

An Interview with the First Orthodontist of Nepal

By Dr Rabindra Man Shrestha and Dr Asal Acharya



Dr Shambhu Man Singh

Born on July 4, 1952, Dr Shambhu Man Singh is the first orthodontist of Nepal. He completed his BDS degree from Kerala University in 1974 and D. Ortho from Royal College of Surgeons Edinburgh in 1989. He started specialist orthodontic service in Kathmandu in 1990. He joined Nepal Army in 1977, where he served for thirty years till 2007 when he retired as a Brigadier General. Dr Singh is an Honorary and Life Member of Orthodontic & Dentofacial Orthopedic Association of Nepal. Besides his glorious involvement in military and civil health services, he is recognized as a humble and gentle person in Nepalese dentistry.

Here is an excerpt of the interview between Dr Shambhu Man Singh and the representatives of Orthodontic Journal of Nepal.

Q. Sir, would you please tell us about your early education?

A. I would first like to thank you, Dr Rabindra and Dr Asal for giving me this honor and taking my interview. Originally, I am from Tansen, Palpa, which is a beautiful place in mid-western Nepal. I went to school at Janata Vidhyalaya, Tansen and completed my SLC in 1968. I then did my ISC from ASCOL, Kathmandu in 1970. I went to study dentistry in Trivandrum Medical College, Kerala, India along with Dr Damdu Tenzing under the Colombo Plan scholarship in 1970. At that time, dentistry was not highly regarded and I had been trying to study MBBS, but as I got scholarship in BDS I enrolled in this program.

Q. How did you start providing dental services in Nepal?

A. After completing my studies, I returned to Nepal in November 1974. As I had studied under a scholarship, I was required to work in government services. To begin with, I was sent to Bir Hospital by the Ministry of Health in January 1975. There were no vacant posts in the hospital so I was given a job contract for six months which had to be extended every time. At that time in Bir Hospital, Dr Basanta Bahadur Rajbhandari was HOD and Dr Rajbhai Shrestha was the second man in the department. Later, Dr Girwan Sharma and fresh graduates Dr Prakash Lal Shrestha and Dr Damdu Tenzing also joined the department.

In March 1977, under deputation I was posted to Tri-Chandra Military Hospital when Dr Dwarika Man Rajbhandari had already retired and Dr Kishor Kumar Pradhan went to England for his postgraduate studies.

Dr Krishna Gopal Vaidya was serving alone at the Army Hospital and he was having some health problems. The Defense Ministry had asked the Ministry of Health for a dental doctor to work under a temporary contract. Thus, I was sent to the army hospital where I saw a better environment and good opportunities. Between September 1979 and October 1982, I also worked in Shanta Bhawan Hospital run by United Mission to Nepal on a part time basis.

Q. Sir, how did you join Nepali Army?

A. In July 1977, the Ministry of Health called a civil service vacancy for dentists through the Public Service Commission. Along with me, Dr Narhari Kharel, Dr Prakash Lal and Dr Damdu qualified for the permanent post of Dental Surgeon under the government health services. I was then posted to Nepalgunj but there was again a need for a dentist in the army hospital. I applied to the Health Ministry to transfer my service to the Defense Ministry. It was accepted and I started as a Lieutenant. Over time, I was promoted to become a Brigadier General. Back then, there was no higher post for dental doctors, my juniors in the medical field went on to become seniors in administration. It was an awkward situation, so I resigned in April 2007 from army service, three years prior to my retirement age. I feel sorry for my seniors who deserved promotion, but compelled to retire at the Lieutenant Colonel position as no further posts had been created. Lately, Dr Bishnu Bahadur Bastola was conferred an Honorary Major General post just before his retirement. This sets a good precedence and shows that the situation is improving and the dental profession is getting the due respect.

