

Veronica Rodrigues 1953-2010



Veronica Rodrigues, Senior Professor at the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) passed away on xx after a five year battle with breast cancer. Dr. Rodrigues was born in Kenya in 1953 where she went to school. She joined Makerere University in Uganda but left during the turmoil there on a scholarship to study in Trinity College, Dublin, where she did her B. A. with Honours in Microbiology in 1976. Stimulated by the scientific papers of P. Vijay Sarathy and Obaid Siddiqi on bacterial genetics, she wrote to Sarathy asking whether she could do her PhD with him. Sarathy, himself a PhD student, passed the letter on to Siddiqi who invited her immediately to join TIFR. With a strange British passport, which barred entry into Britain, Rodrigues landed in India in 1977, a country very new to her and about which she had a romantic and idyllic view. Siddiqi had moved his interests to neurogenetics and pioneered the study of olfaction in the fruitfly. Rodrigues was Siddiqi's first student in this new area. Her independent contribution in the study of olfactory behaviour was appreciated enough for her to be offered a regular position at TIFR even as a PhD student. Rodrigues next

spent three years at the Max-Planck Institute of Biologische Kybernetik in Tübingen. Here she pioneered the study of coding of olfactory information in the brain, one of her major contributions and a landmark study. Returning to her position at the TIFR Mumbai, Rodrigues moved into the study of how the brain develops. Her group first charted out the rules that govern how smell and taste sensory neurons develop. Rodrigues and collaborators were the pioneers in this area as also in the study of the development of brain-regions where olfactory information is coded. Rodrigues next combined her early training in physiology and behavioral biology by asking how the brain is made to encode behaviour and how it changes in response to experience in the real world. Research in the Rodrigues group, more recently, elegantly addressed questions on how individual nerve cells, which are often robust and stay alive through an animal's life, are plastic and can change their form and function upon environmental stimuli. In all these studies her ability to link molecular and cell biology to animal development and ultimately to behaviour has put her group as one of the major players in the neurobiology of olfaction. She unhesitatingly collaborated with the best anywhere. They were usually transformed to work on shared questions better than what would have been ever possible alone and each collaborator became a friend. Ever generous with sharing credit, her leading role was often implicit but acknowledged by all. In scientific gatherings, where preening is not uncommon, her low-key style with high-quality work stood out. She worked extraordinarily hard to communicate her group's science: As its head, that was not only her duty to her colleagues, but she realized the meaninglessness of good work unless it is written down well, published and communicated in seminars.

In parallel with her research successes, Rodrigues gently assumed many leadership roles, first at the Department of Biological Sciences (earlier the Molecular Biology Unit) at TIFR, helping to create an extraordinary intellectual environment. This was the crucible where the NCBS grew before it moved to Bangalore. Rodrigues's generous efficiency ensured that the fledgling NCBS had all the hospitality it needed in its early stages. Such incubations are often tense, but with Rodrigues's care, feathers were never ruffled and strong bonds were made to stay. Later, she became the Chair of the Department of Biological Sciences in TIFR Mumbai and in this role continued to ensure that new faculty had all the resources and independence they needed to allow their science to take off well. While very closely involved with NCBS through interactions with colleagues there, and as a member of its Management Board, Rodrigues resisted all invitations to move to Bangalore, fiercely loyal to her Department in Mumbai and in love with its beautiful location by the sea. Finally, she agreed to fully move to Bangalore in 2005 while still retaining strong links with Mumbai. At NCBS, Bangalore, along with her development of an excellent laboratory she revamped its meetings, workshops, student symposia and cultural programmes to make the campus thrive intellectually. Much of this was done behind the scenes and with little formal authority.

Rodrigues was demanding of others, a tough scientific critic who placed similar standards on herself. She inspired fierce loyalty and affection from all those who interacted with her, yet never hesitated in firmly telling her closest friends and collaborators what she thought. She held back no punches and none could charm her away from telling it as it was. Yet, her friendships withstood all lapses by others and her ability to work for others and the community were legendary. Sensitive to the failings and boorishness of a male-dominated scientific environment, she chose her company carefully and kept her distance from those who exemplified this culture. This, along with her dignified and scathing silence was usually effective in conveying her views.

Rodrigues became an Indian citizen, with much effort and difficulty, about 20 years after arriving here. While truly an internationalist she was always quietly proud of how much she had done for Indian science by doing what she loved: just doing a great job as a scientist, a mentor, a colleague, a leader and a friend. To the Tata Institute in particular and to India, she was every grateful for their generous support for basic science. She was persistent in her demands for our accountability, by doing excellent science and training the next generations, in reciprocation for this liberal support.

Veronica Rodrigues made a deep impression on all who interacted with her. Her departure leaves her family and friends empty, her imprint will last.

K. VijayRaghavan
NCBS-TIFR Bangalore