

# Dr. Sheila Rohatgi (1937-2022): A Tribute to the Everyyoung and Charismatic Lady

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Dr. Sheila Rohatgi was born on March 29, 1937, in Kolkata, and was the second of five sisters (→**Fig. 1**). She did her schooling from the Loreto House School. When she was a student of Loreto Convent School, Kolkata, she joined the Girl Guides Movement. As a girl guide, she was sent to Seth Sukhlal Karnani Memorial (SSKM) Hospital, Kolkata, India to volunteer in the wards. There, she met Prof. Murari Mohan Mukherjee, and saw his amazing work as a plastic surgeon and her romance with the subject began. Prof. M. M. Mukherjee was a direct student of Sir Harold Gillies and started the first plastic surgery unit of West Bengal in the Institute of Post Graduate Medical Education and Research (IPJME&R) College, Kolkata. This unit along with the units at Patna (under Dr R. N. Sinha), Nagpur (under Dr. C. Balakrishnan), and Lucknow (under Dr. R. N. Sharma) were the pioneers of plastic surgery services in the country.

She did her MBBS from Calcutta Medical College, India. In the final year of MBBS, she married Kumar K. Rohatgi, an electrical engineer, entrepreneur, innovator, and pioneer in LED light technology. Her husband played a pivotal and encouraging role in her professional career. For her house job, she went to SSKM Hospital, famously known as Presidency General (PG) Hospital and worked in the department of plastic surgery under Prof. M. M. Mukherjee. She continued in the department for 2 years until 1968, when she did her MS in general surgery. After that, she received an Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) scholarship for a project on the cephalometric analysis of cleft lip and normal individuals, a comparative study. In 1973, she presented this work in APSICON and received the Peet prize. She was the second recipient of this coveted award.

She continued to work in the department of plastic surgery at SSKM hospital under Prof. Anjali Mukherjee, who was also a renowned plastic surgeon of Kolkata and succeeded Prof. M. M. Mukherjee. She presented her work on cephalometric analysis again at the sixth International Reconstructive Surgery Conference in Paris. Her paper was

appreciated by Dr. Ralph Millard and Dr. Todd Skoog, who were both in the audience. Dr. Skoog invited her to visit his department at Uppsala, Sweden, and a big team of Indian plastic surgeons comprising Dr. Sam. C. Bose (Madurai), Dr. Jaju (Ahmedabad), Dr. Sundarajan (Chennai), and Dr. Rohatgi went there. Dr. Todd Skoog presented his atlas of plastic



**Fig. 1** Dr. Sheila Rohatgi.

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surgery to her and this book was to remain her Bible during her career. Subsequently, she went to England and worked in various units. She saw the first nasoendoscopic procedure for cleft palate being performed. There she met and worked with Mr. Ian Jackson and Mr. Bruce Bailey.

In 1977, she presented her work on severe degrees of hypospadias and intersex at Tokyo and went to Dr. Kitaro Ohmori and Dr. Kiyonori Harii for training in microsurgery. They were pioneers of microsurgery, and the unit in Tokyo was famous for microsurgery training. She got the opportunity to get trained on rats in their laboratory and learnt the techniques of microsurgical anastomosis.

In 1978, she joined the West Bengal Health Service and was posted at the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Hospital, Kalyani. She did prolific plastic surgery work there, and Dr. Bruce Bailey visited their department and performed a free LD flap for a scalp defect. Among the other procedures, she performed a pedicled gracilis flap for penile reconstruction. She also convinced the government to purchase a microscope and performed vasovasostomy with 85% success rates at this hospital.

She was in Toronto with her husband for his eye surgery, and she attended a conference and heard Illouz's paper on liposuction. Yves-Gerard Illouz was a French surgeon who developed safer methods of liposuction and was a co-founder of Medecins Sans Frontieres. She bought liposuction cannulas there and came back and started liposuction using an indigenously built liposuction machine designed by her husband, a vacuum technologist as well. She performed her first case of liposuction in 1984.

She was later posted to SSKM hospital, where the lack of an operating microscope deterred her from starting micro-

surgery. She bought her own microscope and installed it in the Emergency OT of SSKM hospital. Along with attempts at replantation, vascular repair of hand injuries was performed routinely. Many tubal recanalizations were performed using the microscope.

In 1987, Dr. Ernest Manders visited the department and demonstrated the use of tissue expanders. He gifted them a few expanders and subsequently, she started tissue expansion procedures in the hospital. In 1990, she held a conference on head and neck surgery where Dr. Ian Mc. Gregor and Dr. E. Manders were the faculty.

In 1992, she was transferred to the Calcutta Medical College as the Head of the Department. There she conducted many conferences, including one on breast reconstruction where Dr. Krishna B. Clough were the faculty. Dr. Clough is an onco-plastic surgeon in Paris, France.

After retirement, she worked in various corporate hospitals, and her main focus was on aesthetic surgery, gender reassignment surgery, and fat grafting. Her website was exemplary in an era where social media usage was not so common.

She was the president of the Indian Society for Surgery of the Hand (ISSH), from 1992 to 1994 and it was during her tenure, the process of India joining the Asia Pacific Hand Surgery group started. This subsequently led to India taking giant steps in the field of hand surgery and being recognized the world over. She was the president of National Academy of Burns India (NABI) from 2008 to 2009. As the president of the Indian Society of Facial Reconstructive Surgery (2006–2008) she held a conference in Darjeeling, which was hugely successful.

For her expertise in burn surgeries, she was awarded the Mrs. Phool Devi Gupta Excellence Award presented by



**Fig. 2** Dr. Sheila Rohatgi receiving Mrs. Phool Devi Gupta Excellence Award at the 18th Annual Conference of the National Academy of Burns in 2009–2010.



**Fig. 3** Dr. Sheila Rohatgi attending the 54th Annual conference of APSI, APSICON 2019, in Bhubaneswar.

the National Academy of Burns in 2009–2010 (► **Fig. 2**). She was very keen to bring the principles of aesthetic surgery to burns management. She used laser and radio-frequency devices to improve burnt skin's scar quality. Her work benefitted many burn patients with improved quality of life.

Despite undergoing surgery for a spinal tumor in 1978 and open-heart surgery in 2012, she had an infectious zest for life. She attended APSICON 2019 in Bhubaneswar wearing dark shades to conceal her orbital injury (► **Fig. 3**). You could find her at all conferences taking notes and asking questions from the front row. Her dress sense was immaculate, and a *big bindi* on her forehead will be remembered by all of us (► **Fig. 4**).

Even after the death of her husband after 60 years of marriage and her contracting COVID in 2021, she recovered and was keen to get back to work. On September 30, 2021, she conducted a successful 6-hour operation of double-breast reconstruction using lipofilling. She was keen to continue her research using fat stem cells in plastic surgery to hasten healing after surgery and reduce scarring. Even as she suffered in the ICU from a heart infection, she was



**Fig. 4** Dr. Sheila Rohatgi with her *big Bindi*.

reading up on fat stem cells grafts so she could continue her research in this field as soon as she recovered from her heart operation. However, God had other plans for her.

She loved socializing and would be the first to throw a party for her friends and medical colleagues and even cook a few dishes after several hours of backbreaking surgery. Vivacious and full of life, she loved traveling and never gave up on an opportunity to explore new places and destinations.

She is survived by her sons Rajeev and Vineet Rohatgi, her daughter-in-law Ippui Rohatgi, her daughter Juhi Rohatgi Williams, her son-in-law Dr. Eric Williams, and grandsons Arjun and Aryan Williams.

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**Conflict of Interest**  
None declared.