

Professor V. V. Rao: A Great Teacher and True Gandhian

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I had the great fortune of having met Prof. Rao on a couple of occasions. In those days, I used to be mainly confined to the village of Chuchuyimlang in Nagaland where Nagaland Gandhi Ashram has functioned all these years. The indelible impression that I am carrying before my mind's eye is of a simple dark-skinned mild mannered person wearing very simple clothes. Later on, I came to know more about him. And since then he happens to be one of the unforgettable persons I have met in my life.

Prof. Rao was cast in the mould of the Gurus or the Rishis of Ancient India. He painstakingly worked to gain knowledge and the greatest satisfaction he drew from his life was to impart knowledge to his students. We come across the information that he was instrumental to groom nearly one hundred students who obtained doctorate. No mean achievement to say the least. He remained a bachelor throughout his life, and ploughed back all his earnings to the University which had paid him. The article contains interesting and important details of his generosity and charity.

One of the major contributions of Prof. Rao is a kind of in-depth study he had undertaken to understand and interpret the North-eastern region. He wrote many important volumes on different aspects of the region. One of his important utterances that I never forget and which I have frequently quoted during my talks is that, "there is no region anywhere in the world which can be compared with the North-eastern region of India." The North-east is unique in a number of ways.

Ishani is very happy to publish this article by Prof. Niru Hazarika, a devoted former colleague of Late Prof. Rao. Many youth of the present era may not have heard about him. We are happy that we are able to introduce an extraordinary learned scholar and a devoted teacher to the present day youth of Assam and the country.

N.Th.



Author

Professor Vadlamudi Venkata Rao, who was born on 14th December 1909 in Nayudupeta of Nellore in Andhra Pradesh breathed his last on 29th October 1993 at Gauhati Medical College Hospital in Assam. Though he is no more amongst us, he will always be remembered in the academic world of the country as a dedicated teacher and a true Gandhian. He came to Assam to join Gauhati University on 17th August 1950 as lecturer in History and Economics. Dr. Rao was awarded the B.A. Honours degree by Andhra University in 1934. He did his M.A. from Allahabad University in 1936, M. Litt in 1946 and Ph.D. in 1950 from the Madras University. With this qualification he came to Assam as Lecturer. He received his D. Litt

degree from Allahabad University in 1964 while serving Gauhati University as the head of the Department of Political Science.

Dr Rao was a dedicated teacher and rendered pioneering service in the field of research in social science till the end of his life. A committed teacher occupies the position next to the parents of the students in moulding the personality of the students. Dr. Rao's life itself was an example of it. He met Professor M. Venkatarangiya during his college life as a teacher in History and he became the idol of Dr. Rao during his whole service life. Dr. Rao recalled his teacher at his death as, "A tall, slim, fair-complexioned person, clad in spotless white long coat and dhoti, with a turban on his head, and Angavastram round his neck, entered, for the first time, the first year Intermediate Arts class. He was Professor Venkatarangiya... After making a few introductory remarks, he delivered his first lecture on Indian history. The delivery was like the flow of mother Ganges, rapid, steady and even...All students were happy that they had got a good teacher." One could feel the impact of his teacher on Dr. Rao's life.

Dr. Rao was taken care of by his teacher Venkatarangiya during his very difficult times for which he remained extremely grateful to his teacher. Professor Venkatarangiya was a nationalist and opposed British Raj in India. Dr. Rao who had enormous faith in his teacher started carrying messages to the national leaders at his own risk, being influenced by his teacher. He narrated his experience as, "In March 1930, I completed my Intermediate examination. I was assigned the role of a messenger boy. I had to carry secret messages during nights by bicycle to longer distances...My father did not like my participation in the movement... One day I was arrested for distributing contraband salt and sent to lock-up pending trial...My parents visited me and demanded that he would submit an apology on my behalf. I did not accede to their demand. My father said that he would submit an apology on my behalf and thereby secure my release. I threatened to commit suicide should he submit an apology on my behalf. My mother wept and told me, 'Don't commit suicide. Go to jail.' My father did not like my mother's attitude towards me. He angrily retorted, 'I have nothing to do with both of you,' and left. Husband and wife, father and son separated never to meet again." Thus the young Rao was thrown out of the house to the wide world. He was in jail for about a year; first he was imprisoned at Nellore district jail, then at Vellore central jail and finally at Alipore camp jail at Bellary. At the jail he had to break stones for road metal, and serve food to other members in the jail.

After coming out of jail, Rao became helpless and instead of going to his parents he approached his old teacher Venkatarangiya for food and shelter. To his utter surprise, the teacher provided him not only food and shelter but also took the responsibility of educating him and admitted young and helpless Rao in B.A. Honours class. Rao stayed with his teacher's family for three years till he completed his graduation. Dr. Rao records, "I accompanied the Venkatarangiyas and stayed with them for three years. Venkatarangiya was a Brahmin. I was non-Brahmin. Both the communities were at loggerheads and yet, he kept me in his house, fed me, clothed me and gave me instruction in political science. This shows his generosity and catholicity of outlook. It may be remembered that he had already ten children by that time. Eight of them were going to school. His monthly salary was Rs. 400/-. Once I remarked rather seriously to Mrs. Venkatarangiya that I was an unnecessary burden to them, She remarked, 'In a house where fourteen mouths had to be fed everyday, one more was no problem.'"