Q. How do you remember your senior and contemporary dentists?

A. I feel very fortunate to have worked under Dr Krishna Gopal Vaidya and Dr Kishore Kumar Pradhan in Army, and under Dr Basanta Bahadur and Dr Rajbhai at Bir Hospital. Once, Dr Basanta Bahadur took me to the Health Secretary; where he had demanded more permanent posts for the dentists in the health service. At the beginning of my career, they guided me a lot. Dr Rajbhai was always encouraging in terms of dealing with patients and carrying out clinical work. Dr Mesh Bahadur always encouraged the juniors, no matter whether he was working in government service or were establishing a private practice. At that time, Dr Mesh Bahadur and Dr Manik were working in Kanti Hospital. I had a chance to meet Dr Buddhiman Shrestha when he was in Nepal, he had served for a brief period in Bir Hospital and had a private practice in Kathmandu. He had earned MS degree in Periodontics from the US. I was very impressed by the personality of Dr Dwarika Man Rajbhandari, I met him a few times in social gatherings. I am obliged to Dr Rajbhai who helped me get into the Dental Department of Shanta Bhawan Mission Hospital to work with Duddley Henderson as a part time dentist. It was the best equipped dental department which gave the best service to the patient at that time. Later, Dr Mira Joshi and Dr Mira Malla also joined Shanta Bhawan Hospital at different times. I learnt a lot while working there which boosted my confidence in clinical practice. I would like to pay my humble tribute to late Dr Basanta Bahadur, Dr Dwarika Man, Dr Krishna Gopal, Dr Rajbhai, Dr Mesh Bahadur, and Dr Bina Kansakar. I really miss my friend Dr Damdu Tenzing who died of leukemia and Dr Basudev Bishta who died of brain tumor in 1984/1985 at early ages. They all have played a great role in uplifting the dental profession in Nepal.

Q. How did you get into post-graduation in Orthodontics?

A. I was selected for post-graduation in Orthodontics as a part of Colombo Plan Scholarship by the government health service through British Council in 1985. I completed my D Ortho from Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh, Scotland in September 1989. Training in the Royal College comprised of two parts. The British Council had given me six months to complete the first part of my study; otherwise I had to return back. It was one of the most stressful periods of my life. I was lucky to pass the first part of both D Ortho and FDS exams within the stipulated time. I cleared the first part of D Ortho in February 1986 and that of FDS in

July 1986. I did both first parts from the Royal College of England, London. Then British Council sent me to enroll in D Ortho (Diploma in Orthodontia) program. When I joined, the course was two years, meanwhile it was extended to three years. I did my hospital practice mainly in Edinburgh Dental College Hospital and Victoria Hospital, Kirkcaldy, later as Locum Registrar in orthodontic departments of Dunfermline and West Fife Hospital in Scotland. The D Ortho changed its title to M Ortho when I was in final year.

Q. How was the orthodontic training in UK?

A. I was trained in Straight Wire and Begg technique in the UK. We also used to do many removable and myo-functional appliances. Once I met Michael Clarke, the inventor of Twin Block appliances, he stays in Kirkcaldy where I used to study. I also met Prof Adams who invented the Adam's clasp when he lectured in Edinburgh. I had the opportunity to work and study under four different consultants: Andrew Sandham (my main mentor), Jim McDonald (my clinical preceptor), Sydney Haynes (my Begg teacher, who also used to do Frankels with modifications), and Jim Barrie (my official guide). For few months, I was posted under Dr K F Moose in Glasgow at Cannisburn Hospital (he was the preceptor of Dr Manik) to learn orthognathic surgery and multi-disciplinary cleft lip and palate treatment. There used to be a requirement of five case presentations (one long case, one multi-disciplinary case, and three short cases) in the final exam. Meanwhile, I thought I would need to do some surgical cases especially in Army Hospital in Nepal. Thus I attended Department of Oral Surgery at Royal Infirmary, Edinburgh for six months to learn surgery under Prof Paul Bradley who was the mentor to Dr K K Pradhan.

Q. How were orthodontic problems managed in Nepal before you started orthodontic practice?

A. During that time, only removable appliances were practiced. I used to do some removal appliances at Shanta Bhawan Hospital. An orthodontist from Delhi, Dr Sunil Khosla used to visit Dr Basanta Bahadur and Raj Tilak Basnet's private clinic in Kathmandu. I have learnt that, renowned orthodontist Dr Ram Nanda from Lucknow used to treat the royal princes Birendra, Gyanendra and Dharendra in Darjeeling often, sometimes even in Kathmandu.

