.¹

Conclusions

Prof Agarwal's death was a tremendous loss to Indian and global ophthalmology. However, he remains immortal through his time-changing concepts, blindness control programs, and his principles. His contributions to modern Indian ophthalmology were so profound that we may not be mistaken by calling him "the father of modern Indian Ophthalmology."

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Author Contributions

KT conceived and designed the manuscript, wrote the first draft of the manuscript, contributed to the writing of the manuscript, agree with manuscript results and conclusions, made critical revisions, and approved the final version. The author reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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