

39th Foundation Day

October ushered in the 39th anniversary of our founding. Traditionally, this is the season to thank all our patients for their faith in us, our staff for their dedication, and our donors and partners for their unwavering support. It is also a time for us to cast our mind back to our origins: the Raos' deep desire to bring world-class eye care to India, the generous support from late Sri L V Prasad and his family, and the first set of patients who placed their trust in us. A flood of memories, stories and remembrances mark this special milestone.

While the “hospital story” shines strong, our founding also proved to be a harbinger for eye research too. Excellence in clinical practice at LVPEI has seeded a transformation in the Indian eye research landscape. In a happy October coincidence, we celebrated the inclusion of 16 LVPEI associated clinicians to the 2025 Stanford/Elsevier Top 2% Scientists List. Seven of them earned a lifetime ranking in ophthalmology from India. In addition, the Nature Index 2025 Research Leaders list also ranked LVPEI at #5, among the top research institutions in India – a remarkable affirmation of our research legacy and vision.

All these happy tidings came together at a glittering foundation day ceremony on 17 October at LVPEI's Kallam Anji Reddy campus in Hyderabad. The event was graced by Dr R 'Balu' Balasubramaniam, who gave the inaugural L V Prasad Oration that day. Dr Balu, a doctor by training, a founder and trustee of the Grassroots Research and Advocacy Movement (GRAAM) and founder of the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM). GRAAM has brought about a unique, grassroots-based voice to public policy by focusing on health, livelihoods, governance and community development while SYVM translates these insights into tangible changes for millions of people across Karnataka and beyond. It is no wonder then that Dr Balu is a member of the Indian government's capacity building mission. He is also a successful author and mentors senior leadership across the country.

That evening, Dr Balu electrified us all with his speech. Deeply ensconced in the eye care context, it was refreshing to see how our peers from across the health sector perceive LVPEI and make sense of our journey. India, he reminded us, is a country of both penury and promise with hope often becoming the transformational bridge. In this process, sight becomes a critical tool and to restore sight then, as he beautifully said, is to restore hope.

This month, I am delighted to share his unabridged speech with all of you, below. I invite you to take a few minutes to go through it. It is a call to offer health services as a right - with dignity, compassion, and with scientific rigor. It is a call to institutionalise such a culture. I am sure you will be moved by his life experiences, inspired by his insights, and re-energised in our collective mission to make this world a better place.

-Prashant Garg

Dr Rao, respected members of the Board, distinguished ophthalmologists and scientists, dear colleagues, friends and staff of LV Prasad Eye Institute — it is an honour to stand before you on this Foundation Day.

Anniversaries are moments of reflection — a time to look back with gratitude, to look around with humility, and to look ahead with purpose. And today, in this hall, we celebrate not just the passage of years, but the endurance of a vision — a vision born from compassion, nurtured by excellence, and sustained by the belief that every human being, no matter how poor or remote, deserves the gift of sight.

When I think of LVPEI, I do not see merely a hospital or a healthcare network. I see an idea — an idea that the finest of science can walk hand-in-hand with the deepest of humanity. That healing is not a transaction, but a relationship. That true excellence in medicine lies not only in skill, but in spirit.

The Meaning of Vision

For those of us who have spent our lives in public health, “vision” is not just about eyesight — it is about foresight. It is about seeing what others do not yet see — the inequities, the silent suffering, the human potential waiting to be awakened.

In my years of working among rural and tribal communities, I have met countless people who have never been seen — not by an ophthalmologist, but by the system itself. Their stories are ones we rarely hear. I remember a painful episode as I began my life in the Bandipur National Park in Karnataka.

It was December 1987—a time when I was young, idealistic, and already disillusioned. I had left behind a comfortable urban life to live and work among the forest-dwelling tribals of Heggadadevanakote. Despite my best intentions, I often wondered if I was making any difference at all. The community regarded me with suspicion; I longed for their acceptance, for some proof that my presence mattered.

One evening, I heard that Madi, a 14-year-old girl in a nearby settlement called Sanimadanahadi, had gone into labor. The colony lay deep inside the forest—no roads, just narrow trails winding between trees and termite mounds. Obstetrics had been my favorite subject in medical school, and I saw in this moment a chance to serve and perhaps earn the trust of the people. With a surge of purpose, I set out through the darkness, my torchlight flickering against the bushes. When I reached, I realized Madi was still in early labor. It was too dangerous to stay the night with wild elephants and boars around, so I promised myself I would return at dawn.

At first light, I walked back eagerly, only to learn from a woman on the trail that Madi had already delivered—alone. My heart sank. Still, I went to check on her. The hut was tiny; its walls plastered with mud and the air heavy with the smell of smoke and wet straw. Her father was away fetching firewood. I called out, asking Madi to step out with the baby so I could make sure they were both fine. But she hesitated, then refused. When I grew impatient, she finally broke down and said softly, “I have only one saree. I soiled it while delivering my baby myself. I have washed it and am waiting for it to dry in the morning sun. I have nothing to wear now.”

