



Obituary



Khorshed Minocher Pavri (1927-2021)

Dr Khorshed M. Pavri India's first recognized and distinguished virologist, died of natural causes in Mumbai on December 27, 2021 at the age of 94. She was the former Director of the ICMR-National Institute of Virology (NIV), Pune. She lived life king-size, independent and on her terms. Doing so in a patriarchal society needed courage and determination. Her significant contributions helped India find a place in the global map of virology.

Paying tribute to Dr Pavri, Dr Balram Bhargava, the Secretary, Department of Health Research, Government of India and Director-General, Indian Council of Medical Research said, "She has contributed, built and brought NIV to the national and international scene. She inculcated a culture of scientific inquisitiveness, scientific rigour and strong sense of work and research ethics. These have been nurtured and encouraged by subsequent directors to create a NIV which has been at the forefront of our battle against COVID-19".

When Dr Pavri succeeded Dr N.P. Gupta as the Director, ICMR-NIV, she became the first woman director of this institute. She had big shoes to fill,

which she did admirably in a short span of time. She provided visionary leadership. She contributed to the foundations of modern clinical and epidemiological research on arboviruses in the country. Her expertise in arboviruses was undisputed. Her earlier research was significant in our understanding of the Kyasanur forest disease (KFD) and the virus (KFDV) that causes it and deciphered the life cycle of the virus, that paved the way for the development of a vaccine against KFD by NIV. She furthered the understanding about several viruses prominently chikungunya, Japanese encephalitis, West Nile and Dengue. She also added novel viruses to the catalogue such as the Balagodu, Kaisodi, Palyam, Chittoor, for many of the viruses people know very little. Dr Pavri realized importance of hepatitis and started work on hepatitis A, B and E. She was also an authority on several virology diagnostic techniques. Under her guidance, the NIV set up facilities to screen blood and blood products for these viruses to make them safe. She also got the first electron microscope installed at the NIV.

During the early part of 1980s, HIV/AIDS was added to the portfolio of work at NIV. It became

one of the first institutes to start work on HIV. Her interest in HIV/AIDS continued even after retirement. She was the Project Director of ICMR Centre for AIDS Research and Control (CARC), Mumbai (an extramural project of the ICMR). She also edited the quarterly journal, CARC Calling, aimed at improving the knowledge and awareness through communicating authentic information. She was the go-to person for any information on HIV at the ICMR. Dr Pavri had authored a book 'Challenge of AIDS', which served as a valuable resource at a time when not much information was easily available.

Khorshed Pavri was born to a very illustrious family. Her mother Tehmina came from a family of merchants who had business in India and China. Her father Minocher Pavri was a well-known lawyer and Public Prosecutor in Navsari, Gujarat. Although born in Mumbai, she spent her childhood in Navsari, Gujarat. She was the third of the five children born to Tehmina and Minocher. The town is one of the earliest sites when Parsees who arrived from Iran settled. It continues to have a significant Parsi Community. The same town which gave to India personalities like Dadabhai Naoroji, Jamshetji Tata, also gave Khoshed Pavri.

She completed her schooling from Sir C. Navsari Zarhosti Madresa High School, where she impressed her teachers by her brilliance and earned double promotion. She had an insatiable thirst for knowledge. She moved to Mumbai in 1943, to study Microbiology from the prestigious St Xavier's College and also earned Ph.D. from the Bombay University in 1951. She went to the USA on a Fulbright Smith-Mundt Scholarship as a post-doctoral fellow, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. All her studies from school to post-doctoral training were through merit scholarships. In the US, she switched to a new and emerging speciality of virology and carried out research-cum-training programme at the Laboratories of the New York State Department of Health and later at the Rockefeller Foundation. She impressed everybody wherever she worked. She never failed to get noticed. Around the same time, the Rockefeller Foundation in collaboration with the ICMR was establishing the Virus Research Centre at Pune. On her return from the USA in late fifties, she joined the VRC as Assistant Research Officer. She blossomed as a virologist and rapidly rose up the ranks caught everybody's attention driven by her deep understanding, hard work and dedication. She was selected to head the VRC in 1978, the year it was renamed as the National Institute of Virology.

