

Gurukumar Bhalachandra Parulkar (1931–2021)

Dr Gurukumar Bhalachandra Parulkar was born in Mumbai on 1 December 1931. He completed his graduation and postgraduation in general surgery from the G.S. Medical College and KEM Hospital, Mumbai with an excellent academic performance. He went on to become head of the Department of Cardio Vascular Thoracic (CVT) surgery and Director–Professor of Surgery at KEM Hospital. Parulkar became the Dean of KEM Hospital in 1984 and later Director of Hospitals and Medical Colleges for Mumbai Municipal Corporation; he retired in 1989. He holds a rare distinction of being at KEM, uninterrupted, from the first day as an MBBS student to the last day as the Dean.

Parulkar was a Fellow and President of several national and international professional bodies, such as ASI, ACTSA and IACTS. He has received many national and international awards for his contribution to surgery and cardiac surgery. He was awarded the B.C. Roy Award twice (1983 and 1997) and Padma Bhushan in 1998.

Such a towering personality was known to us and many others simply as ‘GB’. To summarize in one sentence, Parulkar had all the qualities one would wish to see in a good doctor or surgeon.

He had a brilliant academic career and went to the US to refine his knowledge of cardiac surgery, at the best possible centres. He assimilated the techniques and after returning to India, implemented them at KEM Hospital. He, literarily, nurtured cardiac surgery in the country and at KEM. He realized in the early 1970s the importance of closely working with the Departments of Cardiology and Chest Medicine for the growth of cardiac surgery. KEM was one of the first institutions in the country which had an independent cardiac surgery outpatient department (OPD), way back in 1975. Through various camps and meetings, he built a strong clientele. The practice of writing back to the referring physician was followed in the department since at least, 1978.

Parulkar was what one would call ‘an operating physician’. Throughout his career, he gave priority to clinical approach while treating patients. He could discuss

differential diagnosis merely on inspection of a tumour or chest. Just looking at the heart, he would tell what problems we would face during the operation and would guide us in avoiding them. In the days when investigations in cardiology were restricted to ECG, chest X-ray and an occasional catheterization, his clinical judgement helped us in achieving excellent surgical results even then.



Parulkar was compassionate about patients. He was available in person or on phone, whenever we sought his help. He considered all the patients in the ward as ‘his’ patients and helped them medically, socially and financially, irrespective of the unit they were admitted. Even if we called him at midnight, he never ever asked us whether we have consulted junior staff surgeons prior to calling him. Even when he was the Dean of KEM Hospital, Parulkar was available for surgical assistance or consultation.

Parulkar was the most brilliant teacher we have come across. Teaching was in his blood and genes. The basics of cardiac surgery, cardiology and cardiopulmonary bypass that he has taught us, remains unchallenged till today. He taught in a didactic manner; his clinics in OPD are legendary. He taught us in the ward on rounds. Standing on the left side he taught us on the operation table. He taught us at 9 am in his office and also, taught us at midnight in the ward or ICU. He taught us how to stand, what to speak, which order to narrate causes... you say it – he taught us everything. Parulkar could be shouting at a resident for a wrongly performed operative

step inside the operation theatre, but once the operation was over and he was in the doctor’s lounge, he would not utter a word about the incidence to the audience present there. He was proud of his students and their achievements and would openly declare or announce it in public – a true follower of the philosophy of ‘शिष्यात् ईच्छेत पराजयम्’ (*desire defeat at the hands of your disciple*). It is no wonder that all his students now hold eminent positions, and are considered as pioneers and mentors.

Parulkar always had an eye for research. This research interest extended from basic sciences to new investigative tools, from dog laboratories in the early years to clinical drug trials. The large number of research papers he has published and innumerable M.Sc. and Ph.D. students he helped graduate are testimony to his aptitude. Myocardial preservation and brain protection during cardiopulmonary bypass were certain topics that were close to his heart. The progress of cardiac surgery at KEM from the point of view of safety and number is entirely due to this approach of innovation and refinement.

Parulkar was the greatest showman in cardiac surgery. He spared no words to praise his colleagues from the Department or from the Hospital. He always glorified his institution. He never ever mentioned about the internal squabbles to the outside world, nor did he hint to others about the differences he had with any particular person. At national or international conferences he would defend a paper, even though he was not one of the authors. He would attend almost all the college functions and stimulate the crowd with his wisdom.

Parulkar led a happy life with his family, almost till end. A few months earlier he lost his beloved wife Suman (Vidya). On 4 May 2021 his children Raju and Amla as well as all his students and colleagues lost their ‘Baba’.

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