Those words struck me like thunder. I stood frozen. The forest around me fell silent. Here was a young girl—a child herself—who had brought another life into the world in utter solitude, without even a piece of cloth to cover her. That moment shattered something inside me. It stripped away my illusions about service, privilege, and professionalism. I realized that health care, education, or development were not just about technical expertise; they were about restoring dignity, equity, and humanity to lives long ignored.

From that day, I made a silent vow. As long as there were girls like Madi—living unseen and unheard—my work would continue. Whenever I am weary or plagued by self-doubt, I remember her voice. It reminds me that my struggles are insignificant compared to the courage with which people like her face life's harshest realities. Years later, I remember visiting a small hamlet deep in the forests of Karnataka many years ago. An old woman was led to me by her grandson. She was nearly blind with cataract in both eyes. When I asked her why she hadn't sought treatment earlier, she said quietly, *"Who will take me? Who will feed the family if my son leaves for a day?"* This prompted the beginning of our eye care work at SVYM.

Her words stayed with me. They reminded me that blindness is not just a medical condition — it is an economic one, a social one, a moral one. It robs not only sight, but agency. And yet, in that same village, when a young health worker trained by a mission hospital began screening eyes and arranging surgeries, the change was immediate. Hope came back, one person at a time.

That, to me, is the miracle that LVPEI represents at scale — hope institutionalized.

The Genesis of a Model

Dr Gullapalli Nageswara Rao's vision, when he founded this institute in 1987, was revolutionary in its simplicity. It was to deliver **world-class eye care for all** — not as charity, but as a right.

He and his colleagues built not a single hospital, but a *system* — a pyramid of care that connects the most advanced operating theatres in Hyderabad to small vision centers in villages. It is an ecosystem that integrates care, education, research and rehabilitation into one seamless mission.

Over the years, this model has inspired eye-care systems around the world. But what makes it extraordinary is not just its reach — it is the dignity with which it serves. Whether a patient walks into the Hyderabad center or a rural vision unit, the quality of care — and the respect they receive — remains the same.

That philosophy mirrors what I have often written about in my own work - that equality is not achieved by giving everyone the same, but by ensuring that those with the least receive the best. LVPEI's story is living proof of that principle.

The Spirit of Service

I have often said that service is not a profession — it is a disposition. It is a way of seeing the world.

During my years in tribal areas, I came to understand that service begins not with solutions, but with listening. Many of us in medicine are trained to diagnose before we have truly heard. But in a small hut in H.D. Kote, where I once sat with a tribal healer, I learned something profound. He said, *“People do not come to me because I have herbs. They come because I sit with them.”*

That lesson has never left me. And I see that same principle alive here at LVPEI — in the way your doctors take time to explain, in the way your teams treat each patient as a person, not a case.

You have built a culture where humility walks alongside knowledge, and compassion does not fade with specialization. That is a rare achievement — and it must never be taken for granted.

Bridging Distances

Yet, as I look across our nation, I am reminded that the journey is not complete. For every patient who finds their way to an LVPEI centre, there are many more who do not even know such care exists.

The tribal child struggling to see the blackboard, the elderly woman who believes vision loss is part of fate — they are still out there. Their world remains blurred not because we lack the technology, but because we have not yet bridged the distance — not just the geographic one, but the emotional and cultural one.

The next frontier for institutions like LVPEI, I believe, lies here — in deepening reach, in embedding ourselves in the lives of those who live farthest from comfort.

That will mean listening to communities, respecting their ways of life, and finding models of care that grow *from within* rather than being imposed from above. It will mean training local youth as *vision guardians*, leveraging tele-ophthalmology to reach hamlets, and embracing local languages and idioms so that the idea of care feels like home, not intrusion.

The future of Indian health care will not be built in metros alone — it will be written in villages, and LVPEI can help author that chapter.

Quality and Trust

But as we reach farther, we must never compromise on quality.

Excellence is not elitism; it is ethics. It is our moral obligation to ensure that the poor receive the same standard of care that the rich take for granted.

I have walked through many hospitals in rural India — some built with the noblest intentions — and yet I have seen the difference that discipline makes. Cleanliness, punctuality, record-keeping, communication — these are not trivial matters; they are signals of respect.

LVPEI has set the gold standard here. From its tertiary hospitals to its smallest vision centers, the same attention to detail, the same quiet professionalism pervades. That is why people trust you.

Trust, once earned, must be guarded. It must not be diluted by bureaucracy or complacency. The challenge as you grow larger will be to preserve that culture — where every staff member feels personally responsible for the dignity of each patient.

Sustainability and Innovation

There is also the question of sustainability.

Socially driven institutions often face this paradox — the more generous they are, the more fragile they can become financially. But LVPEI has shown that sustainability is not at odds with service. Through its cross-subsidy model, its partnerships with government and philanthropy, its research and innovation, it has demonstrated that *doing good* can also be *done well*.

