The history of Uveitis Society of India

Genesis

Uveitis and even the retina subspecialty were of very low priority in the ophthalmology curriculum in India, saddled with trachoma and cataract blindness in the 1950s and the 1960s. Cataract surgery was an easily learned skill not requiring much cognition and produced gratifying outcomes for all the stakeholders namely the patients, doctors, and the society. Moreover, cataract surgery till the 1980s was technically non-demanding, requiring not even a slit lamp for the diagnosis. A flashlight and a direct ophthalmoscope were what you needed to examine a patient. Any patient who did not have a cataract, trachoma, corneal ulcer, or an opacity was nobody’s burden. Most of the medical schools until the late 1980s did not even have a slit lamp for use by the faculty or the residents in training. There was hardly any exposure of our doctors to see first-hand how things were changing in the rest of the world as we had very limited financial resources. Socioeconomic and technological developments, rising aspirations of the society, and setting up of institutes in the private sector all played a key role in the development of subspecialties in ophthalmology.

Initiation

Prof. I S Jain of Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER) Chandigarh had a registry of 600 uveitis patients, from which he reported viral uveitis in 1974, Vogt Koyanagi Harada (VKH) disease in 1978, acute posterior placoid pigment epitheliopathy (APMPPE) in 1982, the role of HLA B27 in acute anterior uveitis in 1979, and Wegener’s granulomatosis in 1985. His report that VKH disease and sympathetic ophthalmic are similar diseases was cited by Duke-Elder in the System of Ophthalmology. Prof Jain also presented “Uveitis in Ankyllosing spondylitis” as a poster in 1984 at the 43rd Annual Conference of AIOC held in Cochin. Thereafter, PGIMER also reported acute multifocal choroidopathy in 1989 as well as in 1992; and polymerase chain reaction detection of Mycobacterium tuberculosis at AIOC 1996.

There were few other practitioners like Dr. B T Maskati who used to manage uveitis cases and even used immunosuppressive agents like methotrexate to treat uveitis.

A Stellar Role by Prof. Narsing Rao

We lacked mentors in India back then and this gap was filled admirably well by Prof. Narsing Rao, who not only trained some of the pioneers in uveitis in India like Dr. Jyotirmay Biswas and Dr. Rajeev Buddi in USA but also frequently visited India to hold our hands in improving our understanding of uveitis. He invited and encouraged faculty from overseas to attend our meetings at their own expense and ensured that we got exposure to their thoughts, presentations, and publications. The seeds of the Uveitis Society of India were sown around that time and it took a few years to formalize the same. Prof. Rao also encouraged many of us to speak in international meetings including the American Academy of Ophthalmology, International Uveitis Study Group (IUSG), and other European meetings. Prof. Rao should get the due credit for setting up the uveitis subspecialty in India. Our role had been to follow the path shown by him. And then the rest is history. Today, the Indian uveitis experts hold their heads high with great pride in any international meeting and their presence cannot be ignored any longer.

National Participation

Today’s modern clinical and academic uveitis is immensely indebted to Prof. Amod Gupta of PGIMER, Chandigarh. He joined PGIMER in 1976 and followed the footsteps of Prof. I S Jain under whom he had training in the uvea clinic. Academic uveitis in India advanced by leaps and bounds under his leadership. He made several original contributions. He was the first to describe tubercular serpiginous choroiditis. He also proposed the classification of intraocular tuberculosis. He mentored and guided, directly and indirectly, a passionate group of uveitis leaders in the country. He was honored with several national and international awards. He was awarded Padmashree by the then President of India in 2015. He was one of the founder members of the Uveitis Society of India and was its first president.

In 1983, Dr N Rajini Kantha started the uvea department at Sankara Nethralaya, Chennai. A uveitis registry was maintained. Thereafter, in 1985, Dr. Jyotirmay Biswas took up uveitis as a subspeciality in the same department. He did his ophthalmic pathology fellowship under Prof. Narsing Rao from 1987 to 1989. He returned to India to set up the ophthalmic pathology laboratory and joined the uveitis services in Sankara Nethralaya, Chennai. He started training the rotating vitreoretinal fellows in uveitis and its related aspects. He has imparted uveitis training to more than 40 ophthalmologists throughout the country and abroad. The major turning point was the organization of the IUSG meeting Chennai in 2001. He was the first member of IUSG from India.

In 1993, Dr. S R Rathinam developed the formal uveitis clinic at the Aravind Eye Hospital, Madurai after training with Prof. Narsing Rao, Dr. Robert Nozik, Dr. Stephen Foster, and Dr. Robert Nussenblat. She started the long-term and short-term uveitis fellowships from 2000 onwards.

In the meantime, LV Prasad Eye Institute (LVPEI) in Hyderabad initiated their uveitis department in December 1994 along with their pathology and immunology laboratories headed by Dr. Rajeev Buddi. LVPEI also started uveitis rotation for fellows. Dr. Buddi made uveitis presentations at various clinical meetings. The very first uveitis meeting was held at LVPEI in 1996 by Dr. Buddi. Dr. Virender Sangwan joined the uveitis department at LVPEI in March 1998.