Q. How was your experience in army dental services?

A. When I joined the army hospital at Mahankalsthan, there was only one dental chair with an ultrasonic

scaler unit but without high speed airborne equipment. However they had well trained dental assistants, and Lab facility with trained technicians. Later in 1990, Tri-Chandra Military Hospital shifted to the newly constructed Shree Birendra Military Hospital in Chhauni. At the time when Dr Kishore retired, there were only four posts for dentists. During my tenure, I tried to expand dental service outside Kathmandu and thereby create more dental posts in the army. This materialized to some extent and there were about ten dental doctors in the department during the time of my resignation. There are now around 22-23 dentists working in the Nepal Army with specialists in every field of dentistry.

My dream was to establish a dental hospital separately within the army, although it could not be materialized. I believed that if there were a separate dental hospital there would be less misunderstanding with the medical fraternity and the field will be more open for progress. Recently, the dental department has been shifted back to the newly made TCMH in Mahankalsthan, which is much advanced. There are now dental facilities with doctors in every field ambulatory hospitals in Dharan, Nepalgunj, Pokhara, Hetauda, Dang, etc.

Q. How is army dental service different from civil practice?

A. The basics of treatment delivery are the same in both army and civil sectors. For me, working in the army was better as it is highly disciplined and follows the chain of command. At public hospitals like Bir Hospital, the patient flow was very high, as a result treatment modalities were mostly limited to the symptomatic. We used to organize health camps every year for army professionals and their families outside Kathmandu. I had been to dental camps from Bir Hospital as well. Recently there has been a lot of progress on both sides with specialized services. The treatment facility was better at Shanta Bhawan Hospital. There were two dental chair units equipped with ultrasonic scalers and high-speed airborne equipment with a dental lab for removable orthodontic appliances, dentures and gold alloy crown and bridge. During evening hours, I used to work at my own private practice in New Road, which I continued after I returned from England as well. Later I shifted my clinic to Jawalakhel, and then to Krishnagalli, Patan after earthquake.

Q. How do you find the difference in practice during those days and at present?

A. There were three dental chairs with two portable high speed equipment without scaling unit and suction in Bir Hospital. Even in the Military Hospital, there was no

high speed airmotor system. Sometimes it used to take around one hour to restore one cavity. Dental materials were not readily available, there used to be a shortage of consumables like amalgam and xylocaine. I started my clinic with a small unit investing merely NRS 25,000. The money was sourced from interest-free loans from Nepal Bank and from my sister. I ordered one dental chair unit from Calcutta; which took one month to arrive. We used to get materials through our contacts at Nepal Airlines. Occasionally, some Indian vendors used to carry dental materials in bags. It was only after 1995 that dental materials became available in Kathmandu market. Initially, dentists were not used to wearing gloves for dental practice. Gloves were worn in surgical cases only. Even in England, the practice was the same. After the contagion of HIV and AIDS in 1984, everybody started using gloves. Imagine now we are going to PPE, it is beyond my anticipation.

Later, with the availability and options of various dental materials, treatment quality and standards increased in dentistry. Now, the technology has improved, we are entering the digital age. Our work is matching international standards in orthodontics, restorative dentistry and oral Implantology.

Q. How do you see the change in orthodontic practice over time?

A. I began my orthodontic practice in doing Straight Wire technique with "A" company, later with American Orthodontics. In the beginning, orthodontic brackets were not available in Nepal, so I used to get brackets from abroad. There was no orthodontic lab facility. I used to send lab cases to Baroda, India. Later I taught a technician in Army Hospital to fabricate functional appliances, Quadhelix, TPA, etc. Later, I stopped doing Frankel and Bionator as it was very difficult to make, however, they are very effective appliance if you can fabricate well. Myo-functional appliances work well in cases of retrognathic mandible during the growing phase. Nowadays, I prefer twin block, which is easy for the patient and for the dental lab.

During the days of my solo orthodontic practice, electronic study club through email with the international orthodontic societies helped me a lot. I used to subscribe BJO, JCO and AJO journals regularly; the case reports with treatment success and failures helped me to go ahead more progressively and confidently.