Prof. V. V. Rao

Dr. Rao joined Gauhati University in 1950 to teach Political Science in the Department of Economics. After eight years, i.e., in 1958 he established a separate Department of Political Science and his hard labour and commitment to higher education enabled him to make it very popular amongst the students.

He was very kind to the students, though he maintained strict discipline in the class. He used to pay fees and give books to the poor students. At the time of departmental functions like Freshman Social and Parting Social, he took utmost care so that each and every student gets his or her share to eat. If any student failed to attend the function due to some unavoidable reason, Dr. Rao used to give his share on the day of his return to the class. These departmental functions were held mainly with the money collected from the students; therefore, he was very keen to see that justice was done to each and every payer. Dr Rao used to organize Departmental Convocation to which he invited the Governor of Assam also. Some Governors attended the functions. In the Convocation he used to felicitate the students who secured first class or any distinction in the examination and the research scholars by giving valuables books mainly on Gandhi. Dr. Rao used to spend from his own pocket on this Departmental Convocation. He was very liberal in spending money for the students.

Dr. Rao was a man of sacrifice and could cut down his requirements to the barest minimum. He had one very old bicycle, a few utensils and very old clothes. He did not have even the mosquito net for sleeping at night. Guwahati may be called as a mosquito city. So people used to ask him very frequently about the mosquito net. He used to always say, "I am so black that mosquitoes cannot find me to bite in the dark." In the later part of his life, he left even the

quarter allotted to him by the University and started living in the departmental room itself. One peculiar nature of Dr. Rao was that he was also serving North Eastern Hill University, Shillong as Visiting Professor, and to go to Shillong even in the month of July he used to put on warm clothes from morning in Gauhati itself. For putting on very old clothes, Dr. Rao faced trouble on several occasions. Once he was invited by the Governor of Assam at Shillong. Dr. Rao was at the Governor's place on the right time, but he was prevented to enter the Bungalow by the security personnel on the ground that the Governor had an appointment with a great Professor from Gauhati University, i.e., Dr. Rao only. Fortunately, the Governor came to know about it and he came out to welcome Dr. Rao to his place. Sometimes his simplicity, style of living, etc., made the common people to recognize him.

Vijay Sen Budhraj, a colleague of Dr. Rao in the Department of Political Science, Gauhati University said, "His (Dr. Rao's) living-cum-study-cum bed room was sparsely furnished with a few hard-seat chairs, a large study table, two small tables and a divan. There were not any curtains or cushions. He used rubber tube to communicate with others, though he could easily afford a hearing aid. He lived in austere simplicity. Later I came to know he spent very little on himself and his savings went back to the University in one form or the other. I was much impressed by his Spartan living, legendary generosity and high thinking."

Whatever Dr. Rao earned from the University by way of salary, remuneration and royalties from the publishers, he donated for the promotion of higher education in North-east India and other parts of the country. In Gauhati University, he instituted the Jawaharlal Nehru Professorship, Mahatma Gandhi Visiting Professorship and donated about ten lakh of rupees for the construction of a Lady Research Scholars' hostel. For it, however, University Grants Commission extended a matching grant of another ten lakh of rupees. Dr. Rao was very keenly interested in the promotion of higher education amongst women. He had strong faith on the saying that education of a girl is the education of a family. Further, he donated one lakh of rupees to the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. The Universities of Andhra Pradesh, Allahabad and Madras in which Dr. Rao studied received handsome donations for instituting scholarships in the name of his teacher from whom he got parental care during his student life. Dr. Rao was a man of rare personality who enjoyed hard life.

In 1970 Dr. Rao was honoured by national recognition when he was awarded 'Padmashri' by the Government of India for his outstanding contribution in promoting higher education in India's North-east. He authored several books of permanent value – 'A Hundred Years of Local Self Government in Assam', 'Political Theory', 'A Century of Tribal Politics in North East India', 'Government and Politics in North East India' (4 volumes), etc. Dr. Rao produced more than one hundred Ph.D. scholars drawn from different fields. Thus Dr. Rao could establish himself as a scholar of reputation in India. He also worked as Fulbright scholar in 1962 at the Indiana University in Bloomington, USA.

Dr. Rao was a good friend of the grade IV employees also. He used to talk to them during his leisure time. At the time of festivals like Bihu, Puja, etc., Dr. Rao used to serve them tea and snacks. He was not accustomed to take service from the servants. Once he was provided with a helper. Instead of taking help from the helper, Dr. Rao started entertaining him and after two or three days he found that the helper was a burden to him. He came to me and asked me, "What is the utility of a servant? How to survive with a servant?"

During the movement against illegal foreign nationals launched by the All Assam Students' Union, Dr. Rao was critical of the movement and used to oppose it openly for which he became unpopular amongst the youths. I requested Dr. Rao not to provoke the youths

unnecessarily. He replied, “they are like my children and they are making serious mistakes, as father it is my duty to correct them. It is a Herculean task, especially in the State of Assam for several factors.”

Dr. Rao was a true Gandhian and tried to live throughout his life with Gandhi’s philosophy. He maintained integration in his word, work and thought. He was a man of courage and had independent outlook. He may also be considered as the symbol of integration in the multi-coloured mosaic that India is.

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