Uveitis practice in the 1990s had just risen from the slumber. Serological tests were performed on pooled samples and frozen specimens. The use of immunosuppressive agents like azathioprine, methotrexate, and cyclophosphamide started then. LVPEI had also access to in-house rheumatologist Dr. U N Das for the management of uveitis-related conditions.
National Conferences

The first ever uveitis conference was held at LVPEI on February 24, 1996, organized by Dr. Rajeev Buddi [Fig. 1]. The four faculty at that conference were Prof. Narsing Rao, Dr. Jyotirmay Biswas, Dr. S R Rathinam, and Dr. Rajeev Buddi himself. It was categorically announced in the conference leaflet that “Since the ideal always differs to what is practical, special emphasis will be laid on management in the context of the limited resources available to us. It is our aim that symposium attendees should also gain a practical insight into the use of immunosuppressive therapy for chronic intraocular inflammation. Ample time will be provided for a moderated discussion and interaction with the faculty.” Interesting enough, the conference delegate charge was a meager Rs 200 for general members and Rs 150 for the postgraduates, which was inclusive of food. All the more interesting was the fact that this conference was sponsored by two nonophthalmological companies, namely Nexus Computers and South India Book Agency.

The first successful meeting gave an impetus to go ahead with the second meeting by Dr. Rajeev Buddi again at LVPEI on December 21–22, 1996. In this meeting, there was a special agenda. It was duly announced in the conference leaflet: “During this symposium, the faculty members would like to initiate the formation of a discussion group, special interest group or society for ocular immune and inflammatory diseases. We also intend to hold one such informative symposium every year and would like your input for the First National Symposium on Ocular Immunology and Inflammation being planned for January 1998 in Hyderabad.”

That led to the third Uveitis and Ocular Immunology Meeting named “Current Status Symposium” on January 29-30, 1998. This conference was held in Hyderabad at a conference venue outside the hospital campus. Prof. Narsing Rao was instrumental in inviting eight international faculty apart from him guiding the whole show. This meeting was attended by Drs Emmett Cunningham, Ronald Green, Edward Howes Jr, R A Nozik, and Jack Whitehead from the USA, Dr. P G Watson from the UK, Dr. Jacob Pe’er from Israel, and Dr. Manabu Mochizuki from Japan. The national faculty who attended the meeting were Drs Jyotirmay Biswas, S P Garg, Amod Gupta, B Rajeev, SR Rathinam, and Taraprasad Das. This conference had a special symposia of two hours, each on retinal vasculitis (including Eales’, Behcet’s, and Sarcoidosis), VKH, sympathetic ophthalmia, white dot syndromes, infectious uveitis, and scleritis and corneal (peripheral) immune disorders.

The next uveitis meeting was held at PGIMER, Chandigarh on February 6–7, 1999, organized by Dr. Amod Gupta. The international faculty who attended the meeting were Drs Emmett Cunningham, Jean Deschenes, Edward Howes Jr, and James Puklin apart from Prof. Narsing Rao, who motivated them to join the meeting in India.

Next year, the annual meeting was held at Aravind Eye Hospital, Madurai, and a brain-storming session was held to develop the constitution of the “Uveitis Society of India” on January 12, 2000. The members who attended the meeting were Drs Narsing A Rao, Jyotirmay Biswas, Virender Sangwan, SR Rathinam, B L Sunitha, and N S Murlidhar. In this meeting, Prof. Rao expressed his concern over conducting the meetings only at a few institutions and said that we should have our uveitis meetings in different regions of the country. It was decided to identify other potential sites and people who could conduct the meeting. One of the major limiting factors was finance, so the proposed society would create separate funds for holding annual meetings and fundraising would be the top priority of the society. Prof. Narsing Rao volunteered to help in fund raising in the USA for the society. The mechanism of remittance of such funds to the society was worked out by Dr. Virender Sangwan and Prof. Narsing Rao.

Everybody in the meeting agreed that there is a need for a formal society. The main function of the society would be to enhance the awareness and education about uveitis diagnosis and its management by general ophthalmologists and to popularize the subspecialty and attract younger ophthalmologists for training in uveitis. A core committee was formed to initiate the process of formation of the society, registration of the society, and framing of bye-laws and constitution.

The members of the Core Committee were: Prof. Narsing Rao, Prof. Amod Gupta, Dr. Jyotirmay Biswas, Dr. Virender Sangwan, Dr. SR Rathinam.

The convener of the core group was Dr. Virender Sangwan. It was decided that he would initiate the process of framing the by-laws, and circulate the first draft to other members or create an online discussion group for this purpose. It was decided to complete the formalities of the formation of the society within a year (deadline was December 31, 2000). The society was to be launched formally at the time of next year’s annual uveitis meeting at Sankara Nethralaya, Chennai.

The Constitution

The constitution of the Society was drafted. The first president was Dr. Amod Gupta. The honorary secretary was Dr. Virender Sangwan. The first official address was that of LVPEI. Dr. Jyotirmay Biswas was the vice-president. Dr. SR Rathinam was the joint secretary and Dr. Vinita Nair was the treasurer.

