

THROUGH MY EYES

MY RENDEZVOUS WITH PROF. M. S. SWAMINATHAN

THE MAN IN THE TEXTBOOK

FIRST ENCOUNTER

RESEARCH

AT MSSRF

KEYNOTES AND TRAVEL

MENTOR TO FAMILY



A Centenary Tribute (1925–2025)

MEMOIR OF

LATHA RANGAN



Disclaimer: This memoir is a personal reflection based on my individual experiences, memories, and interactions with Professor M. S. Swaminathan over the years. It is not an official statement or endorsement by the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) or any other institution. While I have taken care to present events truthfully and respectfully, any errors or misinterpretations are entirely my own. This document is intended as a tribute to a remarkable human being and mentor who had a profound impact on my life, both professionally and personally.

The Man in the Textbook



It all began in 1992 when I was pursuing my undergraduate course in Botany from Vaishnav College for Women, Chennai. As a mark of the Institute's Silver Jubilee Celebration, different Department Festivals were organized, and for our department, it was 'Madhullika'; the Chief Guest for the function was none other than Professor M.S. Swaminathan, and we were informed about this in advance. I saw him from a distance and was awed by his composure, radiance and

humility. I grabbed the opportunity to meet and talk to him, evading and ignoring my batch mates and other college friends. In my third year of B.Sc., we had a Plant Breeding subject and the first page of one chapter featured a picture of Prof. M.S. Swaminathan. I had the book in my hand and asked Professor Swaminathan if the photo was of him. He simply smiled. Of course, it was him, and it was naive of me to ask that question upfront. When he said it was him, I requested for an autograph. He asked for my name and shared his views about plant breeding practices and the story behind that photo. Professor Swaminathan again smiled and wished me the best. Little did I know that in a few years down the line, I would be blessed to work in his organization and be personally mentored and guided by him.

Joining MSSRF: A dream realized

In 1996, I got the golden opportunity to join the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), Chennai, as a Research Assistant in the Tissue Culture Laboratory. When I first entered MSSRF, the place felt sacred, serene, almost divine, as if it were an outward reflection of Prof. Swaminathan's inner self in a physical format. Foundation Day Annual events were a regular feature. That year, in April, I had the chance to speak with Prof. Swaminathan (hereafter Prof, as I used to call him fondly) along with my senior, Dr. Jayanthi, who presented the report and our lab's work. Prof recognized me immediately when I mentioned we had met before. Prof's memory, recollection of events, and remembering of names were terrific and out of the World. Like others, I wondered about this quality and remained clueless. Perhaps this quality took him to a position that cannot be imitated, practiced, or dreamed of, but only admired, worshipped and respected.

Seeds of Mentorship

The work culture and ambience at MSSRF were as good as Prof had envisioned – harmonious, inclusive, and nurturing. When Prof was in station, he would be the first to arrive with his infectious smile and greeting everyone, starting from the security personnel posted at the entrance to the receptionist. To him, everyone was his family member and an integral part of MSSRF, and there was no hierarchy or division of labour. He made it a point to visit every laboratory, checking on the progress and offering words of encouragement. During one such visit to the Tissue Culture Lab, he enquired about my work and insisted that I work on a halo-tolerant rice relative for my Ph.D. programme. I could not have asked for a better beginning. The seeds for my Ph.D. were sown, and directions were also given. Incidentally, I had also cleared my Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) Exam and was ready to do my research, Prof agreed to be my Guide. It was then that I began to work more closely with him, and his vision, 20 years ahead of its time, stood by his conviction and guided me throughout my research. In a very humble and subtle way, he made us to step outside the boundaries of our research, which, in retrospect, had far-reaching consequences in my life and certainly a factor of boon for my own personal and professional scaling. Prof had a unique and signature style of identifying talents beyond defined boundaries and would convince all. This was his scientific charisma that only very few individuals are bestowed with. I have never seen him lose his control or temperament, but his disagreement or disappointment would be effectively conveyed in a dignified, acceptable manner.