The future will demand even greater creativity. Artificial intelligence, portable diagnostics, 3D printing, and new optical materials will redefine ophthalmology. But the real innovation will lie not in gadgets, but in design — in reimagining delivery models that make these technologies affordable and accessible.

I envision LVPEI leading that movement — creating innovations *for* India, *from* India, that can light the way for the world.

The Human Side of Care

But while we speak of systems and science, let us not forget the soul of this work.

Every patient who walks into your clinic carries an invisible story. For them, loss of vision is not just darkness — it is dependence. It is the loss of livelihood, dignity, and participation in life.

In one of my visits to a village in our project area, I met a young boy named Ravi. He had lost much of his vision to corneal opacity. He told me quietly that what he missed most was not being able to play cricket with his friends. Months later, after a surgery arranged through a charitable eye hospital in Bengaluru, his vision improved. When I met him again, he did not talk about his eyesight — he talked about the joy of running again, of being included again.

That is what you restore at LVPEI — not just sight but belongingness.

When your team performs a cataract surgery or a corneal transplant, it is not just the lens or tissue that is being replaced; it is the person's confidence, their connection to the world. That is the true miracle of your work.

Nurturing the Next Generation

An institution's longevity lies in the people it shapes.

LVPEI has been not only a hospital but a university — nurturing generations of ophthalmologists, optometrists, scientists and vision technicians from around the world. Watching the video of your fellows from the world, I understood that you have trained not just skills, but values.

To the younger members of the LVPEI family who are here today - remember that your degree or fellowship is not a destination; it is an initiation into responsibility. Each of you holds in your hands the ability to transform lives — sometimes with a scalpel, sometimes with a word.

When you walk into an operation theatre or a remote camp, pause for a moment and remind yourself — this is sacred work. The person lying before you is not a subject, but a story.

Research, Evidence and Ethics

LVPEI's research output — in ocular genetics, stem cell therapy, corneal biology, low-vision rehabilitation — has brought Indian science global recognition. Yet what distinguishes your research is that it remains rooted in today's reality. You study not only molecules but systems, not only cells but communities.

That balance between the field and the bedside, between publication and purpose, must remain your compass. Science divorced from society is sterile; society without science is stagnant. LVPEI stands at that sweet spot between the two.

And with that comes ethical responsibility. The more advanced our technology becomes, the more vigilant we must be about consent, transparency, and human dignity. Ethics is not an appendix to research; it is its foundation.

The Inner Vision

If I may move from the external to the internal — there is also another kind of vision, we must cultivate.

It is the vision that Swami Vivekananda spoke of when he said, *"They alone live who live for others."* It is the vision that allows us to see the divine in every patient we serve.

Medicine, at its best, is a spiritual act — a meeting of two vulnerable beings, one seeking help and the other offering it. In that moment, the line between giver and receiver dissolves. We are all instruments in a larger design.

I often recall the Upanishadic idea of *seva* — not as service rendered to the weak by the strong, but as a form of worship. When we serve another, we serve the same life that breathes within us. LVPEI's story is one of institutionalized *seva* — where modern science meets ancient wisdom.

A Vision for the Future

So where do we go from here?

Imagine an India where no child goes blind from preventable causes. Where every tribal village has a trained local vision guardian. Where technology enables instant remote consultation. Where rehabilitation is not an afterthought but a continuum of care.

Imagine further — a South Asia connected through LVPEI's expertise, collaborating with African nations through your Liberia Eye Health Initiative, building a global movement of equity in vision care.

This is not a distant dream. You already have the foundations, the credibility, the culture. What you need now is scale — and the courage to imagine beyond what seems possible. Like the Prime Minister often mentions, what we need today are Standards, Scale, Systems and Speed to solve the world's complex problems quickly. And LVPEI provides these very important fundamentals in its work.

Closing Reflections

As we celebrate this Foundation Day, let us pause to honour those who made it possible — the donors, the mentors, the nurses, technicians, administrative staff, and countless others whose names may never appear in annual reports, but whose fingerprints are on every healed eye.

Dr Rao's vision was not just to build a hospital, but to build a *community of conscience*. You have lived up to that ideal.

But every foundation, no matter how strong, must be revisited and renewed. Complacency is the quiet enemy of greatness. The day an institution begins to believe that it has arrived, it begins to decline.

So today, I urge you to treat this celebration not as a commemoration, but as a recommitment — to equity, to excellence, to empathy.

When you walk out of this hall, carry with you not just pride in what has been built, but responsibility for what remains unfinished. Somewhere, in a remote tribal village or an urban slum, there is still a person waiting to be seen — and when you reach them, the spirit of LVPEI will be alive again.

Let this Foundation Day be a reminder — that the true measure of this institution lies not in the size of its buildings or the sophistication of its equipment, but in the light that returns to the eyes of those who thought they had been forgotten.

May LVPEI continue to stand as a beacon of both science and soul — where technology serves humanity, and compassion remains our clearest lens.

Thank you, and my heartfelt congratulations to every member of the LVPEI family.

Dr R Balasubramaniam
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New Delhi.

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