

## ONLINE ONLY

OBITUARY

## Dr Sunil Pandya: Neurosurgery was just one facet of his life

BINDU DESAI

**Ward X KEM Hospital**

I first saw Sunil Pandya in 1967, when I was a medical student. He worked on Ward X, the Neurology/Neurosurgery ward, in King Edward VII Memorial (KEM) Hospital, headed by Dr Homi Dastur, an eminent neurosurgeon who had established a 40-bed unit with an independent operation theatre.

This unit was looked upon with awe by all GOSUMECS (students of the Seth Gordhandas Sunderdas Medical College or GSMC). The trio of Drs Dastur, Pandya, both neurosurgeons and Anil Desai, a neurologist, had a reputation for professional excellence, commitment to public service and ethical integrity that inspired us, then quite cynical and typical “know-it-all” students.

**The Sunil I knew**

I have so much to share about Sunil, it would require an entire biography. Just our emails since 2005, and letters before that, come to several hundred! He was the exception to the overwhelming majority of medical professionals whose natural tendency is to be “cultural deserts”.

I will give you a very brief account of the man I knew.

His mother's impact on him was profound. She had kept the family going through hard times, with money often not available for the next month's rent. Yet when he grew up, money or power held no special attraction for him, and he never sought either. Sunil was bespectacled, with bright sparkling eyes, cheerful, in shirtsleeves and trousers, never in a tie or suit. Easy going, though with a depth that seemed bottomless.

I got to know him personally in the early 1980s, when I was home from the US. I had made several hundred slides based on JD Bernal's four-volume *Science in History*. Sunil got interested in this right away; so I was invited to give a weekly talk at the Neurosurgical library which Sunil, who I wrote of as SKP, listened to with rapt attention. Several weeks later I heard that the Neurosurgery staff had no choice but to attend, as Sunil attended the talk, but he was the only attentive listener!

Thus began a friendship that spanned over four decades. Whenever I was in Bombay, he was among the first people I would connect with. My sisters and I would be invited to a sumptuous feast at his home. After we had eaten and were chatting around the dining table, Sunil would get up and offer

us ice cream. Most of us were too full and declined, and his face would fall, till one of the guests accepted his offer.

His interests literally spanned the alphabet from Art describing Van Gogh's genius to Zoology — what dogs do all day. I catalogued the emails we shared, a task that took several days. I will share excerpts of a small sample that illuminates what he was like. They tell us of his world view, one that was universal and compassionate; but neither dogmatic nor polemical.

I was stunned by all the categories his emails covered:

There were biographies of friends and the famous — of Dr Jivraj Mehta, first Dean of Seth GS Medical College, of leaders in Indian neurology and neurosurgery, Drs Noshir Wadia and Gajendra Sinh, to British Nobelists Dorothy Hodgkin and the US's Dr Harry Zimmerman; of dear colleagues like Anil Pilgaonkar; of cricketers like Ranjit Sinh, and of the first woman to join the Indian Foreign Service in 1949 — CB Muthamma.

On civilisation, he shared a wonderful anecdote of Margaret Mead on the first sign of civilisation: “Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts... We are at our best when we serve others. Be civilized.” This sentence could also be said to sum up Sunil himself.

His thinking on culture embodied what Jawaharlal Nehru said culture should be — a widening of the mind and the spirit. He shared the advice of Chief Dan George, chief of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation in Canada, of “a love that gives the terrible sufferings your culture brought ours when it swept over us like a wave crashing along a beach... with a love that forgets and lifts up its head and sees in your eyes an answering love of trust and acceptance. This is brotherhood... anything less is not worthy of the name.”

