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Eulogy for Prof. M.S. Swaminathan; Reminiscences of a disciple.

Rama Narayanan

The passing of Prof. M.S. Swaminathan has created a void in the lives of people whom he touched. They are sure to have many memories about him just like I do. The purpose of this note is to remember and celebrate Professor Swaminathan for the sensitive, wonderful, and caring human being he was.

M.S.S the human being

My association with Professor Swaminathan began in 1991 when I joined a project on Early Childhood Care and Education, headed by Ms. Mina Swaminathan, an expert in Early Childhood Development, at the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation. Though I did not directly work with him at that time, I attended meetings he led and had fleeting glimpses of him in and around the Foundation. While walking down the corridor, he would wave to the gardener, the housekeeping staff, a scientist, or any other staff whom he saw at a distance. He always had a word with any colleague whom he met face to face, even if he or she happened to be a junior person. If he appreciated someone's work, they were sure to receive his warm personal message of approbation. His memory for names and faces was remarkable. He would recognize even a chance acquaintance immediately even if he had not seen them for a decade and remember what they had spoken in the meeting or what he had discussed with them. It was this quality that enabled him to identify and invite the most suitable professionals to participate in any task that he undertook, whether it be a conference or a Task Force. It remained with him till the end. When I had called on him about six months before his demise, he discussed the Nutrition Conclave that we had organized way back in 2007.

He never failed to attend important events in the lives of his colleagues, whether it was a wedding or an obituary, irrespective of their position in the Institution. His humility and respect for another person's time and work was remarkable. He had no hesitation in going to the desk of a much younger colleague and sit with them for a one-to-one discussion. Once when I was engrossed in my work, the intercom buzzed. On picking up, a colleague at the other end asked me to look up. I was startled to find Professor Swaminathan sitting there patiently, waiting for me to finish the job on hand! Quite mortified, I apologized to him. He brushed it aside saying "It is essential not to lose a thought when it occurs. It may not come again. Moreover, it is such a pleasure to see someone absorbed in work".

He deeply loved and respected the farmers of the world. His well loved quote was 'Except for farmers all others are guests in the planet'. He believed in giving farmers due representation in all the national and international conferences, workshops and meetings. In one of the Annual Conferences, organized around the time of his birthday every year, the guest of honour was the President of India. When the security detail suggested that the farmers for whom seats were allotted in the first few rows, be shifted to the back, Professor Swaminathan calmly replied that he would rather cancel the function. He had his way! While everyone outlined the awards that he received, he quietly went about initiating awards and honours for the farming community. Due to his intervention, the Government of India initiated the

‘Genome Saviour Award’ to all those especially from the tribal community who were involved in conservation activities. He disliked referring to users of any socio economic programme as ‘beneficiaries.’ He often said that we, rather than them, were the beneficiaries. He was very sensitive to the key role played by women farmers and the multiple work roles of women. So affected was he by the lack of opportunity for women farmers to credit, technology and training, that he tried hard to introduce the Women Farmers Empowerment Bill in the Parliament when he was nominated to the Rajya Sabha. The *Mahila Sasaktikaran Pariyojana*, a pioneering initiative for women farmers in the Vidarba region, was later adopted by the Government of India. The Foundation’s motto of ‘pro poor, pro women and pro nature’ arose from a truly caring heart.

His work ethics

His passion for work was legendary. He would have reached home at 3 am in the morning after travelling for over 24 hours, but would be at his desk by 8 am ! There was no separate ‘unwinding time’ for him. Work itself was his relaxation and ‘recharge’ button. Till the very end he made it a point to visit the Foundation, which was probably his first home. At the end of the meetings that he chaired, there would be a tea break where we would linger for about ten minutes for a chat. By the time we reached our desks and opened the system, the minutes of the meeting would have been delivered to us ! Whoever wrote to him was sure to receive a reply within 24 hours, whether it was a student from a University asking what course to pursue or the Prime Minister’s office seeking clarification on some issue ! His prompt response to emails was very well known. His time management was exemplary. He would arrive an hour before the scheduled office time and reply to about 400 mails. He would do this task by sitting next to the secretary and dictating to her. Only then would he go to his room. In addition to the scheduled appointments, no one who came to see him without one, would go disappointed. He was very particular in acknowledging all those who contributed in any endeavour, whether orally or in writing.