Late nights, Early wisdoms

Many of us used to work late hours in our laboratories, and the place was isolated in the evenings. Although safe, it was a concern to our well-wishers, including Prof. He would ensure that someone was around to see us safely to the nearest bus stop or used to give us a ride in his car if he spotted us walking, and if there was slight hesitation or refusal, he used to insist with a smile. This was the case for all his staff, students, and other well-known pupils. His genuine care for us was evident in everything he did – his affection, his attention to detail, and his unwavering commitment to our well-being. He truly personified the simplicity and greatness in his appearance, thinking, and actions, and incidentally, all converged - a very rare feat indeed.



MSSRF was no less than a scientific heaven, where we had a conglomeration of pure genius and great minds from around the World, coming and visiting as guests, speakers, panellists, etc. It was Prof who introduced and allowed us to meet, interact and discuss with big stalwarts during events, conferences, and meetings. This was a regular saga in MSSRF, it became a culture, and I could see the kind

of respect from various quarters, everyone trying to get to know or introduce themselves to Prof. He used to oblige without an iota of air, frustration or restlessness. One can very well imagine the demanding role and responsibilities of Prof, as Chairperson of a world-class organization, sought-after scientist, educationist, mastermind, think-tanker, chief patron of many pro-poor, pro-women and pro-nature activities, and above all, the Messiah of Indian Agriculture, the kind of toll on the body and mind is immeasurable. But never did I see him giving any excuse, time limitation or hurriedness in my last three decades of association with him. Whenever I approached Prof with any problems, it appeared that he had all the time on Earth to lend his ears with compassion, comforting words and, of course, a viable solution.

A lecture in London and a lesson in humility

Prof was open to criticism for any review and never saw or judged where it came from. There was no discrimination as far as age, gender, or qualification was concerned when he wanted or looked for any review and embraced open comments. I recall vividly the association I shared with Prof on a reciprocal basis with regard to scientific presentations. When I was invited to celebrate the ‘50 years of DNA Double Helix- Legacy of Watson and Crick’, it was a kind of homecoming for me to MSSRF in 2003. I had to give a presentation, and I was nervous. It was a self-imposed pressure; Prof quickly noticed and took steps forward to put me at ease, which was much needed at that juncture. Perhaps he could feel and sense the fact that a young Post Doc representing her Institution stood exposed in front of scientific heavyweights. He took the liberty to introduce me to the audience and added words of encouragement that lifted me. I not only survived, but that was my first foot forward as a speaker amidst

the scientific community. Later in the evening, Prof told me that he was happy with my presentation and I did a good job except for the fact that I was rushing through and very fast. His precise comments were, 'The scientific merit of such sound work was overtaken by my speed.' This is exactly the role of a mentor and Guide, and he was a true champion of the same, which made me see both my weaknesses and strengths. He also shared that there is always a take-home message in every presentation, and we should be smart and quick enough to absorb it. This mantra of his I have tried to carry forward to date.

I was fortunate enough to be a participant and a minor contributor to many of his speeches in India and overseas. It was in 2002 that he was invited as a keynote speaker at the London Museum along with the elites of Sir David Attenborough, another great legend. Prof's presentation was on "Looking Beyond Green Revolution and Way Forward". His delivery, impeccable timing and ability to relate things by drawing analogies to real-life scenarios were beyond imagination, and finally concluded with quotes of three Indian Legends: Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekanand and Rabindranath Tagore. However, I was unhappy that day, mainly because the slides' colour combinations, format, and style did not appeal to me personally. After his presentation, Prof asked my opinion, and I was quick and straight enough to express my views about the slides, which he took very positively. Prof always gave us the freedom to express our likes and dislikes. After this incident, I witnessed how Prof took note of my views seriously and ensured that his slides were visible, legible, clear bowl, and appealing, even from a distance. Subject matter and content were never doubted earlier, either. In fact, in 2008, when I was in the audience and he was delivering the Keynote Lecture at the

Indian Science Congress, addressing the masses, he asked openly if his slides were visible to all, especially to those in the back seats. It was very humorous of him to state that he was advised by one of his students to keep the slides bold and clean. I could not help but smile, and I could see Prof smiling, too. We relived that moment together.

