

Coluthur Gopalan (1918–2019)

The father of nutrition research in India is no more



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Dr Coluthur Gopalan
(1918–2019)

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Dr Coluthur Gopalan, widely considered as the father of nutrition research in India, is no more. He was responsible for initiating nutrition research in independent India, leading to a number of interventions such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the midday meal scheme

for school children and the goiter prevention program.

Dr Gopalan, decorated with top civilian honors and several professional awards, would have turned 101 on 28 November 2019. He passed away in Chennai on 3 October 2019.

He was the Director of the Hyderabad-based National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) from 1960 to 1974 and Director General of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) from 1974 to 1979. He later founded the National Nutrition Foundation and served as its Chairman till the end.

Starting his professional career in nutrition research at the Nutrition Research Laboratory (NRL) during the British period, he continued his journey over the next six decades. In the late 1950s, NRL moved to Hyderabad and became NIN. Gopalan took over as Director and expanded research to several key areas. Since nutrition is a multidisciplinary subject, he set up divisions for clinical research, biochemistry, bio-physics, endocrinology, analytical chemistry, food toxicology and the field units.

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At NIN, he laid the foundation for research to tackle problems such as protein energy malnutrition, vitamin A deficiency, phrynoderma, lathyrism, fluorosis and pellagra. The National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau (NNMB) was also a result of his labor.

Under his leadership, ICMR expanded research into neglected communicable diseases and modernized the working of the Council. Three new institutes – the Malaria Research Institute, the Vector Control Research Institute and the Leprosy Research Institute – were established to develop and implement preventive and management strategies for these diseases.

Dr Gopalan also got NIN to work on Indian foods, resulting in a publication entitled *Nutritive Value of Indian Foods*, which was based on analyses of over 500 Indian foods. This work was used for calculating the dietary intake of all nutrients. This made India the first developing country to have its own Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs).

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The National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) in India

“NIN today bears testimony to his genius as an architect and father of nutrition sciences in India. Research under his leadership formed the basis of major national nutrition programs initiated in the 1970s – ICDS, Massive Dose Vitamin A and Iron Supplementation,” commented Dr R Hemalatha, Director, NIN.

“Dr Gopalan was a visionary institution builder. He viewed medical and nutrition science from a holistic perspective and

always wanted to address them taking a multidisciplinary and multisectoral approach. His contributions to medical science in general and nutrition science in particular are immense. He, in fact, brought nutrition to center stage and was instrumental in putting it as an important driver in the developmental plans and policies of the country,” said Dr Balram Bhargava, Director General of ICMR.

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Dr Gopalan was conferred with the first FANS Living Legend Award by the Federation of Asian Nutrition Societies (FANS) during the 13th Asian Congress of Nutrition in Bali in August 2019. Dr Gopalan was a founding member of FANS and continued as an honorary executive member until his decease.

His colleagues Al Sommer and Keith West remember him:

Before there was a WHO* (1948), UNICEF (1946), ICNND (1955), NIN (1958), USAID (1961) and DHS (1984); before there were DRIs (1997), and methods of HPLC (1967) and AAS (1955) to assess nutrients; before the synergy of nutrition and infection was published by Scrimshaw, Taylor and Gordon (1959 and 1968); before the emergence of nutritional epidemiology as a discipline (1960s); before there was a Department of International Health at Johns Hopkins (1961) or even an independent India itself (1947), there were the observations, insights and writings of Dr CG Gopalan, physician and nutritionist, addressing the plight of India’s malnourished. May he rest in peace, and his mission carry on.

*** Abbreviations in order of appearance:**

World Health Organization, United Nations Children’s Fund, Interdepartmental Committee on Nutrition for National Defense, National Institute of Nutrition in Hyderabad, US Agency for International Development, Demographic and Health Surveys, Dietary Reference Intakes, high-performance liquid chromatography, atomic absorption spectroscopy.

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