He strongly believed that scientists had to work with farmers as partners. He did not believe in the concept of ‘demonstration farms’. Rather, he insisted that farmers’ fields should bear testimony to farming solutions proposed by scientists. Farmers had to test for themselves and see if the techniques / technologies worked. This according to him ensured that the scientists were responsible in giving ‘workable and practical’ solutions to farmers’ problems. As a true scientist he was honest in his appraisal of the advantages and disadvantages of any scientific intervention. He believed that completely organic farming was not a viable solution for the increasing need for food production, especially in the wake of diminishing resources. Yet, he was quick to acknowledge the excessive use of chemical fertilizers that he had not foreseen. In fact, he pointed out that the ‘green revolution’ had become ‘greed revolution’. This prompted him to coin the term ‘evergreen revolution’, wherein he advocated that soil testing be made mandatory for maintenance of soil health, while advocating the judicious use of fertilizers.

M.S.S the ‘boss’

I have never seen him throw his weight around to make a point. He did it all by action. It was his practice to go round the Foundation as soon as he arrived in the morning much before everyone else. If he found any desk untidy he would quietly arrange everything neatly and leave. He would not even find out whose desk that was. If you had left your desk untidy and

found it neatly arranged in the morning, then you could be sure that you had been honoured by Professor's visit. This was far more jittery than a reprimand!

He would give you an assignment reposing complete faith in you to do it well. It was also his way of helping you to push your boundaries. In early 2000 when non communicable diseases were emerging as a threat, he deputed me to attend a conference organized by the WHO. When I hesitated saying that was not my area of expertise, he simply said '-- then make it your area. Read, discuss and attend any lecture if possible'. He would quickly assess a person's interest and capabilities and whenever a suitable assignment came his way, would ensure that the person was involved in it. That is how he got me into developing a course on 'Hunger, Famine and Food Security' for the UN University of Peace in Costa Rica and later to chalk out the 'Community Hunger Fighters' Programme, a nutrition literacy project with tribal communities. Once he gave you the job, he would never once ask you as to how it was coming along, or what you were doing, but simply wait for you to complete the task and present it. At the same time he would avidly read whatever reports you submitted and ask relevant questions that sometimes would not have occurred to you. Once I had sent my monthly field report wherein I had described the feeding practices and food intake of the population. He had raised a question as to why in the same community where people had a similar background, access to resources and challenges, there were differences in practices. This made me go back with more enquiries and helped in understanding about support services and communication channels and the way they operated. Even when he found you wanting in a task, he would not have a harsh word but would ask you to put it down as an experience.

His passion for nutrition

While the green revolution ushered in food security, he realized that it required more than calorie adequacy to improve the nutritional status of the population. This recognition came very early in his career and thus began his tryst with nutrition. His widening perception regarding nutrition security was reflected in the statement 'food security at the national level has to be translated into nutrition security at the household level for every man, woman and child'. 'Agricultural remedy for a nutritional malady' was a phrase he often quoted, when talking about nutrition sensitive agriculture. As the Director of Indian Council of Agricultural Research, he wanted to introduce nutrition as a subject in agricultural colleges in India. At that time nutrition was offered as one of the subjects in Home Science education at the undergraduate level. Hence Home Science departments, with nutrition as a major subject were introduced in Agricultural colleges. The last project in which he was actively associated was about leveraging agriculture for nutrition security in South Asia. He had tremendous regard for Dr C. Gopalan, India's leading nutritionist. When the former passed away, he initiated the Gopalan Oration lecture at the Foundation.

His legacy

His biggest legacy was to show how to live well and die well. I am equally awed by his intellectual and professional capabilities as well as his innate humaneness. His soft voice and ever smiling face is etched in my memory. When one of his Professors, Dr Shankaram, a nonagenarian passed away, Professor Swaminathan mentioned in his tribute that a life lived well is not to be mourned but celebrated. True to this, let us celebrate the fact that we lived in the time that he did and had an idol to look up to.