

The Woman Who Ran AIIMS

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The Memoirs of a Medical Pioneer

Sneh Bhargava

 juggernaut

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For my parents
My husband – Amar
My children – Anjulika and Sandeep
My siblings – the Taneja siblings

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Author's Note

I was inspired to write my memoir at the age of 94 by an Abraham Lincoln quote: 'In the end, it's not the years in your life that count, it's the life in your years.' I retired from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in my sixtieth year, the only woman director in the institute's history, and had no thought of writing anything. I felt I had not done anything very special, only discharged my duties passionately and created a brand that I hoped would grow stronger and maintain its position as the best hospital in the country. Throughout my career as a doctor, both before and after AIIMS, my motivating force was to honour the education that my parents had made sacrifices for – an education that was the best that money could buy – and to repay the trust they had placed in my abilities. My parents provided me with a Western education and Eastern values, and I faced no gender bias from them at any stage of my life. It fills me with admiration to think of how fiercely forward-looking and progressive they were despite the deeply patriarchal society they lived in during the early decades of the twentieth century.

Over the years, dear friends from the medical profession urged me to write about my career and experiences. They all offered to help me with the task and kept encouraging me, but ultimately, I had to have the will and desire to recollect my

life's journey, and it was then that Abraham Lincoln's remark struck me.

One of the main reasons for my reluctance was my failure to keep a diary or notes on my long and active life, a failure that was perhaps influenced by one of my father's favourite sayings: *Neki karo aur kuein me daalo*, which means 'do good and forget about it; do not expect any reward'. What I did have, however, was a notebook that I always kept in the pocket of my white coat, titled 'Mistaken Diagnosis', in which I religiously took detailed notes as to why I made a particular mistake. I shared these experiences with my students so that they could learn as much from them as I had, so that the mistakes were never repeated. But even here, I wondered why anyone would be interested in reading about my mistakes given that technology had moved forward so much from when I started down the untrodden path of diagnostics radiology in India. For the uninitiated, this is a medical speciality that uses imaging to create pictures of the inside of the body to help diagnose illnesses.

By 1990, I had retired from AIIMS. A century had passed since the discovery of X-rays by Röntgen in 1895, and that year, I chaired a national exhibition celebrating radiology decade by decade, chronicling its journey from the early days when X-rays were used to detect tumours that the eye could not see to diagnosing the actual molecules in those tumours by magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). My friends kept pushing me to write my memoir, but I was just too busy. After my retirement from AIIMS, I was involved in teaching and patient care at two

hospitals. I have never had an idle day in my life, right into my 90s. I had no time to pick up my pen. Then Covid-19 struck and enforced leisure on me when the government ordered senior citizens to stay at home. As a super-senior citizen, I was forced to comply, even though I was healthy and active, but it was this enforced period of inactivity that finally prompted me to put pen to paper and record all the juggling and balancing involved in my trinity of responsibilities – teaching, research and patient care, and as a daughter, sister, wife and mother. As director of AIIMS, I had an even larger canvas to cover, which involved dealing with politicians. I had the pleasure of dealing with nine politicians as health ministers and five secretaries in my six-year tenure.

My husband Amar Nath and my family gave me all the support I needed at all times, without me ever having to ask for it. At times, nothing was as important as wearing a mother's cap, and at others, work took precedence owing to the oath I had taken, like many of my generation, to serve society to the best of my ability. As I started writing, I realized I had a story about how I had built up the radiodiagnosis department at AIIMS to be one of the best – if not the best – in the country. This guided and inspired many others to raise their standards. To my great pride, I was considered one of the pillars of the team that built AIIMS as an institution that worked for India's poor. My time at AIIMS was a time of constraints and limited funds and, to put it bluntly, of gross neglect of the health sector. From the 1950s till the 1990s, the health budget allocated for patient care and education was only 0.9 per cent of India's GDP, and the bureaucracy seemed to resent giving even that tiny sum. Contrast this with the World Health Organization's (WHO's) recommendation that health should represent 9–13

per cent of the GDP. We could only plead with the powers that be, and I spared no effort in doing so and then making the most of what I managed to prise out of them. My goal was to train the next generation, creating health manpower for the nation because our future depended on it.

As director of AIIMS, my job was to expand and develop teaching, research and patient care, which was the responsibility that Parliament had entrusted to us. I have tried in my memoir to illustrate how I provided leadership, both in the radiology department and as director of this institution. The obstacles kept arising, I kept overcoming them and the institution kept growing. It gives me great pride to hear that generations of students regard the years of my directorship from 1984 to 1990 as a 'golden period'.

