

Legend or Myth - Story of an Unsung Hero

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There are times when I have wondered, why our country is not a scientific superpower? We have some of the best brains the world has to offer, and yet, so few Nobel Laureates! But then again, is it a question of best brains? Or does it have something to do with opportunities? Or maybe it is the legendary Red Tape of our glorious nation? But now that we have started talking about brains and red tape, let me tell you a tale of both. About a brain that was probably among the very best; and how the legendary red tape almost successfully turned him into nothing more than a myth.

Dr. Subhash Mukhopadhyay is a name probably few of us have heard. The man to whom this name belongs to was a physician and scientist from Kolkata, India. He was born in Hazaribagh, Bihar, in 1931. He did his MBBS from National Medical College, Kolkata in 1955, standing first in Gynaecology. He also obtained B.Sc (Hons) in Physiology from Calcutta University. In 1958, he completed his PhD in Reproductive Physiology from Calcutta University under the stewardship of Prof. Sachchidananda Banerjee, and in 1967, obtained a PhD from Edinburgh in Reproductive Endocrinology. But his claim to fame and source of shame is something else; something that makes him so remarkable and tragic at the same time.

Dr. Subhash Mukhopadhyay is the near forgotten soul who discovered the easiest and most successful way of producing a test tube baby, and he did it with nothing more than the most primitive of equipments and a household refrigerator. He is also the same person who was driven to suicide for having achieved the same.

Babies born through in-vitro fertilization, known colloquially as test tube babies, are something that have been considered more in the realm of science rather than science fiction for the past thirty six years. And that transition happened on 25th July, 1978, when Dr Patrick Steptoe and Dr Robert Edwards successfully carried out the birth and conception of Louise Brown, the world's first test tube baby, in the UK. 67 days later, on 3rd October, 1978, Durga (alias Kanupriya Agarwal) was born in Kolkata. She was the world's second and India's first baby conceived through IVF, and also the first embryo to come from frozen and thawed ovum, and was the product of Dr Mukhopadhyay's work.

Dr Mukhopadhyay, along with Prof. Sunil Mukherjee, a cryobiologist, and Dr Saroj Kanti Bhattacharyya, a gynaecologist, worked on a method of in vitro fertilization, which was successfully used on a patient with damaged fallopian tubes. Where Dr Steptoe and Dr Edwards had used a laparoscopic approach, Dr Mukhopadhyay used transvaginal colpotomy to harvest the ovum. He was also the first to use human gonadotropins to stimulate oogenesis, and cryopreservation of the embryo. This not only made the procedure easier, but also increased the chances of success manifold.

He presented his findings in the Indian Science Congress, in January 1979, and also published a paper in the Indian Journal of Cryogenics. He discussed his experiment in the "Fifth International Congress on hormonal Steroids 1978" held at New Delhi in November - December 1978. He held discussions with

many other eminent individuals from the world, and was also invited by numerous institutions to speak on the subject of embryo transfer. Among others, an institute that he visited was Gauhati Medical College and Hospital. At the conference of the Gauhati Obstetrical and Gynecological Society, he was presented with a 'Manpatra' or scroll of honour.

But alas, the masterpiece of this desi genius was not meant to get its due. In December 1978, the West Bengal Government set up an Enquiry Committee to look into his claims. The committee was presided over by a Radio physicist and was composed of a gynaecologist, a psychologist, a physicist and a neurologist. The crime Dr Mukhopadhyay had committed that had attracted the wrath of the Great Government were that firstly, his claims seemed bogus and improbable at first sight, secondly, he had announced his findings to the media before being cleared by Government bureaucrats, and thirdly, he claimed to have accomplished this feat with barely any high tech equipment at all and that too in his flat! These mighty people heckled and prodded him on the technique adopted, this despite the fact that none of the committee members had a minimal knowledge of modern reproductive techniques. The committee finally gave its verdict. The Doctor's work was not acknowledged, and he was labeled a fraud!

Mukhopadhyay was denied leave to write a detailed report on his work, and was then subsequently prevented from attending a meeting in Japan to discuss his work. And then to add insult to injury, he was transferred to the Institute of Ophthalmology as professor of electrophysiology which would have prevented any future research with hormones. Facing such humiliation and ostracisation, and suffering from bureaucratic negligence instead of recognition, the Doctor finally succumbed. Dr Subhash Mukhopadhyay committed suicide in his Kolkata residence on 19th June, 1981.

It was only in 1997, when T. C. Anand Kumar- former Director of the Institute of Research in Reproduction, Mumbai, and the man then officially credited with India's first test tube baby in 1986- cleared Dr Mukhopadhyay's name and gave him his due recognition, and published a paper to that effect in "Current Science" April 10th, 1997. It was when he went to Kolkata to attend a Science Congress, he was handed over Dr Mukhopadhyay's own handwritten notes. After going through those meticulously, he concluded that the laurel of creating India's first test tube baby belongs not to him, but to the late Dr Mukhopadhyay. In this endeavour he was helped amply by Prof. Sunil Kumar, the last surviving member of that pioneering team. Subsequently, on her twenty fifth birthday, Durga alias Kanupriya Agarwal, exposed her identity in a ceremony organized in the memory of Dr Mukhopadhyay and confirmed her origin in the lab of that pioneer.

Finally after such prolonged delay, Dr Mukhopadhyay got the honour he deserved. Today his method of combining in-vitro fertilization with cryopreservation of the human embryos is the preferred method of medically assisted reproduction the world over. More than three million test tube babies are born worldwide by the technique pioneered by Dr Mukhopadhyay more than thirty years back. Numerous books have been written and a Bollywood film, 'Ek Doctor Ki Maut', made in his honour. Even the Great Government has now acknowledged his contributions by redesignating the post of Professor of Physiology at the NRS Medical College as the 'Subhash Mukherjee Professor' and also installing a plaque in his memory.

In Sao Paulo, Brazil, on the occasion of 30 years completion of IVF, Brazilian Medical Society recognized and honored him for his incredible achievements. Dr. Subhas Mukhopadhyay is still respected and remembered as someone who invented the most efficient process for the birth of test tube babies.

So to conclude, one of our potential Nobel laureates was driven to suicide, all due to the ignorance of the establishment and a reluctance to acknowledge the existence of such brilliance in our backyard. But hopefully, that will all change in the days to come, and no more of our stalwarts will fall victim to the unforgiving fate of state neglect. Here's hoping for a better and smarter India.

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