In his field, he came across death often and had to engage with patients' families on end-of-life issues. He sent friends a 2003 book titled *When children die*, an essay “Why I hope to die at 75”, and a letter Rachel Carson wrote about death: “For the Monarch [a butterfly], that cycle is measured in a known span of months. For ourselves, the measure is something else, the span of which we cannot know. But the thought is the same: when that intangible cycle has run its course it is a natural and not unhappy thing that a life comes to an end.” [<https://www.themarginalian.org/2017/01/13/rachel-carson-dorothy-freeman-letters/>]

After reviewing brain death, euthanasia, advance directives, and living wills, Sunil wrote in the 2015 article titled "As I approach the end of my life," published in the *Journal of Postgraduate Medicine*: "...as I approach "the last scene of all," I view death as a final event and a logical termination of life. It holds no terror." [https://doi.org/10.4103/0022-3859.166507]

## On Ethics

Reviewing a book by the grandson of Dr William Scoville, a neurosurgeon in Hartford, Ct, USA Sunil called it "a case study in medical ethics". It dealt with an operation for epilepsy performed on a patient, Henry Molaison, by Dr. Scoville, in the 1940s, for the latter's intractable epilepsy. Dr. Scoville removed large portions of both of Mr. Molaison's temporal lobes. Sunil recounted "During surgery Dr. Scoville could find no abnormality in the temporal lobes. Records of the electrical activity of these lobes also showed no abnormality. Certainly, there was no localised area from which epileptic discharges could be identified. Had there been visible disease or an identifiable source of fits, this part of the brain could have been removed to render Henry fit-free." [https://doi.org/10.20529/IJME.2017.087]

Sunil continued: "Most neurosurgeons would have shrugged their shoulders and closed up the wound..... even a surgeon of the eminence of Dr Wilder Penfield would have conceded defeat, as there was no hint of the origin of the seizures... This was particularly important in those days when the functions of the temporal lobes were not as well understood as they are today. Mr. Molaison developed severe loss of memory to the extent that a few minutes after meeting someone, he had no recollection of the meeting, and he could not find his way to his own home."

Further, Sunil commented: "Were such an operation to be performed under modern circumstances, the neurosurgeon would find himself in deep trouble. At the least, Dr Scoville would have been accused of medical adventurism, acting outside accepted medical practice. The permanent handicaps that Henry Molaison suffered would result in heavy damages imposed by a court of law."

While he felt strongly about ethical decisions in surgery, Sunil regarded criticism of Dr Marion Sims for operating on enslaved women, as being "at risk of being assessed for events of a certain period using the principles, views and practices prevalent in our times." He pointed out that Sims' operations helped in treating the scourge of vesicovaginal fistulae, which "continue to occur in underdeveloped parts of the world despite the knowledge we possess to prevent them." And included an abstract regarding the same.

I argued: "Yes, but that doesn't mean he should be honoured with multiple statues...."

## On family and friends

He was a caring and concerned friend whom I relied on for advice. He helped in countless ways, suggesting consultants'

names, giving me their contact details and saying I could tell the doctor he had given me their name. Lo and behold, consultants with weeks or even month-long waiting lists for appointments would schedule one the very next day!

In the mid-eighties, I came from Chicago to interview for a position of Reader in Neurology at KEM hospital. As I was due to leave for the US soon, Sunil suggested that we go to the Municipal Commissioner's Office to get a sense of the likelihood of my being chosen for the position. He took the trouble to accompany me to that office, at a distance of several kilometres, and gently asked the obviously reticent assistant where I stood as, if chosen, I would not return to the US etc. The assistant's respect for Sunil was evident and after some humming and hawing indicated obliquely that I had not been selected. For Sunil to go out of his way, busy as he was, was typical.

He was loved by my entire family, and he loved them in return. When my mother died in 1996, he wrote individual letters to my family and me. He captured grief as only he could. To my family he wrote "A vital link with the past has been broken. Memories must have come floating into your minds.... ranging from childhood to the recent past, of good times and not so happy times". To me he wrote what I have remembered since: "I wish you equanimity; especially in the still, silent hours of the night when myriads of thoughts rush unbidden to create a kaleidoscope of images upon the mind's eye. As you ponder on a wide range of shared experiences over the decades past, may you hold fast to those that brought all of you a measure of joy". I could tell him about my family members and close friends who had died, and he seemed to instinctively understand why the loss was so great.

When my sisters died, Jyoti in 2014, and Pritiben a year later, his remarks were heartfelt, describing Jyoti as "so full of laughter and joy"; and Pritiben as "friendship, generosity, concern and dignity personified."