All I can say without the slightest hesitation is that I endeavoured to discharge my duty with dedication and passion. I leave it to the reader to judge my contribution.

I would like to thank my partners – they are far too numerous to name – in this difficult but rewarding journey and urge the generations to come to remember that there will be twists and turns in your career, but there is always room at the top.

Lastly, I have no words to express my gratitude to my faithful and dedicated secretary, Tara Datt Phulara, for the devotion and passion with which he has diligently captured my memories electronically while meticulously performing all the other tasks of managing my office efficiently.

This is not a book for scholars or researchers but for those who want to bring equity in education, research and healthcare

to millions of our people so that India can have a healthy workforce.

It is a true account of what can be done if you think you can. I will end by endorsing former president Barack Obama's famous words on his election as the first black president of the United States of America (USA): 'Yes, we can.'

Foreword

I deem it a great privilege to have been asked to write a foreword for a memoir by Professor Sneh Bhargava, one of the icons of post-Independence India, who has spent her life pursuing her vision of bringing world-class technology to the poorest of Indians. Sneh is the only woman to hold the highest position of the premier medical institute of the country – director of AIIMS in New Delhi – and remains the only woman to have held that post in AIIMS’s long history. She pioneered the advent of radiology in India and is known in the entire medical community for her unparalleled contribution to medicine. It is a contribution that has inspired more than one generation of medical students who looked up to her not only for her expertise but also for her moral integrity, principled conduct, exacting standards and refusal to compromise on patient care. Her tenure at AIIMS left an indelible mark on medicine because she trained and mentored generations of radiologists who went on to work across India to help diagnose illnesses.

Sneh is an icon in the areas of medicine, medical education and medical research. These three pillars were identified by our first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and promoted by our first health minister, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, as the ideals for

the newly established AIIMS in New Delhi. Sneh fervently made them her life's mission.

It has been a matter of great pride for me to have been counted as one of her friends for over 60 years. Our acquaintance began at Irwin Hospital in the 1950s and progressed as colleagues at AIIMS since 1965, where we worked together on our common goal of making AIIMS a national centre of excellence, particularly in the field of neuroradiology. She took the radiology department of AIIMS when it was nothing and turned it into the best radiology department in the country. We collaborated to develop neuroradiology as one area of her famous radiology department and worked together on professional excellence and research. Some of our publications, on tuberculosis (TB) of the nervous system, for example, are globally recognized.

Sneh's qualities defy easy description because there are so many: outstanding skills as a radiologist; superb administrator who knew how to make a hospital run well; one of the best diagnosticians of her time, head and shoulders above her peers, who could take one look at a plain image and make a diagnosis, outdoing even the clinician; a kind and compassionate person who always held herself – personally and professionally – to a very exacting standard of integrity and probity; and a wonderfully vibrant and vivacious woman who loves life, basks in the affection of a devoted husband, a large family and circle of friends, and never misses an opportunity to dance and party!

Sneh's journey to achieving iconic status can be traced back to her upbringing as a little girl in a highly respected and wealthy family of legal luminaries, deeply imbued with traditional culture, in pre-Independence Punjab. That her parents' thinking was modern comes out clearly in Chapter 2

(Family, Childhood and Partition). Considering the prevailing sociopolitical environment in the country at that time, it is not surprising that Sneh was sent to a boarding school, Sacred Heart Convent in Dalhousie, at the age of five. It is amazing that her parents chose this option in the early 1930s when educating a girl was almost taboo and when many orthodox Indians would not even have thought of sending their sons to a boarding school at this tender age. It was this upbringing with traditional values and exposure to western education that shaped her character and laid the foundation for her spirit of service that emerged later.

There is another aspect of her early childhood that led her to become an empathetic doctor. While playing with dolls (even before she went to school), she was always the 'doctor', a role that was also applied to her hapless younger sister. Clearly, a strong instinct to be a physician stirred in her during these early years. While circumstances prevented her from being a clinician, her success lay in converting her appointment as a specialist in a para-clinical department (radiology) to virtually a clinical department, initially at Irwin Hospital and later at AIIMS. As she writes in this memoir, her goal on joining AIIMS was simply 'to drag radiology from the periphery of medicine to the mainstream where it would be recognized as invaluable because of the role it could play in reaching an accurate diagnosis'.

