A tribute to the indomitable spirit of Jivraj Mehta

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Jivraj Mehta (1887-1978) was the founder-architect of Seth Gordhandas Sunderdas Medical College and King Edward VII Memorial Hospital, Mumbai. He devotedly served the cause of these institutions in the unenviable post of their first Dean over an eventful period of 18 years (1925-42). This was in addition to the selfless services that he rendered to the society in numerous other positions of immense responsibility and honour. A man of simple yearnings and exemplary moral rectitude, his life is a saga of perpetual struggle for the betterment of his fellow citizens.

“He who serves his brother best, Gets nearer to God than all the rest”
- John Ruskin

Early Years

Jivraj Mehta was born on 29th August 1887 in Amreli, a small town in Saurashtra in the state of Gujarat, in the family of Narayan and Jamakben Mehta. His father, Narayan Mehta, was a small time shopkeeper who struggled to make ends meet. However, abject poverty could not dent the tireless spirit of young Jivraj. This spirit was further shored up, thanks to the strong influence of his grandmother, a lady of drive and determination, and to the encouragement of his schoolteacher Apte Sahib. He was driven by a zealous desire to excel in the face of overwhelming odds. He would often study under streetlights and would also give tuitions to supplement the meagre income of his family. After completing his matriculation from an Anglo-vernacular school in his hometown, he briefly toyed with the idea of entering the Indian Civil Services. The prospect of the mundane job of a civil servant under the colonial rule, however, did not rate highly in his scheme of things.

Around this time, he came into contact with Dr. Eduljee Rustomji Dadachandjee, a civil surgeon in Amreli. Dr. Eduljee’s son was one of the students he taught. By all accounts, it was the fruitful interaction with the philanthropic Dr. Eduljee that prompted him to take up medicine. He subsequently secured admission into the Grant Medical College and Sir J.J. Hospital, Bombay (now Mumbai), after clearing a stiff written test and a thorough viva voce examination that was conducted by the British IMS officers.

His medical education was sponsored by the Seth VM Kapol Boarding Trust. He was also endowed with the Jamkhande scholarship—a scholarship that was reserved for the poorest of the freshly admitted students. Conscious of the precarious financial position of his family, young Jivraj would forthwith dispatch most of the scholarship amount back home. He would himself struggle with the meagre resources at his disposal. The financial hardships that he faced during his college years taught him invaluable lessons in life. Besides, the generous help that he received from various quarters seems to have instilled into him an added sense of responsibility. He reciprocated the aid of his mentors by faring exceptionally well in academics. He topped the class in his First Licentrate in Medicine and Surgery (the then equivalent of MBBS) examination. In his final year, he was able to capture seven of the eight prizes open to his batch and shared the eighth prize with his hostel roommate Kashinath Dikshit. This treasure of prizes prompted Jivraj to request the authorities at the Kapol boarding to allow him to partly pay for his stay at their facility—an act that testifies his immense sense of self-esteem.

Later, he applied to the Tata education foundation for a student loan to enable him to pursue his postgraduate studies in London. His impeccable credentials ensured that he was one of the only two students selected for this prestigious fellowship from amongst several bright students who had applied for it. He then sailed to London in May 1909 with the determination to scale even greater peaks.

Life in London - Birth of a Nationalist

Jivraj Mehta lived in London from 1909 to 1915. On his arrival in England, Jivraj secured admission to the reputed London Hospital Medical College. His stay in London was punctuated with events of great political significance—events that were to have major bearing on the rest of his career.

While in London Jivraj found, much to his outrage, that the Indian students department of the India office in London was upsetting the very interests of Indian students and also that its agents were spying on the naive students. In protest, he
established the London Indian association under the patronage of eminent leaders of Indian independence movement. Quite deservedly, he was elected its president and he served in that position for two years. He was also one of the founding members of the Indian Guild of Science and Technology, an organization that had been instituted with a view to foster deeper understanding of these subjects among Indian students. He also took active interest in Mahatma Gandhi’s passive resistance movement while it was still in its infancy. His indirect contribution to the freedom struggle came through the dutiful medical services that he rendered to the nationalistic leaders whenever they were in London. However, his involvement in the nationalist revolution was not at the cost of his studies. He crowned his eventful stay in England with a University gold medal in his MD examinations in 1914. The following year he added to his laurels by being made a member of the prestigious Royal college of physicians of London. Following his British education he returned to India and entered into private practice.