He thought very highly of Pritiben. Indeed, when I had been visiting him weekly in 2011 as he was recovering from a back injury, Pritiben once asked whether she could accompany me. Sure, I said, and as we entered his flat a beautiful smile lit up Sunil's face. I couldn't help noticing it and protested that in all the weeks I had come, no such smile greeted me! He smiled at me with an expression that implied that a woman of grace and elegance such as Pritiben naturally elicited such a response!

I almost always got a reply to any email I sent him. His reaction to a piece where I said that, as a child, I would talk to trees, and indeed one of the nicknames for me was "Chatterbox"! Sunil's reply was typical of him:

"Dear unvarnished eccentric / chatterbox,

Thank goodness you have remained untainted by unwanted adult influences whilst you were a child."

## On Gandhiji

Sunil's admiration and regard for Gandhiji was woven into his life. There were Gandhiji's comments about time "You may not waste a grain of rice or a scrap of paper, and similarly a minute of your time, it is not ours. It belongs to the nation, and we are trustees for the use of it." Sunil lived that!

There were messages regarding Gandhiji's glasses, about an entire journal issue on medical aspects of Gandhiji's life, which included an ECG of the Mahatma. Sunil had not been to Sabarmati Ashram, but it was to be at the top of his list when he next went to Ahmedabad.

The Gandhiji Sunil admired is evident in these quotes he sent from the Mahatma: "I was born a Hindu, no doubt. No one can undo the fact. But I am also a Muslim because I am a good Hindu. In the same way, I am also a Parsi and a Christian too." — (Mahatma Gandhi, 30 May 1947).

Reacting to Milie Polak's 1931 book *Mr. Gandhi: The Man*, Sunil wrote in 2024:

"But his message will live forever don't you think? His life, work and teachings are immortal. The message needs to be studied, pondered and incorporated into actions. For this to happen, those in power, in particular, need to be awake to it and heed it. Alas! Today this is not so as everyone scrambles for votes and power."

## A passion for history

Whether it was local or international history, Sunil was fascinated by it and full of information. On the Parsi community, his letters ranged from Bombay Parsis to Parsis as pioneers in the "soda" industry, to Parsi car owners. He shared a documentary on Parsis, and told us why we have two Parsi New Years!

He also informed us about doctors with streets named after them in Bombay, the making of Marine Drive; a long essay on 'How KEM [hospital] influenced doctors.' He wrote about remembering the song '*Mumbai Meri Jaan*'; and about photos of what was once the BB and CI (Bombay, Baroda and Central Indian Railway) and is now the Western Railways Headquarters, a superb example of Indo-Saracenic architecture.

The day after International Women's Day in 2018, he wrote that when one is asked to name important inventors you might start off with Alexander Graham Bell, Leonardo da Vinci, or Thomas Edison. You probably wouldn't mention Ada Lovelace, whose work on how to code a computer (which hadn't even been built at the time) to use letters and numbers was published in 1843, making her the first computer programmer in history or Josephine Cochrane, who created a motor-powered dishwasher in a shed behind the house, received a patent in 1886 and founded a company to manufacture the machines, which were initially sold to restaurants and hotels, rather than households. Sunil added

that we might never have heard of them, but they are just two of the female inventors behind everyday objects and scientific innovations, attaching a link which detailed 12 inventions we wouldn't have today if it weren't for these ground-breaking women.

## On Indian history

Sunil shared a column by Jawed Naqvi about the pogrom in Gujarat in February 2002, detailing the events – the wanton killings, the destruction of venerated graves.... He then shared with me a poignant letter written by Ruttie Jinnah in 1928 to Mohammed Ali Jinnah; sent me information about the evolution of the Indian flag from 1906 to 1947, and the front page of *The Times of India* on August 15 1947, with the banner headline: "Birth of India's Freedom," along with a photo album of Nehru – brought out by *The Times of India* on November 14, 1964. His emails ranged from: a brief history of Pune, to the Emperor Akbar agreeing to Dastoor Meherji Rana's request to keep the sacred fire burning day and night at the palace; to Aaliya Sultana Babi, the force behind the preservation of the rare dinosaur fossil beds at Raiyoli's Balasinor Fossil Park since 2016; from 50 facts about the Indian Railway to the sale of her heirloom Jubilee Diamond (254 carats) by Meherbai Tata, to fund the setting up of the Tata Memorial Cancer Research Foundation, which SKP valued more than the Taj Mahal.