Let me provide a little potted biography here which only skims the surface of her career. Sneh started her career as an assistant radiologist at Irwin Hospital, Delhi, in 1958, and

served as lecturer at Lady Hardinge Hospital and College. She joined AIIMS as an assistant professor of radiology in 1961, taking over as director of AIIMS in 1984, on the day Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated, until 1990. She served AIIMS for a total 30 years, 6 of them as director. She also had the honour of being the radiologist to the President of India from 1978 to 1990. After her retirement from AIIMS, Sneh remained associated with AIIMS as professor emeritus. Her so-called retirement was no retirement at all. She became even busier, dividing her time between Sitaram Bhartia Institute of Science and Research in the west of the capital as a senior consultant and Dharamshila Narayana Superspeciality Hospital at the other end, in East Delhi, where she was a senior consultant and also head of the department of imaging services. Her frenetically active 'retirement' years make me think of Dylan Thomas's famous line – 'Do not go gentle into that good night, / Old age should burn and rave at close of day; / Rage, rage against the dying of the light.' What is exemplary about her joining these two not-for-profit hospitals is that Sneh forsook the path that many in her position – and with her credentials – would have taken, that is, join a private hospital with a lucrative income. She does not spell out in this memoir why she chose not to, but I think everyone who knows her understands that it would have clashed with the spirit of service that informed her entire career. Instead, a reputed Sitaram Bhartia and a 300-bed Dharamshila Hospital stand today as a testimony to this devotion.

During her career, Sneh trained countless medical students in research in various aspects related to radiology. Among many other pathbreaking ventures, she pioneered the CT and ultrasound investigations in India. Along the way, she found

time to serve as chair of the Medical Education Committee of the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) and chair of the Ethics Committee, Medical Council of India (MCI).

I will not list the countless awards and honours Sneh has received as they could fill a small bookshelf. I will instead settle for mentioning just a few. She is the former president of the Indian Radiology and Imaging Association (IRIA). In 2018, she was awarded honorary membership of the Radiological Society of North America – the only radiologist to be so honoured to date. To name only one of the many lifetime awards she has received, Sneh was awarded the Millennium Award 2000 by the IRIA. In 1991, she was awarded the Padma Shri for her distinguished contribution to medicine.

One feature of her personality that makes Sneh stand out is her constant striving to learn about what is new in technology. Prior to joining the radiology department at AIIMS as an assistant professor in 1961, she had decided to upgrade her knowledge of the subject by going to London for a diploma in medical radio diagnosis (DMRD). As a matter of fact, she had hardly any training in radiology prior to this. Here, the memoir recounts many interesting episodes about how Sneh, a colonial ‘subject’, fared in the land of the colonial ‘master’, especially as the only female student in the department of radiology at Westminster Hospital. In the two years she spent there, she was exposed to the contemporary professional status of radiology, which was very different from how it was seen in India at the time. At AIIMS, radiologists were seen as so lowly that they were treated as ‘photographers’ at best and ‘back-office workers’ at worst. The radiology department had one 500mA X-ray machine and one Odelca camera for miniature chest X-rays. In fact, AIIMS was lagging behind several other

institutions in the country. Madras, Vellore and Bombay were far better equipped. Not only was there a paucity of diagnostic equipment, there was hardly any supporting staff.

Yet, by then, the clinical units at AIIMS had been attracting an increasing number of patients and, hence, demands for radiological investigations were growing. It required active strategic efforts to obtain the necessary facilities while resorting to *jugaad* in the meantime. Gradually, after tireless efforts, persuasion and the support of collaborative clinical departments (especially cardiothoracic and neurology-neurosurgery), Sneh managed to procure state-of-the-art equipment not only from the health budget but also from other sources such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the Swedish International Development Agency. Medical colleagues who worked outside the institute tended to believe that once you become a faculty member at AIIMS, life was a bed of roses and everything was provided on demand. This was far from the truth. Sneh had to craft all manner of strategies and deploy all her wits to justify her requests for the latest equipment by convincing the faceless bureaucrats why it was needed.

It goes without saying that it is not the bricks and mortar or even the quality of the staff that produces excellence but rather the leadership quality of the faculty. Sneh's leadership, based on an unbending insistence on the highest standards of patient care and professional excellence as well as a refusal to settle for anything middling or mediocre (which some people chafed at, unable to understand her absolute insistence on the best, always), created a dynamic atmosphere at AIIMS, which elevated the institute's reputation to hitherto unscaled heights.

As for her personal expertise in radiology, it was the stuff of legend. When they saw her hitting bull's eye after bull's

eye in her diagnoses, her colleagues began talking of how she possessed a 'third eye'. She mentions some of these examples of her uncanny ability to see what others could not in the memoir, and I could easily add a whole list of my own but will settle for only two examples.