Growing under his wings

My connections and regular touch with my teachers were to my advantage. During the course of my Ph.D. at MSSRF, I had an opportunity to go for training at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) Philippines. For all rice researchers, it's a must-visit place, and I was excited. A day before my departure, I noticed a small envelope on my working table and was kept there by Prof himself. I opened the envelope and saw some currencies and a small note. I went to meet Prof and sought his blessings. Until then, I did not know that Prof had served as Director General of IRRI, the first Asian to head that post of a CGIAR Institute. He gave me some directions and known contacts and wished me to come back safely after productive training. Prof had an eye, ear, and feel for small things and valued them so much. It was overwhelming to see that the orientation of the Workshop took place in the very IRRI building named after Prof in his honour. Everyone who learned that I was from MSSRF came and spoke to me at length about Prof. Instantly, I felt connected. During my Ph.D. research work at IRRI, Prof cemented me to all other great scientists and researchers working in the rice field. I was over the moon and truly felt privileged.

From mentor to family

Prof had great taste and love for Indian classical music and culture. He used to hymn now and then near the MSSRF corridors, in his car while travelling, and not many knew about this. This was revealed to me by Prof's personal secretary for a very long time, Ms. Sridevi, a very good close friend, an associate of mine, and a true well-wisher. Sridevi and I stayed in the same area in Chennai and used to travel many times together to and back from MSSRF on regular working days. Prof's hidden passion for music, culture, food, and travel was disclosed by Sridevi, of course, not without his due knowledge.



Prof used to take time to treat this passion whenever the opportunity struck. The Music Festival in December is famous in Chennai, and music lovers worldwide go there. I observed that Prof used to miss his hectic travels, especially in December, to probably feed his passion. My observations were spot on, as confirmed by Sridevi. It was again amazing to see on a reciprocal basis the respect and admiration Prof commanded from people of different quarters. Prof invited MS Subbulakshmi to come to MSSRF for the inauguration of JRD Tata Ecotechnology Centre and to deliver the invocation, and instantly, she agreed. Meeting, listening and seeing the two great legends was no less than a visual delight.