## On Palestine

Sunil mourned the death in Gaza, of Dr Haider Abdel Shafi, and called him "a great physician with true love for his countrymen." A little later, he made us aware that Gauze was traditionally woven in the Gaza region of Palestine and that the English word is said to derive from the place name for Gaza [3] (Arabic: غزة ghazza), a center of weaving in the region.

## On slavery

He sent excerpts of Aime Cesaire's writing: "The slave ship! ... I hear coming up from the hold enchained curses, the death gasps of the dying, the sound of someone thrown into the sea ... the baying of a woman in labor ... the scraping of fingernails searching for throats ... the flouts of the whip ... the seething of vermin amidst the weariness." (From *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* ... by Aime Cesaire translated by Clayton Eshleman & Annette Smith)

Sunil commented: "The exhilarating lucidity and force of the second passage, its ideological potency and compression of historical subject matter through detail - these remain as cogent and persuasive today as they were in the late thirties."

## On the United States

He informed us of Benjamin Banneker's 18th century *Almanac of Strange Dreams*. Banneker was an African

American mathematician and astronomer and represented the fascinating relationship between science and religion (11/18/2024).

Of William EB DuBois' letter to his daughter Yolanda:

"You, however, must not laugh at yourself. You must know that brown is as pretty as white or prettier and crinkley hair as straight even though it is harder to comb. The main thing is the YOU beneath the clothes and skin - the ability to do, the will to conquer, the determination to understand and know this great, wonderful, curious world."

### Miscellaneous points

- He wrote on the similarity between *Namaz* and *Namaste*;
- On my travel essay: On Maine (08/01/2011) Sunil wrote: "The stars are in their correct positions, so I was able to read your delightful essay on your life and times in Maine. You have captured the beauty, the cold and the frustrations of living there very well indeed. You are a natural author. I strongly urge you to expand each of your essays and incorporate them into a book. *Travels with Bindu* would be a delightful guide to many. And those fated never to visit the places you write about will I earn to marvel about them through your eyes"

Sunil was also full of fun and here are a few examples:

- In 2018, under the title "An interesting limerick on the family Stein" he sent a delightful email: This appeared in an obituary note on Godfrey Smith, editor of the *Sunday Times Magazine* (London) who was thinking of commissioning an essay based on the principal characters in a limerick which was called 'The Steins'
- 'There's Ep and there's Gert and there's Ein  
The wonderful family Stein  
Ep's sculpture is junk  
Gert's poems are bunk  
And nobody understands Ein.'
- In 2019, he shared an article about the need for a Professor of Stupidity! The article quoted Bertrand Russell's view of the organised fervour of stupid and brutal people – two qualities, he noted, that 'usually go together.' Russell went on to make one of his most famous observations, that the 'fundamental cause of the trouble is that in the modern world the stupid are cocksure while the intelligent are full of doubt.'

There were emails with attachments to enjoy in great depth: Science, art, literature, neurosciences, and reviews!

### Obituaries

Of an obituary I wrote about my friend Maltiben Jhaveri in 2014, who besides much else, founded The Climbers Club in Bombay. He replied: "An excellent tribute to an obviously

remarkable person! You have, indeed, been blessed to have such wonderful persons around you from childhood. You have a rich legacy from them."

Of colleagues, Dr Manubhai Kothari (12/17/2014) and Dr Bhandarkar (09/18/2020) both kindred spirits at KEM Hospital, he described the former as having an "encyclopedic mind ranged over a vast range of topics and his photographic memory" and the latter as "A tall and mild-mannered man, an inspirational figurehead, Bhandarkar shall be remembered as a clinician, scientist, and researcher, but above all, as a gentle human being."

