

***The man who brings light***

*May 13, 2003*

Perhaps it is because India is my adopted country and I can still remember the two-fifth of this life spent in France, that something deeply upsets me here. It is the scant respect for what is "made in India". It is only occasionally, when something comes back to India after a videshi round, that it gets its due respect.

One recent proof of this is the exaggerated media reaction to the death of Kalpana Chawla. She was undoubtedly a great professional. Nobody can deny that the end of the Explorer shuttle was tragic, but the fact is that today if someone was to realise a similar or even a greater feat in India, nobody will speak or write about him or her. It is a real tragedy that something purely "made in India" is not treated as great and valuable as a videshi product or realisation.

I recently came across someone who should be a role model for the Indians, a national hero. Unfortunately, very few Indians even know his name. Dr G Venkataswamy, known to his friends and colleagues as "Dr V", was born in 1918 in a small village in Tamil Nadu. After receiving a medical degree from Chennai's Stanley Medical College in 1944, he joined the Indian Army Medical Corps, but had to retire in 1948 after developing severe rheumatoid arthritis. The disease left his fingers crippled. This handicap changed his life. With indomitable courage, he returned to medical school and earned a masters degree in ophthalmology and decided that he would operate patients. Through years of hard work and perseverance, Dr V managed to train himself in holding a scalpel to perform cataract surgery. Today, after 50 years, he has performed over one lakh eye operations. And that is not all. In 1976, after retirement, he decided to start a crusade to eradicate needless blindness from India. His vision was to provide standardised services to the rich and the poor on par with what existed in the Western hospitals while each patient would be treated the same way without taking his income into account.

To achieve this, the Aravind Eye Hospitals would combine modern technology, latest management practices and compassionate care. In 1976, he opened his first 11-bed hospital in a rented house at Madurai. A year later, an additional building which could

accommodate 30 patients, was built. Today, the Aravind Eye Hospitals have five units in Tamil Nadu. The latest addition in Pondicherry was inaugurated this year by his friend, President APJ Abdul Kalam.

The Pondicherry hospital has, like the other units, a high ratio of free beds: 600 beds will be free while only 150 will be paying. The service provided will be same for all. In the year 2000 alone, the Aravind Eye Hospitals handled over one million outpatient visits and performed nearly 2,00,000 surgeries. Who in India knows that Dr V's hospitals, through their network of medical facilities and outreach activities, treat the largest number of eye patients in the world? Shouldn't we feel proud?

One of the guiding concepts of Dr V is the standardisation of the operations. His model is not a swadeshi model, but the McDonald chain of restaurants. About 10 years ago, he asked a Harvard Business School professor: "Tell me, can cataract surgery be marketed like hamburgers? Don't you call it social marketing or something similar? See, in America, McDonald's have mastered the art of mass marketing. We have to do something like that to clear the backlog of 20 million blind in India." His concept was simple. First, all operations had to be standardised to cut the costs. His target were the penniless. The problem was that often the illiterate people did not know they could regain their eyesight, and that too for free! The trick was to go to villages, provide free check-ups, detect the cases of needless blindness and invite the visually impaired to come to one of the centers for the operation.

The management of these "recruiting" camps is so well organised today that many American universities come to study this model which, hopefully, could be replicated elsewhere in the world. Another innovation which helps the self-sufficiency of these hospitals is that instead of importing raw materials, like lenses, sutures, needles, etc., Dr V manufactures these in India, with the same high quality standards as the West, but at a reasonable cost.

President Kalam wrote a poem titled *The Man who brings Light into Life* in honour of his friend. But the question remains. Why isn't Dr V the subject of articles in the Indian press? It would perhaps inspire hundreds of vocations like his and India's face could be changed.