A Name, A Blessing, A Bond

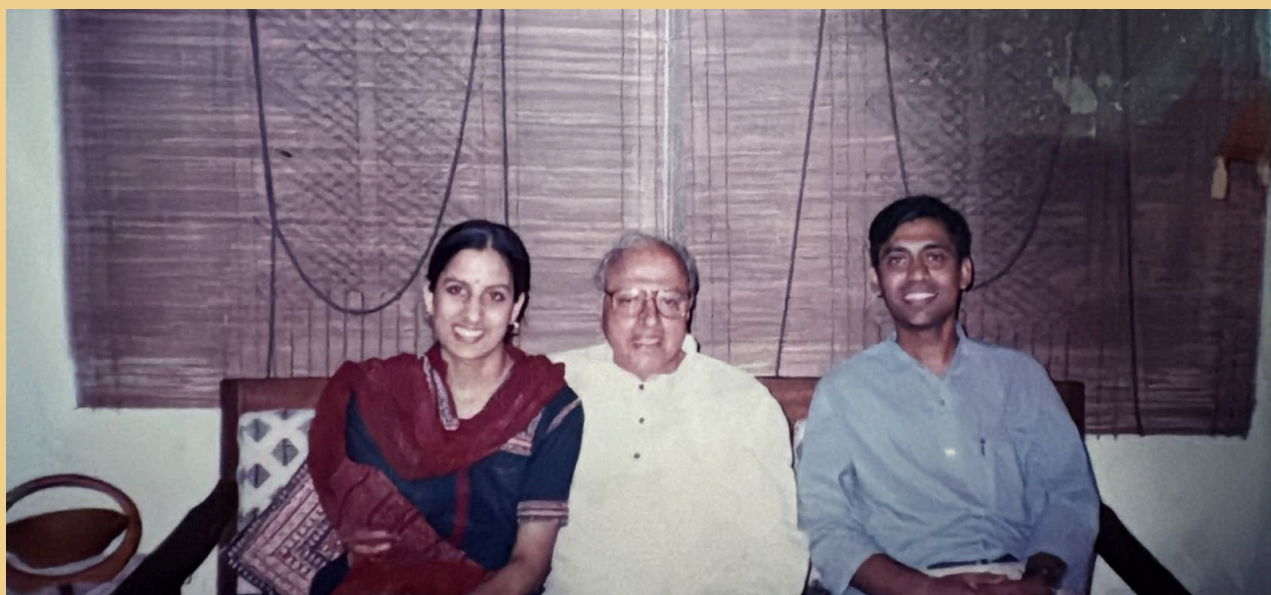
Sridevi and I were fortunate to travel and accompany Prof on a trip to Tirupati and seek the blessings of Lord Venkateshwara. Brahma Muhurta and witnessing the early morning darshan of the Deity with a backdrop of Subhprabhatam is a rare feat and only entitled to the most elite and VVIPs. For us, it was a dream come true, all thanks to Prof. We were not prepared, but Prof knew all and shielded us and took care of us like a father figure. Our trip was then marked with his presentation at SV University, and I could only see people far off till my eyes could see. This speaks volumes of his reach and his being a truly Public Figure, garnering respect and adulation from all quarters.



Personal touch, empathy and consideration are other qualities of Prof that cannot be missed. In my personal life, Prof showered all of these on me. My father had met with an accident and was admitted to the hospital. It was a very challenging phase of my life, and I did not share it with many. Somehow, Prof learned about this (maybe from Sridevi) and immediately took the required steps to meet with an orthopedic

doctor, among other things. Prof's intervention in the matter came like God's calling. His position in my life scaled to another level altogether. When my father passed away, I did not disclose to Prof knowing his age, but he still got to know somehow and reached out to me personally. He showed his disappointment, which was the first time I got a scolding from him, although in a soft tone. It was very comforting and consoling. Now, I miss them both, and a vacuum has been created.

Prof met Sudip (my better half) in Germany, and it was as if they were long-lost brothers. During our wedding, he took us out shopping and invited us to his house for a feast. We never expected this, but the impact that has left and the memories we carry are fresh and long-lasting. Prof shared his experience, gave tips on a healthy, prosperous married life, and advised us to reciprocate and respect each other as true soul mates.



We could see his true, sincere feelings for us. Prof also visited our house when our son was born and ushered his blessings. In fact, the name for our son, Shreyas, was suggested by Prof. Could I have asked for more? We all were elated. In the last few years, whenever I visited