Back when I started, people were unaware of the practice and used to get scared with orthodontic braces and functional appliances. The practice had to

be explained and they had to be educated. I tried to popularize fixed orthodontic treatment in Nepal through proper treatment. With the increase in awareness level, patients are now more co-operative and compliant. These days, patients report themselves to seek orthodontic treatment. Orthodontic braces have also become a fashion. Orthodontists nowadays are updated, and have access to advanced knowledge and skill. They are also good at communication. We now have post graduate programs inside Nepal, and orthodontic association will certainly lead to the progress of the profession and the services.

Q. What are your professional achievements?

A. I think I am proud of being an orthodontist, that too being the first one in the country. I was among the founders of Nepal Dental Association. I have served as the Treasurer of Nepal Medical Association during 1983-1985, and as an Executive Member of Nepal Medical Council during 1996-2000. I was also among the founders of the National Dental Hospital, which is the first dental hospital in the country.

I have been honored and felicitated by Nepal Dental Association, Orthodontic & Dentofacial Orthopedic Association of Nepal and by Nepalese Association of Oral & Maxillo-facial Surgeons during their annual conferences. I was conferred the Birendra-Aishwarya Medal and Gorkha Dakshin Bahu Fourth in 2001, Medal of Long Service in 2002, and Gorkha Dakshin Bahu Third in 2004 from the Government of Nepal. I am an International Member of American Association of Orthodontists and Fellow of the World Federation of Orthodontists. I was privileged to attend an Attachment Course at the US Army, Fort Gordon, Georgia. I had honor to chair a session in International Orthodontic Congress in February 2010 in Sydney, Australia.

Q. Tell us about the most memorable events in the profession.

A. When I returned from the UK in March 1990, orthodontic treatment had not yet started in the Army Hospital. I used to do a lot of surgical cases like fracture management, cyst removal, etc. Later, Dr Bishnu Bahadur Bastola joined after finishing his surgical training from Pakistan. We used to manage numerous trauma and mutilated cases efficiently during the Maoist insurgency period. I am very grateful to Dr Bastola for his wonderful surgical work and feel rewarded with the outcome of such cases.

During my tenure in the medical council, two pioneering dental colleges were started in the country.

I spent much time along with Dr Kishor, Dr Manik and Dr Baburam Marasini, then registrar of the council, to formulate the regulations for dental colleges. We did many inspections and were required to provide suggestions and recommendations to the government. We worked with Prof Bhaskar Rao and Prof Jyotindra Kumar from the Dental Council of India to frame the syllabus. It was a very hectic job; it was common to get warning and political pressure on telephone calls. Around 2003/04, I tried to run the Royal College program at National Dental Hospital for. On behalf of RCS Edinburgh, Prof Peter Mossey had come to Nepal for that purpose. Despite its recognition, it could not go ahead and materialize because of the lack of interest from local candidates.

Q. Sir, what are your personal hobbies and desires?

A. I like listening to music, singing and playing the harmonium to some extent. I am fond of old Nepali songs of Bachchu Kailash, Narayan Gopal and Prem Dhoj. I like to read religious and philosophical books, do meditation regularly and follow Guru Paramhansa Yogananda. I also like watching cricket match.

I wanted to do more in the field of cleft lip and palate. I wish there was a craniofacial center in the country where we can treat different craniofacial anomalies including cleft palate and complex syndromes with the active involvement of orthodontists. It is a high time, oral surgeons and orthodontists should come together to start a craniofacial center in Nepal. Though I couldn't start it, I am always willing to support if anyone takes a lead.

Q. Lastly, would you like to share a message with the newer generation of colleagues?

A. I would like to say that, "In orthodontics, you should be more careful while treating patients. Like driving a vehicle, it matters how you drive after getting a license. You may reach your destination or may end up in an accident. You have modern equipment and technology at your hands; you should make full use of them. You should always keep learning and upgrade yourself. You should attend and upgrade your knowledge through conferences and study clubs, and make the habit of reading journals regularly. You need to provide quality service at reasonable price. I am proud of younger generations who are doing TADS, lingual ortho and clear aligners at international level and I admire them."