

The Maker of Modern Pharmacy

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The year 1931 stands as a turning point in the history of modern pharmacy in India. The drugs enquiry committee submitted its report in March 1931. The recommendations, which the committee made, aimed at bringing out order in the prevailing disorganized pharmaceutical affairs in the country. It was also in 1931 that Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya chose Mahadev Lal Schroff and entrusted him with the task of organizing Pharmaceutical institution at Banaras Hindu University. I do not recall the year but it was in the early 1950s that I met Schroff at BHU Department of Pharmaceutics, when I was working as a teaching faculty there. After that there were occasions to meet him off and on. He took liking for me. We shared our views and had a sustained correspondence. I still preserve several of the letters, which he wrote to me. I could have been Prof. Schroff's colleague when he was at University of Sagar (1959-60). I remained on the faculty of the university for around eight years (1956-64), but during the period Schroff was at Sagar I was on a leave for a long visit to the University of Maryland.

To mark the hundredth birth of Prof. Schroff, the Association of Pharmaceutical teacher's of India invited me to deliver ' Professor M.L.Schroff Centenary Oration', which I did on 14th December 2002 at Pune during the 54th Indian Pharmaceutical Congress session; the text of the oration was published in the Indian journal of Hospital Pharmacy (2002, 39, 187-194).

To prepare for the oration, I had to do a lot reading on Schroff and that spurred me to do a thorough research on this Pharmacy giant of the 20th century. Every possible source was tapped for collection of material on him. An intensive correspondence was carried out. The institutions at which he studied abroad were also contacted. Every bit of writing by him was scanned. What his critics said about him was also noted. The study and writing lasted for around two years. It became possible to do a book length monograph on professional biography of Schroff, also covering his life in general and personality characteristics. The manuscript entitled Mahadev Lal Schroff: Maker of Modern Pharmacy is now with publishers (Vallabh Prakashan, Delhi). The book should become available in a few months. A mention be made here of some the extracts selected at random from the monograph on Schroff.

Mahadev Lal was orphaned when he was less than 10 years of age. His elder brother supported him to study up to the intermediate of Science level. Schroff joined the Banaras Engineering College in 1920. From there his real struggle in life started. Swami Satya Deva, a reformist Arya samaji and an active nationalist of the early 20th century, visited the Banaras Hindu University and delivered a stirring lecture. Certain of the utterances of the Swami were not liked by the Engineering College principal Charles A. King. The latter made certain remarks, which offended the audience. The student went on strike. Many of his colleague yielded to the pressure of the authorities and returned to the classes; Schroff didn't and left the institution.

Mahadeva didn't know as to what he should do next after he had abandoned his engineering studies. He toyed with the idea of going abroad, which was not approved by his elders. He managed some money and stealthily sailed for overseas in October in 1921. He had hard time abroad. He earned some money in Japan and then went on to the United States of America. He first joined the University of Iowa for BS in Chemical Engineering. When he was to start his second semester, he was badly treated by the administrative clerk, who made derogatory remarks about his color. Mahadeva Lal was not one who would pocket such an insult. He reacted and as a protest said good-bye to Iowa. He ended up qualifying for A.B. Hons. in Chemistry from Cornell university (1926) and M.S. in Chemistry from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1927). He also attended the Harward University.

Schroff returned to his homeland after absence of eight years. Looking to the mood of the nation and heightened tempo of the moment for liberation of the country his patriotic feelings were aroused. He jumped into the struggle for the freedom. He became private secretary to Seth Jamnalal Bajaj, a prominent leader of the time.

During his formative years Mahadeva has been inspired by his lawyer and literary brother who was a staunch Congressite. Their house in Bhagalpur was a center of political activity. Mahadeva was greatly influenced by the national workers with whom he came in contact. Now he was a khadi wearing active worker himself, who was full of fire and enthusiasm that a young man of his caliber should have after returning from his studies in a free country.

Mahadeva Lal Schroff toured different places with Bajaj and Gandhi ji. Significantly, he joined the 1930 salt satyagrah moment, and led a band of satyagrahis from his home district of Bhagalpur. He was arrested and underwent imprisonment for six months in Hazaribagh central jail in Bihar. After his release from the Hazaribagh jail, if Schroff had continued in freedom movement he had the potential to mature as a leading figure in the field. He was young, full of enthusiasm. He had imbibed nationalistic spirit right from his childhood. He had an impressive personality; he was a six-footer and well built. He was a forceful speaker, though showing a slight stutter in his speech. He could express himself clearly not only in spoken but also written Hindi and English. He was a bold and fearless fighter for a cause, which endeared him. His long stay in America had honed his yearning for independence of the country. He had all the necessary qualities and also right potential contacts to make a mark in the struggle for the freedom. That was not to be, since he had developed an earnest desire to serve the Banaras Hindu University.

Schroff did not have any pharmaceutical initiation. With his Chemistry background, his confidence in himself and his determination, he was to self teach himself while on job, and pioneer establishment of pharmaceutical teaching and research programmes. It is a marvel and a matter of intense surprise.

No coverage on schroff can be complete without looking into his personal standard and commitment to work. If he was convinced that his stand was correct he would not compromised, even if the persons around him had assessment of variance to his. He would not yield on principles. He was all for protecting the standards of education, teaching and examination.

Schroff was model personified as teacher. He wanted his colleagues to come up to his expectations. He was particular about their performances. Generally he was able to extract the best out of them. Some may have been critical of him and not appreciative of efforts the Professor made to make them efficient academics. Still he remained receptive to constructive criticism. As from teachers, he also had high expectations from students.

Schroff was no preacher of values. He portrayed value system through practical demonstration. If he was hard taskmaster, he himself worked very hard. He was a stickler for punctuality and better management of time. He did not accept laxity in this respect from his colleagues and students. The overwhelmingness was Schroff's very visible characteristic. His qualities of humanness and lightheartedness were better known to those who came in close contact with him, particularly his colleagues, in academics and elsewhere, and students.

One like Schroff was the need of the time, to start building pharmacy in India from nearly a scratch. His was a vibrant and robust personality; he had the vigor, boldness and clarity of thought and action. Where he proved to be and able builder of the pharmaceutical education, he also significantly engaged in moulding the pharmacy profession. He influenced the development of the drug industry, worked for and participated in operating the statutory bodies, established pharmaceutical organizations and founded pharmaceutical journals; infact every facets of the pharmacy received his attention. Pharmacy became not only his passion but also an article of faith.

The studies on Schroff and the estimates of his contributions by his eminent contemporaries, lead one to place Professor Mahadeva Lal Schroff high as the maker of the modern pharmacy in the country.

Schroff's saga of struggle in his life, his patriotic fervors, his shaping a profession for which he himself had no grooming, his not compromising on principles, his standing up against many odds, and his spirited journey on a path of his own making, can be an inspiring subject of a picturized portrayal.