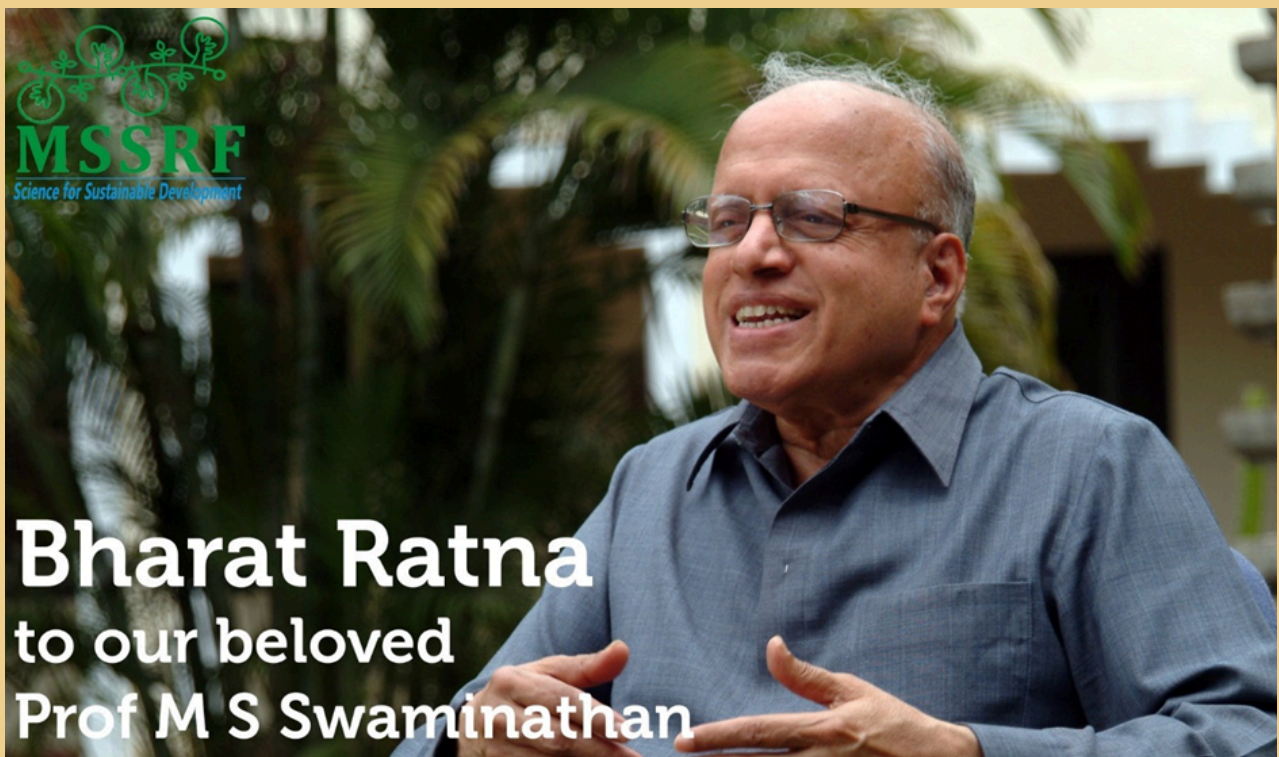
MSSRF to meet Prof, Shreyas also accompanied me, and Prof used to share some of his life experiences as a young child and as a teen with Shreyas to encourage and motivate him.



We feel blessed and know that he is always there for us from him, even though he is not with us today. When we heard that he had passed away (incidentally same date and same month as my father) it was Shreyas who went to the Foundation to pay respects to his mortal remains on our behalf. Sadly, Sudip and I could not, despite our desire, due to our Institute's mid-semester examination. His contribution to shaping and transforming me is so vast that it cannot be expressed in words or emotions. I feel blessed that Prof was part of my journey then, now and in future.

