

Vulimiri Ramalingaswami

1928-2001



Vulimiri Ramalingaswami, who made seminal contributions in the field of nutrition research in India, delivered the Fifteenth Convocation Address at the Indian Statistical Institute on March 31, 1981. His address entitled “Of Human Numbers And Human Needs” highlighted the problems surrounding the fast population expansion in India since independence and the need of implementation of policies pertaining to family planning and primary health care.

Professor Ramalingaswami, popularly known as Rama, was born on August 8, 1928 in Srikulam, Andhra Pradesh. He obtained his primary medical degree (MBBS) in 1944 and his MD degree in internal medicine in 1946, both from the Andhra University, followed by a D.Phil in pathology in 1951 and D.Sc in 1967 from Oxford University, UK. From his early days, he was interested in pursuing a research career in medical sciences. Following his MD degree, he joined the Nutrition Research Laboratories, Conoor (now known as the Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad). He believed that human diseases could best be understood by research in basic sciences and the requirement of an effective co-ordination of laboratory, clinical and community-based research. His primary interest was in nutritional problems in the developing world, with particular emphasis on protein energy malnutrition, iodine deficiency disorders like endemic goiter, nutritional anemia and liver diseases in the tropics, which included the new clinical entity of non-cirrhotic hypertension. His publications in *Nature* (1964, 201, 546-551) and *Lancet* (1969, 733-735) are well known in the field of pathophysiology of protein-energy malnutrition.

In 1957, Professor Ramalingaswami moved to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) as the founder professor and head of the department of Pathology and later became the Director of the Institute. During his tenure at AIIMS, he

established a leading school in pathology and continued to provide leadership in nutritional research, which was instrumental in the successful rehabilitation of victims of the great Bihar famine of 1967 and the refugees during the Bangladesh war in 1970-1971. His pioneering work on Himalayan endemic goiter carried out on a population of 100,000 in the Kangra Valley was the defining force not only behind India's National Iodine Deficiency Control Programme through iodine fortification of common salt, but also other iodine deficiency control programmes in other regions of the world. He served as the Director-General of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) between 1979 and 1986 during when he envisaged the vision of health planning in India through his goal of "Health for All by the Year 2000. He also initiated research on HIV in India.

In the Convocation Address of the Indian Statistical Institute in 1981, he discussed at length the dynamics of birth and mortality rates of India at that time. He lamented on the inability to bring down the birth rates in India to levels proposed in the Fourth and Fifth Five Year Plans. He also pointed out that the decline in the adult mortality was proportionately more than the decline in the infant and child mortality, a feature not consistent with the health histories of developed countries. In this regard, he emphasized on the need of a close integration of family planning activities with primary health care. He also provided a detailed analysis on the associated economic problems of population expansion: food supplies, housing, unemployment, etc.; and highlighted on the need for population education programmes and technological advances in reproductive health care.

During the later stages of his career, he involved himself in the research of infectious diseases, particularly in the developing world. He was the Chairman of the technical advisory committee set up by the Government to look into the outbreak of bubonic and pneumonic plague in India in 1994. He was the international editor of the journal Emerging Infectious Diseases from 1998 till his death on May 28, 2001.

Professor Ramalingaswami received awards and honours from all over. He received his D.Sc (h.c.) from the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden. He was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of London, Royal College of Physicians of London, the Royal College of Pathologists in London, the American College of Physicians and a foreign associate of the National Academy of Sciences (USA). The numerous awards he received include the CIBA foundation lecture in 1963, Lilly lecture in 1972, Health Clark lecture, Leon Bernard Foundation Award (WHO) and Laque Parisot lecture (WHO). He was also the recipient of the first RD Birla National Award and the highest scientific award in India, the Shanti Swaroop Bhatnagar Award. He was elected the President of the Indian National Science Academy. He was also decorated with the highest civilian honours: Padmashri and Padmabhushan by the Indian Government.

Apart from being a researcher in medical sciences, Professor Ramalingaswami excelled as an amateur theatre actor and a singer. His distinguishing career has been best described by Sir Harold Walter while honouring him with the Leon Bernard Foundation Award: “physician, research scientist, teacher and humanist”.

Article by: Sourav Ghosh, Professor, Anthropology and Human Genetics Unit, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata, India.