In this meeting it was decided to hold future meetings of uveitis outside the major eye institutes and also form the Uveitis Society of India (USI). The venue for the the next seven annual meetings...
was also decided. Hence, the first informal annual conference of USI was held in February 2001 at Chennai. It was not named so because the formalities had not been completed to register USI. Hence, the meeting at Hyderabad from February 22-23, 2002 was named the First Annual Conference of the USI. Interestingly, the meeting in 2003 at Bangalore was named as the “International Symposium on Intraocular Inflammation”, which was held from March 1-2, 2003. This could have been named “the second Annual Conference of the USI.”

The aims and objectives as noted down in the constitution were as follows:

1. To cultivate and promote the practice and research in uveitis and ocular diseases
2. To accelerate and promote professional and social fellowship amongst the members of the society and to provide all opportunity to each member to undertake, promote, and participate in all the activities of the society so as to realize their full potential
3. To contribute to the mutual exchange of knowledge and appreciation of each other amongst the members of the society
4. To promote continuing education in the field of uveitis and ocular inflammation by organizing (a) seminar, symposia, workshops, conferences, and refresher courses and (b) by publishing newsletters, pamphlets, and journals on academic and nonacademic matters pertaining to the society
5. To promote the development and research of instruments and appliances in the field of uveitis and ocular inflammation with a view to manufacture and encourage such products in developing countries
6. To encourage the formation and eventual affiliation of the state uveitis association and to coordinate with other associations and societies of allied disciplines.

This is the single biggest leap in the history of the USI so far.

### Formal Meetings of the USI

The next year, the annual meeting was organized by Dr. Jyotirmay Biswas. This meeting was combined with the Annual IUSG Meeting in Chennai, which was held from February 2–3, 2001. The dates of the annual meeting of the USI were February 4–5, 2001. The meeting was named the “International symposium on Uveitis and Intraocular Inflammations and the Third annual conference of the Uveitis Society of India [Fig. 2].” This meeting was attended by who’s who of international uveitis experts and several other IUSG members.

The third annual meeting of the USI was held at Jalna, Maharashtra from October 9-10, 2005. This meeting should have been named as the fourth Annual Conference. The meeting was organized by Dr. Vinita Nair.

The next meeting was held in Madurai from December 2-3, 2006. This meeting was held in Aravind Eye Hospital, Madurai and was organized by Dr. SR Rathinam. Interestingly, this meeting was named the “The Sixth All India Uveitis

### Table 1: Past Meetings of Uveitis Society of India

| Year | Venue                          | Presidents               |
|------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1999 | PGIMER Chandigarh              | Dr. Amod Gupta           |
| 2000 | Aravind Eye Hospital, Madurai  | Dr. Amod Gupta           |
| 2001 | Sankara Nethralaya Chennai     | Dr. Amod Gupta           |
| 2002 | LVPEI Hyderabad                | Dr. Amod Gupta           |
| 2003 | Bangalore                      | Dr. J Biswas             |
| 2004 | PGIMER Chandigarh              | Dr. J Biswas             |
| 2005 | Shri Ganapati Nethralaya, Jalna| Dr. J Biswas             |
| 2006 | Aravind Eye Hospital, Madurai  | Dr. J Biswas             |
| 2007 | Sankaradeva Nethralaya, Guwahati| Dr. SR Rathinam          |
| 2008 | LVPEI Hyderabad                | Dr. SR Rathinam          |
| 2009 | Sankara Nethralaya, Chennai    | Dr. SR Rathinam          |
| 2010 | Chandigarh                     | Dr. Virender S Sangwan   |
| 2011 | Goa                            | Dr. Virender S Sangwan   |
| 2012 | Bhubaneswar                    | Dr. Virender S Sangwan   |
| 2013 | Mussorie, Uttaranchal          | Dr. Virender S Sangwan   |
| 2014 | New Delhi                      | Dr. Sudha K Ganesh       |
| 2015 | Pondicherry                    | Dr. Sudha K Ganesh       |
| 2016 | Colombo, Sri Lanka             | Dr. Manohar Babu         |
| 2017 | Kolkata                        | Dr. Manohar Babu         |
| 2018 | PGIMER, Chandigarh             | Dr. Manohar Babu         |
| 2019 | Bengaluru                      | Dr. Vishali Gupta        |
The list of awardees along with their title of the talks at Dr. G Venkataswamy endowment lecture is given in Table 2.

Dr. G Venkataswamy Endowment Lecture

This award is a tribute to honor Dr. G Venkataswamy for his eternal work done for the field of ophthalmology. Dr. G. Venkataswamy was the Founder Chairman of Aravind Eye Hospital, Madurai.

Those who have contributed much to the field of uveitis were recognized with this unique award. This was started from the 15th Annual meeting of USI held at Pondicherry in 2015. The first recipient of this endowment award was Prof. Narsing Rao [Fig. 3].