Bharat Ratna: A tribute long due

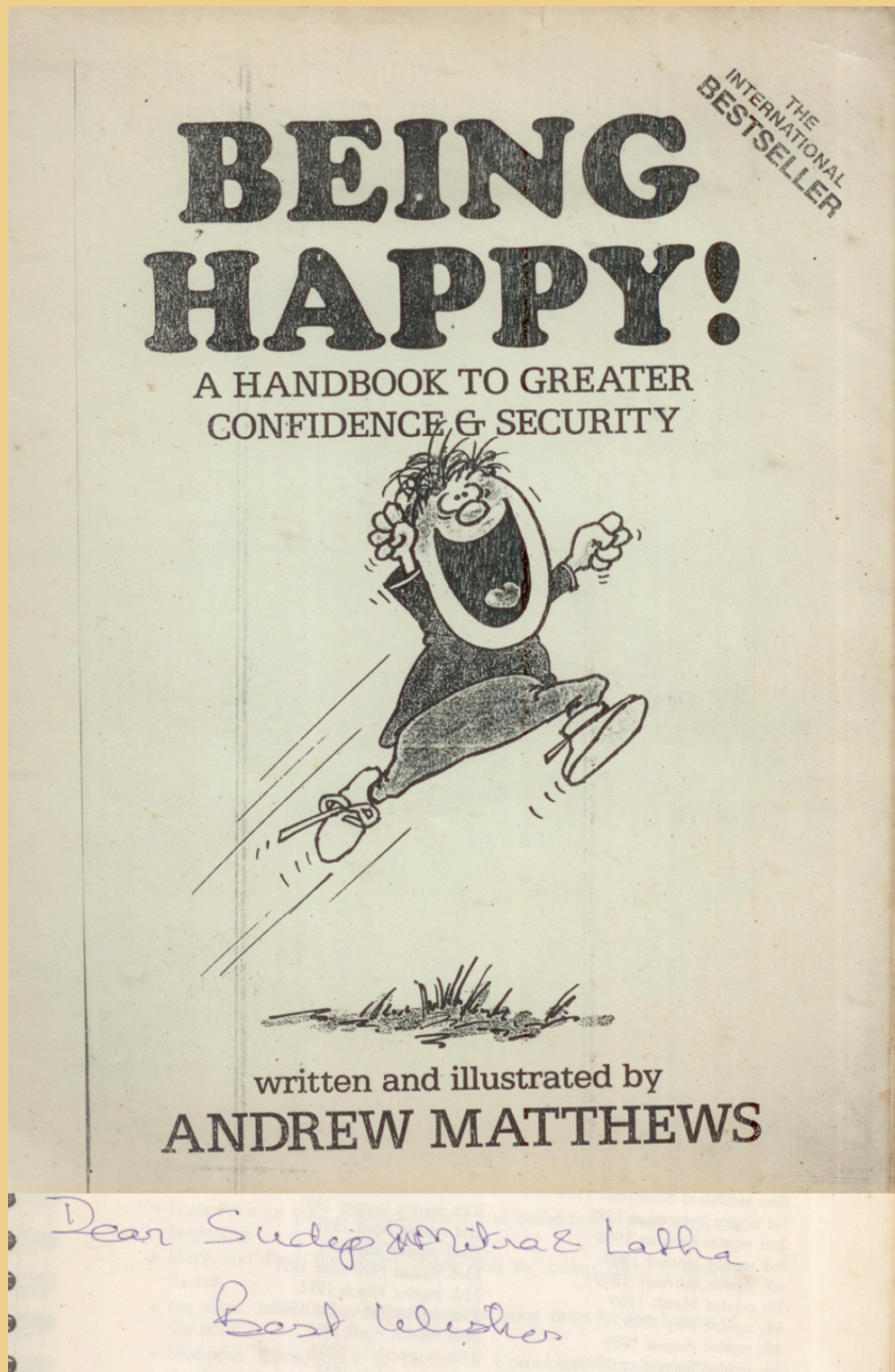
We, the entire fraternity of MSSRF (past and present), are thankful to the Government of India that Prof was recognized for his unparalleled contributions to the field of Agriculture and was awarded the highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna, posthumously. How I wish it could have come earlier during his lifetime, but alas, it wasn't meant to. Nevertheless, it came, and what matters is that he duly got what he deserved for so long.



Forever in the footsteps of a Giant

As we celebrate Prof's Centenary celebrations, I, like countless followers and admirers of his, take the pledge to carry forward his legacy in the spirit that he envisioned. All those whose lives he touched will be remembered and dedicated for varied reasons. I will miss his care, affection and empathy, and my best tribute to Prof will be to continue on the path that he steered, propelled so passionately and nurtured like his own baby as we celebrate Prof's life, journey and multifaceted contributions.

A gift to remember



Prof gave us a copy of “Being Happy!” by Andrew Matthews, as a wedding gift. Simple, thoughtful, and full of warmth - just like him. We treasure it, not just as a book, but as a lasting reminder of his love, wisdom, and presence in our lives.