He sent me a detailed Obituary of Gieve Patel, doctor, artist, sculptor, poet and playwright, on May 2, 2024.

### On poetry

He was a poet at heart, I think.

He shared quotes from over two dozen poets, from Maya Angelou to William Wordsworth, covering American, British, Chilean, Indian, and Lebanese, to Palestinian poets.

He especially loved Mahadev Desai's Gujarati translation of Tagore's *Ekla Chalo re*.

### Quotes sent by Sunil

Jim Cullen in 2022: This message was titled 'A sobering thought' ... "other animals prey and kill; only humans kill and pray."

Marian Anderson: When I sing, I don't want them to see that my face is black; I don't want them to see that my face is white - I want them to see my soul. And that is colourless.

George Bernard Shaw: on X'mas, writing to the *Reynold's News*:

"Christmas is for me simply a nuisance. The mob supports it as a carnival of mendacity, gluttony, and drunkenness. Fifty years ago, I invented a society for the abolition of Christmas. So far, I am the only member. That is all I have to say on the subject."

Albert Einstein: Weak people revenge. Strong people forgive. Intelligent people ignore. The difference between stupidity and genius is that genius has its limits. The only thing more dangerous than ignorance is arrogance.

Carl Sagan: You go talk to kindergarteners or first-grade kids, you find a class full of science enthusiasts. They ask deep questions. They ask, "What is a dream, why do we have toes, why is the moon round, what is the birthday of the world, why is grass green?"

These are profound, important questions.

They just bubble right out of them.

You go talk to 12th graders and there's none of that.

They've become incurious. Something terrible has happened between kindergarten and 12th grade.



## As a teacher

Sunil was so many things, but teaching was very important to him. He sent these Ten Commandments that Bertrand Russell advised a teacher to follow (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-nature-nurture-nietzsche-blog/201509/bertrand-russells-tencommandments-0>), and Sunil embodied them all! (Nov 11, 2024)

- 1: Do not feel absolutely certain of anything.
- 2: Do not think it worthwhile to produce belief by concealing evidence, for the evidence is sure to come to light.
- 3: Never try to discourage thinking, for you are sure to succeed.
- 4: When you meet with opposition, even if it should be from your husband or your children, endeavour to overcome it by argument and not by authority, for a victory dependent upon authority is unreal and illusory.
- 5: Have no respect for the authority of others, for there are always contrary authorities to be found.
- 6: Do not use power to suppress opinions you think pernicious, for if you do, the opinions will suppress you.
- 7: Do not fear to be eccentric in opinion, for every opinion now accepted was once eccentric.
- 8: Find more pleasure in intelligent dissent than in passive agreement, for, if you value intelligence as you should, the former implies a deeper agreement than the latter.
- 9: Be scrupulously truthful, even when truth is inconvenient, for it is more inconvenient when you try to conceal it.

10. Do not feel envious of the happiness of those who live in a fool's paradise, for only a fool will think that it is happiness.

Sunil loved this poem, and I end with it:

### ***"Hope" is the thing with feathers by Emily Dickinson***

Hope" is the thing with feathers —  
That perches in the soul —  
And sings the tune without the words —  
And never stops — at all —

And sweetest — in the Gale — is heard —  
And sore must be the storm —  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm —

I've heard it in the chilliest land —  
And on the strangest Sea —  
Yet — never — in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb — of me.

Yes, he was always hopeful and reminding us of the good we are capable of.... Like all of you, I miss him terribly, but I believe that he lives on in all the acts we undertake to help others...

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**Author:** Bindu T Desai (btidesai@icloud.com), Retired Neurologist, 555 Pierce ST, Apt 1422, Albany, CA, 94706, USA.

**Conflict of Interest:** None declared

**Funding:** None

**To cite:** Desai BT. Dr Sunil Pandya: Neurosurgery was just one facet of his life. *Indian J Med Ethics*. Published online first on August 5, 2025. DOI: 10.20529/IJME.2025.060

**Manuscript Editor:** Meenakshi D'Cruz

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