My brother-in-law had been admitted to another hospital with back pain, and his wife insisted that he should be moved to AIIMS under my care. It was our practice to sit with the radiologist and look at all the X-rays and other investigations. The other doctors and I, all diagnosed a disc prolapse and prepared for surgery. Sneha was on leave at that time. We went ahead and wheeled my brother-in-law into the operating theatre and then found that it was not a disc prolapse but TB of the spine. When Sneha returned, I showed her the various images but did not give her my brother-in-law's medical history. None of it. She took a look at the X-ray from this angle and that angle, and calmly pronounced without any hesitation: 'This is not a disc prolapse. It is TB.' My colleagues and I were stunned. We had been unable to put our finger on the actual ailment despite having far more knowledge of the patient's history and symptoms.

On another occasion, my mother had to be rushed to AIIMS from Allahabad (now Prayagraj) in acute pain. The day she was admitted, she was crying – the pain was so unbearable. The physicians in Allahabad suspected multiple myeloma. The trusted physician I consulted at AIIMS also suspected malignancy and ordered a barium meal test. I showed the result to Sneha. She diagnosed a lump of fat, a benign tumour, to my great relief. I gave my mother medication for the inflamed artery. The next morning, I went to see her in her ward and asked how she was. 'What do you

mean, how am I? I'm absolutely fine and I'm ready to go home,' she replied.

Apart from her 'third eye', a personality trait that became legendary was Sneh's emphasis on discipline. Everyone at AIIMS knew this. Everyone was terrified of her. As one of our colleagues once said, 'If Dr Bhargava is on leave, just install a scarecrow of her somewhere, it's enough to make everyone behave.'

In pursuit of her cherished goal to convert radiologists from 'readers of the black-and-white shadows' who were not fully involved in the overall patient care to partners in patient care, Sneh planned regular interaction with clinicians by organizing what she called 'clinico-radiological conferences' with departments such as neurology, neurosurgery, cardiology and cardiothoracic surgery, which were held every day. They were attended by the faculty, residents and staff from the concerned departments, and detailed discussions took place about every patient, taking into account the clinical picture along with all the relevant investigations, in order to arrive at an evidence-based diagnosis. It was this pioneering initiative by Sneh that led to the evolution of subdisciplines under radiology such as neuroradiology, cardiac radiology and paediatric radiology. Some of these later became fully fledged, independent departments awarding super-speciality degrees. Her department at AIIMS stood out because she moved it to the heart of the hospital, and made it part of the crucial decisions made about diseases and how to treat them. Clinicians depended on her opinion.

She encouraged her younger colleagues to specialize in one of the subspecialties besides general radiology. As her successes took root, it helped to fulfil her desire to move radiology from

the basement of medicine to the sunlit uplands of mainstream medicine, and turn the radiology department at AIIMS into a lodestar.

Despite a very heavy patient workload, teaching and training responsibilities and the struggle to continuously revolutionize the department of radiology, Sneha did not neglect the third part of AIIMS's *raison d'être*: research. Between 1962 and 1998, she published 138 scientific papers and eight chapters for books, many for international publications and reputed journals such as the *British Journal of Radiology*, *Australian Radiology*, *Japanese Heart Journal*, *European Journal of Nuclear Medicine* and *Neurosurgery Review*. Some of her findings, particularly those related to lung diseases and brain TB, received global approbation.

The six years of her directorship is a record of how her responsibilities changed and how she discharged them. This required management skills and public relations skills in addition to her will to take the whole institute – not just one department – to greater heights. New departments were established, which included the Centre for Education, the International Clinical Epidemiology Network (INCLEN) programme to strengthen epidemiology, the biotechnology department, the haematology department and the foundations of the emergency department.

Sneha's journey to the pinnacle of her profession has been a joy, an education and an example to all her students. As her friend

and colleague, I have enjoyed being by the ringside, watching her climb one peak after another while never altering her personality or morality to fit anyone's demands. Her journey was not easy but she never let obstacles stop her from reaching the top.

I can only conclude by saying that Sneh deserves the gratitude of the millions of people who benefitted from her services, and of her colleagues who enjoyed her ever-willing collaboration and help.

This memoir has many lessons to teach coming generations if Confucius' adage – study the past if you would define the future – holds good.

Dr P.N. Tandon, MS, FRCS

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Founder and President, National Brain Research Centre, and
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