As a departure from the regular tradition of profiling the president, this year we bring a candid interview with Professor Gour Choudhuri, President of Indian Society of Gastroenterology (ISG). The outlook being that: ‘Mankind is not a circle with a single center but an ellipse with two focal points of which facts are one and ideas the other’. And a face-to-face interview will provide us with the ideas of the man who is leading the ISG this year, and ideas are often blessed with more potential than facts.

Dr Choudhuri graduated from JIPMER, Pondicherry in 1978. He did his post-graduation in Internal Medicine and thereafter completed fellowship in Gastroenterology, both from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. In 1985, he joined the faculty at IGIMS, Patna, and in 1987 joined the Department of Gastroenterology at SGPGI, Lucknow, which he has been heading since 2002. He has served as the Honorary Secretary of ISG for six years.

Which books/leaders influenced you in the growing period?

In my early years I was captivated by Victor Hugo, Leo Tolstoy and Aldoux Huxley. Thereafter, it was Somerset Maugham, A. J. Cronin and Arthur Conan Doyle; all three of them possibly attracted me because they were physicians as well as literary figures. Albert Schweitzer’s works had a discerning impact on me. He was a humanitarian, theologian, missionary, musician and a physician. The English translation of Rabindranath Tagore’s ‘Gitanjali’ has been a constant travel companion as it appeals to my heart. Bertrand Russell may have jocularly remarked that ‘Not to be absolutely certain is, I think, one of the essential things in rationality;’ but from his works I learned to look at the whole picture rather than limit myself to dogmatic thoughts. I have also been influenced by Mother Teresa. I have been providing voluntary service at her center at Lucknow and Naviyoti school for blind children. The association has continued since 1989, and every year we celebrate the birthdays of our children with the inmates of this center.

You successfully organized the ISG annual conference in Patna in 1986 when you had just started your career. How was the experience?

The driving philosophy for me has been to cherish challenges and transform them into stepping stones. At Patna I was asked to organize the annual ISG conference and I took the challenge as the youngest organizing secretary (I was 30 years old then).

What have been your major achievements as ISG secretary?

I had inherited a smoothly running society from my predecessors. On my own part I set out to add a dash of vibrancy and enthusiasm. The agenda was to achieve a better session quality with more engaging scientific deliberations. The work done for ISG includes setting up the website and
online abstract submission. Efforts were made to encourage young researchers, the number of awards went to 40 awards per year. Younger gastroenterologists were invited as faculty. National task forces, and nation-wide multi-centric studies were started for the first time. Travel fellowships were initiated for international meetings and we developed closer interactions with international societies like WCOG, APDW, BSG and ACG.

Every individual has some vision and the society’s vision is often an amalgamation of all such constructive visions; collecting such visions, separating the wheat from the chaff and projecting the final dream is a fine art. I have batted for the younger crowd of ISG, as I feel the potential to achieve is maximum amongst them. Teaching has been my passion. I have conceptualized short-training programs for GI fellowship trainees in the form of Grand Young Masters and Young Clinicians Program.

As ISG secretary what do you consider missed opportunities? Of the planned 4-6 task forces only two have delivered. We created a ISG research foundation which reached the conceptualization stage but did not hit the road.

What is your mission as President? My major objectives are development of patient support networks and formation of advocacy groups for planning out and supporting policy initiatives.

You are currently heading one of the finest Gastroenterology departments in the country. What would you rate as impact making contributions from your side? The Department at SGPGI, Lucknow was started by late Professor S. R. Naik, and we remain indebted to him for his vision. I have remained inspired by his philosophy and I think my major contribution has been letting individuals grow. I believe that members of faculty in my department are highly talented and like artists need their space to grow; they have brought national and international acclaim to our department. I have never curtailed the multifaceted growth of my colleagues.

How do you rate yourself as a researcher? I started working on hepatobiliary and pancreatic diseases. I initiated endoscopic ultrasonography in 1989 in India and ESWL in 1991. I may have published a multitude of papers (almost 200), however truthfully speaking I feel my career as a researcher could have been better.

What do you feel about industry-academia partnership? A huge change has taken place in the last one decade. Earlier the industry was considered as a pariah. On the flip side, getting too close with industry and getting identified with it is a problem. I believe that the right thinking person at senior positions in industry can foster strategic partnerships for academia’s benefit. A good example of such partnership is the ‘Human genome project’ which was completed ahead of time because of positive relationship between the industry and the academia.

What role has your wife played in your career decisions? I met my wife, Arundhati in 1985 after I had finished my fellowship. Arundhati came from a well off family and was used to everyday luxuries. However she supported my endeavor to pursue academics even though it was not a lucrative option. If I ever feel like leaving academic medicine, it would be a tough job for me to convince her considering the best years of our life were without luxuries.

Do you think you have influenced career choices for your children? My father was a judge and he never influenced me as far as career options were concerned. Similarly I encouraged my kids to make their own decisions based on their aptitude and interest. My daughter, Jui, has joined medicine. I suspect because daughters try to emulate fathers. My son, Deep likes to take the shortest route to the top and is studying law at National Law School, Gandhinagar.

You are a clinician who serves the people and altruism excites you. Are there any other activities you initiated? I relish doing anything which is constructive, which gives a sense of direction to the younger lot and is not necessarily always connected with only gastroenterology. Fascinated with the concept of health promotion, I undertook a WHO fellowship in Australia in 2004. The fellowship dealt with public health awareness and changing attitudes and policies. Since then four WHO projects and one UNICEF project on health promotion have been initiated by me to promote health amongst students. I started HOPE initiative (www.hope.org.in) and now we reach out to 500,000 students in Uttar Pradesh. I am dedicated towards holistic health providing services and contributing to comprehensive health care. I have rediscovered my passion for writing, and contribute regularly to a healthcare column in a national newspaper. My write-ups are available on www.healthgossipindia.blogspot.com.

Thank you Dr Choudhuri for what has been an exceptional insight into you, for a very forthright interview. Your perceptive vision encompassed with ample dexterity is the largess from which the ISG has been the benefactor until now and will continue to do so in the coming years.

Vineet Ahuja, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. e-mail: vins_ahuja@hotmail.com