Returns to India to Begin an Illustrious Career

Dr. Jivraj found his practice extremely rewarding. Within less then a year, the celebrated industrialist Sir Ratan Tata requested him to accompany him to London where he was to seek medical treatment. Dr. Jivraj decided to abruptly discontinue his practice, perhaps out of a sense of obligation towards the family that had funded his post-graduate studies. His voyage to London, though, proved extremely perilous. The British ship SS Arabia on which they were traveling was torpedoed in the Mediterranean on 11th November. While most other men of his age would have panicked under similar situation, Dr. Jivraj displayed nerves of steel. He single-handedly guided his fellow passengers, including Sir Ratan, to safety whilst risking his own life. However, the prolonged stormy weather conditions that he had to face soon after the rescue took a heavy toll on his health. He was diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis and had to seek a prolonged period (close to four and a half years) of convalescence in a sanatorium in Switzerland. The disease troubled him for a major part of his life and his battle with mycobacterium concluded with him undergoing partial pneumonectomy of the right lower lobe in 1970.

During the fag end of his stay in Switzerland, Dr. Jivraj happened to meet the maharaja of Baroda Sir Sayajirao Gaikwad. The maharaja was impressed with the young doctor’s potential and he subsequently invited him to Baroda, initially in the capacity of his personal physician and 2 years later as the chief medical officer (CMO) of the erstwhile state of Baroda. During his brief tenure as the CMO, Dr. Jivraj initiated some comprehensive reforms in the state medical services. He also worked towards improving and enlarging the facilities for treatment at the Sayaji General Hospital.

Dr. Jivraj Mehta - The Founder-Architect of KEM Hospital

In 1915, the Bombay Medical Union had been entrusted by the Bombay Municipality (now the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation) with the task of planning the organization of the proposed KEM Hospital and the Seth GS Medical College. The perceptive amongst the Union members were aware of the intellectual acuity for which Dr. Jivraj had become quite famed. To harness the same, they invited him to their committee meeting where the matter of the KEM Hospital was to be discussed.

Dr. Jivraj suggested that the proposed medical college be housed in one large two-storeyed building and the hospital (together with the outpatient department) be housed in another adjacent building, the two being interconnected by corridors. This was radically different from the traditional design of isolated blocks of buildings housing different departments in the existing medical colleges of the country. However, Dr. Jivraj argued that persisting with such a conventional design would prevent close co-ordination between various departments. Besides, it would not be feasible for the authorities to supervise the functioning of the hospital without alerting the staff. The committee was convinced with the views of this brilliant doctor-architect and thus, it was decided to fashion these institutions on the lines suggested by Dr. Jivraj.

In effect then, KEM Hospital partly owes its design to the logical perception of Dr. Jivraj Mehta. However, as has been pointed out, Dr. Jivraj had to accompany Sir Ratan Tata to London during this period. So, Dr. P. T. Patel, who was then the officer-in-charge of the municipal isolation hospital, supervised the concrete construction of the hospital.

Later in 1925, applications were invited by the medical and public health committee of the Bombay municipality for the post of dean of KEM hospital. Dr. Jivraj, who was then the CMO of the state of Baroda, applied for it and was unanimously selected for the post. Thus, on the 1st April 1925, Dr. Jivraj assumed the reins as the first Dean of these nascant institutions.

Dr. Jivraj Mehta - The Administrator Par Excellence

Blessed with the compelling combination of a great foresight and a shrewd mind, Dr. Jivraj discharged his duties with remarkable diligence. Under his stewardship, major architectural modifications (additional storey on the hospital blocks, common passage connecting the hospital and college buildings, etc.) were undertaken to facilitate smooth delivery of patient care. A code of conduct was framed for the staff connected with the twin institutions. The staff, in turn, helped Dr. Jivraj with the formulation of rules and regulations for the day-to-day administration of the hospital.

A man who himself lived an austere life, Dr. Jivraj was exceedingly particular about the discipline in the hospital. In fact, the unusual methods that he brought into play to ensure strict discipline in the hospital have become part of the hospital’s legend. As he later recounted, “I would come over to the hospital in the middle of the night from my residence in Altamount Road, keep my car outside the hospital compound so that no one knew in advance of my presence and quietly enter the building through the outpatient-casualty section. I would move about the hospital, often entering the
wards through the servant’s staircase to see for myself that no one was on duty was misusing his time. I preferred using the small winding staircases for I was able to check also on the cleanliness of the sanitary facilities. Call books were regularly checked and doctors not attending within a reasonable time were disciplined. I would taste the patient’s food from time to time just before it was served to them. I would walk into the student’s hostel and residents’ quarters at midnight to see for myself how they lived and worked. If a light was found burning in a student’s room in the hostel while he was asleep, he would be hauled up.” Today, one may construe this as taking one’s job too seriously but in the context of time it was effective in maintaining the hospital and the college at its peak competence.