Dr Pavri served on many national and international committees including those of the World Health Organization (WHO). She was a member of the Scientific Committee to the Cabinet. Dr Pavri had over 100 scientific publications and several Ph.D. students. Among her books, '*Vimla in Virusland*' was very popular. This book is about a young girl who is suffering from influenza, falls asleep and in her dream, she meets the influenza virus, who takes her around the 'virusland' and introduces her to different viruses. Writing a book for children is not a child's play. Only a person with clear concepts can write in a language that is simple for the children to understand and at the same time keeping their interest alive. Dr Pavri had that winning combination. Short, amusing and informative verses she had written showed her skill as a poet as well. The book had several reprints and two editions. The second and enlarged edition was edited by one of us.

Over the years at NIV, she emerged as a no-nonsense, matter-of-fact person. Her actions and decisions were unbiased, taken in the best interest of the work. She would examine all data shared with her critically, and almost always had 'uncomfortable' questions. Always scientifically thought-provoking and threw challenges, but at the same time gave free hand and encouraged young scientists. She appreciated free expression, was open to fresh ideas and never distinguished between senior and junior scientists in scientific discussions. She loved scientific arguments. She had inherited the art of convincingly articulating her point of view from her father and most often ended up convincing the others to her point of view. Her quality of encouraging young scientists was unparalleled. She gave full freedom to the young scientists and allowed them to follow their own ideas and ways to pursue research that did help many budding virologists. She wanted them to become excellent scientists and not super-technicians. She made no compromises on quality of work and expected high standard of research all along. Could not tolerate carelessness and a casual approach to science and work and did not hide her unhappiness when she noticed them. Being impulsive, she wore emotions on the sleeve.

'Pavri bai' as she was affectionately addressed at NIV, wore western dress most of the times. One could hear her high heels click-clack, and volleys of instructions she would give while walking down NIV corridor. Coupled with her brilliance, talent and success, the over-all impression she created was that of

awe and respect. Only a few managed to wriggle out of this aura.

Hidden behind the smokescreen was a lady with a golden heart, which many came to know only after her retirement. She was a great human being, witty, had a great sense of humour. She was a warm and helping lady. She had tremendous will power. She got rid of nicotine dependence in one go. After her retirement, some of the scientists and other members of NIV would meet on her birthday to felicitate her and spend time reminiscence the 'old times'. She loved the affection and the attention she got from her former colleagues. This very thoughtful gesture continued for almost 30-35 yr, till COVID-19 pandemic cruelly brought end to this.

Remembering Dr Pavri, Prof T. Jacob John, former Head of Departments of Clinical Virology and Microbiology, Christian Medical College, Vellore, said that, "Everyone knew Dr Khorshed Pavri as an eminent virologist, but we knew each other as friends also - she always addressed me by my family moniker. To describe her in one word: vivacious. As we were both retired, we lost touch with each other and the news of her demise was received with sadness. However, we must really celebrate her life as a great scientist and a wonderful person".

Dr Pavri was wedded to virology and found no time to tie the knot. Post-retirement her professional

commitment was rivalled only by her attachments to nibblings and their children. They, especially the grandchildren, were the centre of her universe. One could not miss the twinkle in her eyes and joy on her face when she was with them. Nothing gave her greater joy. She doted on them. She moved to stay with her sister in 2010. She was alert and aware till her last few days. She is survived by a younger brother and a sister.

Dr Pavri has left an indelible mark on the institution and on the countless scientists and staff who were fortunate to have interacted and worked alongside her. We have lost a dear senior colleague, one of the champions of virology. We all will miss her passion, her intellect, her wit and of course her dressing downs!

We are thankful to many who shared with us their recollections about Dr Pavri (A.C. Mishra, Devendra Mourya, Milind Gore, Priya Abraham, Ravindrakumar Soman, Vidya Arankalle, V.S. Padbidri, family members of Dr Pavri and many more).

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