



# Dr. S. M. Mahaluxmivala

## The Legacy Lives On

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Indian J Plast Surg 2023;56:197–200.

We stand on the shoulders of giants who paved the way for us. One such pioneer was Dr. Sam Minocher Mahaluxmivala (► **Fig. 1**). He was 93. A general surgeon by training, an abiding interest in plastic surgery, saw him set up the department in Nair Hospital. He was associated with Topiwala National Medical College and B. Y. L. Nair Charitable Hospital from 1948, when he joined the institutions as a student and, barring 4 months in 1957, up till his retirement in 1989.

He completed his FRCS and had fellowships, both from the United Kingdom and the United States. He was one of the earliest plastic surgeons, not just in Mumbai, but also in India and was the surgeon to many celebrities. In 1961, he started private practice. During this time, apart from gaining attachments to Bombay Hospital and the B. D. Petit Parsi General Hospital, he, along with Dr. K. N. Dastur and Dr. Adenwala, was instrumental in setting up, next to the Taj Mahal Hotel, the prestigious Northcote Nursing Home, which became a byword in luxury medicine. Apart from catering to celebrities, the nursing home became an art house collection, featuring canvases by M. F. Husain, K. H. Ara, Shiavax Chavda, Homi Patel, and Lalitha Lajmi among others.

He laid the foundation for the Department of Plastic Surgery in Nair Hospital. The department was established on January 26, 1964. He was the longest serving head of the department until his retirement in 1989. He mentored and nurtured many of the top plastic surgeons of our time.

During his tenure, he authored a book “Plastic Surgery- A Compendium.” This book had computerized line drawings—an advance far ahead of its time.

In 1984, he was elected as President of Association of Plastic Surgeons of India (APSI)—a post that he held with aplomb. He was one of the earliest presidents of the APSI to take the conference out of a major city as a part of the

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**Fig. 1.** Dr. Sam Minocher Mahaluxmivala.

outreach program. He brought, to the conference, an extraordinary level of attention to detail—organizing return tickets for delegates arriving from out of station (these were pre-Internet times and communication was still via snail mail) and buses for transport of delegates from and to Nair Hospital, thus ensuring that the conference was a resounding success

His love for academics and his urge to proselytize plastic surgery saw him setting up a Burns and Plastic Surgery Department in Saudi Arabia. He was there for 4 years.

I was his fourth student and the first who had had a postgraduate degree under his belt. Dr. Abhay More, Dr. Ashok Shah, and Dr. Vinay Saoji were my predecessors. Up until the time that I joined the department, Dr. Mahaluxmivala was a distant figure to me. Interactions between general surgery and plastic surgery were limited to references and to sending patients, so I was referred to the plastic surgery outpatient department (OPD).

The first time I really met him was after I had been accepted as a student in plastic surgery. When I went for

DOI <https://doi.org/10.1055/s-0043-1770766>.  
ISSN 0970-0358.

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his signatures that signified his acceptance of me as a student, I was more than a little overawed by his presence. Tall, with horn rimmed spectacles that often slid down his prominently beaked nose, and a voice that came close to being stentorian, he could have presented a forbidding

personality, but for the fact that there was an ever-welcoming smile and a twinkle in the eye.

He ran a tight ship. His accent on record keeping and photography both preoperatively and postoperatively resulted in a slew of papers presented at the various





conferences conducted by the APSI. The OPD was conducted on the basis of appointments. Folders of patients scheduled to attend the OPD were to be available for immediate perusal. All patients were supposed to have preoperative and periodic postoperative photographs. In fact, it was not uncommon to see the plastic surgery residents, OPD over, traipsing to the photography department leading a band of patients there to be photographed. He had commandeered a room next to the plastic surgery ward and had managed to get a clerk appointed to help with record keeping and administration. Once in a common while, it would be his practice to enter the room and check the records randomly, thus keeping us punctilious and on our toes.

Appreciation for meticulousness and regularity was met with fulsome praise, and while an occasional lapse was forgiven with a disgruntled frown, regular incompleteness invited more vocal rebukes.

He had a mercurial temper and did not tolerate repeated errors of omission, but the iron fist would always be tempered by the velvet glove. How often is it that, after a particularly severe dressing down More, Ashok, Saoji, and I have been taken to the Willingdon Club for a regal lunch.

His hospitality was legendary and the home reflected his wide-ranging tastes in the arts and craft. An invitation to dinner with family was an event that we still cherish. During those dinners, quite often with our spouses, the topics of discussion were wide and free ranging—ranging from the arts—he had an M. F. Husain in his collection—to classical music especially Western classical music of which he had a wide selection.

As a teacher, he was supportive and extremely encouraging. He was one of the few surgeons who was extremely fond at the Tennison's method of cleft lip repair and residents who passed out from Nair were among the few who were equally adept at both types of repairs. Once he gained confidence in his juniors, he was liberal with independence in surgery and it was quite *usual* to see him relaxing in the surgeons' lounge while we went about completing the list. His presence was purely to instill confidence in his team and to tell them that he had their back.

His humanity to his subordinates and his respect for authority were exemplary. I still remember a running battle that used to take place between the theater in charge—a male nurse who preferred the appellation Sister Patel. Dr. Mahaluxmivala's proboscis was not really designed to hold a mask in place and quite often would be dangerously close to his upper lip. Sister Patel, lying in wait for just this to happen, would growl at him. Sheepishly, Dr. Mahaluxmivala would indicate that his mask be restored to its more appropriate location. When I goaded him to retaliate, at one who was so palpably his subordinate, Dr. Mahaluxmivala just replied that in the theater Sister Patel's rule was supreme and that it was we who were the subordinates. It is a life lesson that I have never forgotten.

Attitudes like this demanded respect from his peers and colleagues and love bordering adulation among his juniors and students. Ethics, honesty, and frankness were qualities he cherished and while he practiced it throughout his life, he expected the same from those around him.

He took a keen interest in the progress of his students and was free both with advice and surgical support. There were

numerous occasions when he would invite his students who were in practice to come to Northcote to demonstrate a surgery that he thought they had developed skills in. I would like to quote here, in Saoji's own words, an incident that happened with him "Some 15 years ago, Dr. Mahaluxmivala was a guest speaker in the Academy of Medical Science at Nagpur. The topic was 'Body Sculpturing.' He began by saying, 'I have come to this city of Nagpur for this lecture, also to meet my colleague, Dr. Sudha Sutaria and to know how my student Vinay Saoji is doing.' I felt so good when my teacher said this in a packed auditorium. You had singled me out for your love and affection! We, residents, will always be indebted to our beloved and respected teacher. He was a towering personality and as a student I bow to him." In comparison to Drs. More, Shah, and Saoji, my association with him was possibly one of the shortest in those days, but the impression it left on me was deep and indelible.

His services to the society extended far beyond the walls of the hospital. He was also a Rotarian at heart and continued

being an integral part of the Rotary Club of Bombay till the end. He was the Honorary Secretary of the club for almost a decade and dedicatedly served on several of the medical committees of the club including the Talwada Medical Committee in the rural outskirts of Mumbai.

He is survived by Madam Mrs Nargesh, son, Dr. Jehangir Mahaluxmivala, and daughters, Pervin and Zarine.

"To live in the hearts we leave behind is never to die." We will miss this great teacher, luminary and, above all, a great human being.

#### Conflict of Interest

None declared.

#### Acknowledgments

My grateful thanks to Dr. Uday Bhatt and Dr. Amit Peswani of B. Y. L. Nair Hospital and T. N. Medical College for the photographs and for help in compiling the timeline of Dr. Mahaluxmivala's career.