However, tending to all these matters personally preordained that Dr. Jivraj had to put in long and arduous hours. One of the many things that would perpetually motivate him was the fact that he was the commander of the first medical institution that was entirely staffed by Indian doctors – a verity that placed them under the constant study of the British IMS officers. The eternal sentiment articulated by the dean was – “We wanted to make them realize what the independent Indian doctors could do without them, nay, in spite of them!” Besides, Dr. Jivraj was a man who believed in practicing before preaching – “When others see you burning the midnight oil at your desk, you will automatically find your example being followed - not perhaps to the same degree but certainly well beyond the expected norms.” No wonder that various departments of the hospital flourished expansively and many brilliant doctors were able to attain their full potential under his rousing leadership. These doctors in turn went out of their ways to support their Dean in his numerous endeavors.

**Contributions to Medical Education in India**

As early as the 1930s, Dr. Jivraj had gauged the fundamental importance of research in medical education. In his capacity as the dean, he made fervent efforts towards securing adequate funds for this enterprise. His appeal to the honoraries, notably Drs. P. C. Bharucha, M. D. D. Gilder, N. A. Purandare and R. N. Cooper, for financial donations to the college research corpus was met with overwhelming response. However, similar requests to the Indian Research Fund Association, the central authority that had been established by the colonial rulers for furthering research, went for nothing. Dr. Jivraj was not one to take such an injustice lying down. When Sir Walter Fletcher, the then Secretary to the British Medical Research Council, visited Bombay to attend a dinner that had been hosted by the eminent research scientist Dr. Raghavendra Row, Dr. Jivraj persuaded him to visit KEM Hospital. He was able to show Sir Walter and his team, the commendable research that was being carried out at the hospital despite the constraints of infrastructure. He also impressed upon Sir Walter the acute need of Government support for such a research program. As was inevitable, the Government sanctioned funds within a few weeks for the same projects through the Indian Research Fund Association. This was just one of the many instances when Dr. Jivraj overcame seemingly insurmountable obstacles in his uncomparable style.

His contributions towards the development of other medical institutions are also legion. When the Government was contemplating establishment of a central medical research institute at Dehradun, Dr. Jivraj along with other distinguished medical personalities like Sir Nilratan Sarkar and Dr. B. C. Roy strongly forwarded the case of the metropolitan city of Delhi (now New Delhi). The government accepted their proposal and subsequently established the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) at Delhi. He was also involved in the planning of the medical colleges and hospitals at Poona (now Pune), Ahmedabad, Nagpur and Aurangabad. In Bombay itself, Dr. Jivraj played a key role in the establishment of the Topiwala Nair Municipal Hospital, Lokmanya Tilak Municipal Hospital and the Dr. Balabai Nanavati Hospital. Evidently, his passion for serving humanity was not limited by the precincts of region.

In recognition of his eminent stature in the field of medical education, he was thrice elected president of the All India Medical Congress and also president of the Indian Medical Association.

**Life Beyond Medicine**

An isolated description of his medical career can do no justice to the multi-faceted personality of Dr. Jivraj. Inspite of his pressing obligations as a medical man, Dr. Jivraj took vigorous part in the independence struggle of his motherland. He was a close associate of many national leaders and would frequently accompany Mahatma Gandhi on his tours. He was twice incarcerated (1938 and 1942) by the British government for his beliefs among which was his role in Gandhiji’s Satyagraha movement. After India attained independence in 1947, Dr. Jivraj graced public office in various positions. He devotedly served people as the first “Diwan” of the erstwhile Baroda state in free India, director general of health services and secretary to the ministry of health in the central government during the partition period, minister of public works, finance, industry and prohibition for the then province of Bombay, first chief minister of the state of Gujarat (1960-65) and subsequently, as the Indian high commissioner to the United Kingdom (1963-66). His deft handling of matters of considerable political and economic significance earned him lasting reverence from his peers and love of the public.

**Valediction**

Dr. Jivraj Mehta personified iron will and dogged determination. Add to that irrefutable veracity, unflinching self-belief, humility and intellectual perspicacity and one gets a colossal character that has few parallels. These were the outstanding qualities that powered his meteoric rise from the dusty Saurashtra to his rightful place as the doyen of medical education in contemporary India.

He had deep-rooted respect for the culture in which he lived yet he was always prepared to break the shackles of the norms and customs that were in disagreement with his principles.
His marriage to Hansaben - who was herself no mean a lady - outside his caste was a powerful illustration of this virtue.

It is not given to many institutions to have men of such substance as their founding fathers. As a tribute to the infinite service that he offered to Seth GS Medical College and KEM Hospital, the main auditorium at these institutions – the auditorium that has been an enduring witness to the roller-coaster history of these establishments – has been aptly named after him as the Jivraj Mehta lecture theatre (JMLT).

Dr. Jivraj Mehta bade farewell to the material world when he passed away peacefully in his sleep on the 7th November 1978. His life is perhaps best recapitulated in Mackey’s lines:

“The smallest effort is not lost,
Each wavelet on the ocean tossed,
Aids in the ebb tide or the flow.
Each raindrop makes some floweret glow,
Each struggle lessens human woe.”

Long live the legacies of Dr. Jivraj Narayan Mehta!

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