The Man Who Saves Eyesight

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THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: In 1943, three million people died of starvation and malnutrition during the Bengal famine. There was extreme penury all around. But even amid these difficulties, there was a 12-year-old boy who used to dream big every night. He often thought he could easily touch the stars.

"Those days were full of blind faith, superstition and primitive practices," said Dr Mani Lal Bhaumik. Superstitions had Dr Bhaumik's mother remain standing after her delivery, because the umbilical cord was being cut by people of lower caste.

Son of a school teacher, Dr Bhaumik walked four miles on his bare foot to reach school.

Little did he know that despite his poverty, one day, he would grow up to become a renowned name. Dr Bhaumik is the co-inventor of the Laser surgery for the eyes (LASIK).

Speaking about his invention, he says, "Earlier, when laser made a hole, it would burn. But when the experiment was going on, the laser rays accidentally fell on somebody's hand, and it did not burn. The discovery paved the way for corrective eye surgery." Dr Bhaumik says that his team took 10 years to study the pros and cons of the surgery.

When it was pointed out that patients are still reluctant to undergo the surgery, out of fear, he says, "It might be because of lack of awareness. To me, it is as safe as scratching your skin. Around 30 million people worldwide have undergone it. As far as I know, there has not been a single complaint. The success of the surgery depends on the skill of the surgeon. But, undoubtedly, the surgery is a bit expensive."

It was Dr Bhaumik's association with the renowned Indian physicist, Satyendranath Bose, which changed his life. "He was my mentor, who had an independent and brilliant mind," said Dr Bhaumik. "My professor was his student and he introduced me to Bose." And then there was no looking back.

Dr Bhaumik also recollects his one-week stay with Mahatma Gandhi in his ashram. "He did not speak much," says Dr. Bhaumik. "But whenever he spoke, it was a gem. He was highly disciplined. We had to get up at the crack of dawn. By this time, the hymn, 'Raghupati Raghava Raja ram', would be reverberating everywhere."

Dr Bhaumik was at Kochi recently to deliver a talk at the Photonics Department of CUSAT. And despite having lived for 55 years in the United States, he is an Indian in every sense. "The West has achieved a lot, but whenever they feel a vacuum, they turn to India," says Dr Bhaumik. "A blend of East and West can do wonders for you."

Nevertheless, he reiterates the bond that binds everyone in this world. "The particles with which the universe is made up of is from a single source and interconnected," he says. "If the world knows this fact, there would not be any religious wars."

Dr Bhaumik has won many awards including the Padma Shri, in 2011, for his achievements in the field of science and engineering. He has also set up the Mani Bhaumik Educational Foundation, Kolkata, which funds the university education of several underprivileged but meritorious students from rural Bengal. And, recently, the man, who was born in poverty, donated $150 million to the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, his alma mater. His book, 'Code Name God: The Spiritual Odyssey of a Man of Science', which became a best-seller has been translated into 100 languages.