

Some memories of VKRV Rao

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VKRV Rao was my grandmother's elder brother, and this tenuous kin relationship was reinforced when my parents decided to name me after him. He would visit us regularly, throughout my childhood. I don't remember much about him as a child – he was not someone who was very comfortable with young children. And he was scary - a loud, commanding presence whose visits were marked by stern orders from my father to clean up my mess around the house. I remember visiting him and his wife Kamala when I was seven, with my parents, at his ministerial bungalow in Delhi and being petrified that he would ask me a question about algebra or something. Kamala Aunty compensated for this with her kind eyes, tremendous warmth and freshly baked chocolate-walnut cakes.

So it was, largely with Kamala Aunty's cakes in mind, that I would visit them regularly throughout my teens in Bangalore. At the age of fifteen, I took my first economics course in the tenth standard and discovered, a little to my surprise, that his name (and – by default - mine) were all over the book. So, in an attempt to make small talk and break the ice I would ask him about his work in the Planning Commission or in devising India's national income, or about Keynes – parroting something that I had read in the textbook and often getting a stern rebuke back about the incorrectness of the statement. I guess this was the first real connection that I made with him – and the first time that I was drawn to economics as a subject. In hindsight what I was receiving was a unique oral history of his perception of the Indian economic experience. The conversations with him made the stultifying NCERT textbook come alive. His memories would also range across topics like the kindness and encouragement he received from Keynes, or the debates he would have with his friend Alec Cairncross, or the difficulties he faced putting together the data for his PhD thesis.

I decided to major in economics for my BA in St. Xavier's College in Bombay, and would spend most of my summers in Bangalore, with a twice-a-week visit to the Rao residence. As I grew older, and as he did, our conversations grew more intimate. He would ask me to join him on his evening walk and talk and, more importantly and flatteringly for a young undergraduate, listen, with great intensity, to my naive ideas. I would tell him about some new thing I learnt in econometrics and he would bemoan the state of modern economics, its increasing mathematization, its neglect of social and political factors, and his strongly held belief that economics could not be studied in isolation from the other social sciences. All this shaped me greatly, if subliminally. Dr. Rao strongly believed that in order to make good policy – the social sciences had to learn from, and speak to, each other. This was the spirit behind his idea that the Delhi School of Economics should also house a first-rate sociology department, and that the Institute for Social and Economic Change should give equal prominence to all the social sciences.

I would ask him about the Lewis model, and he would tell me how much he used to personally like but intellectually disagree with Lewis when they served on some UN Committee. I would ask him about the Harrod-Domar model only to get a lecture on how important it was to not mathematize Keynes because much of what was interesting about

Keynes' ideas were in the details of his writing – not in the simplified versions that were imbedded within mathematical representations. I even had the audacity to write an essay revisiting his famous paper on “Investment, Income and the Multiplier” in the context of the black economy. It was a confused piece, full of the ignorant arrogance that characterizes one’s late teenage years and it was quite critical of the original article for assuming full tax compliance. Yet, he read it with care – returned it to me with red marking in the margins where he had raised all kinds of questions. And then he quizzed me about it – like I was in a Cambridge tutorial – without any rancour, even accepting some of the critique as valid. It was perhaps at that moment that I decided to become a research economist myself – which was perhaps what he was trying to encourage me to do in the first place.

When I decided to go to the US to get my PhD in economics, he sternly warned me not to get too enamored of mathematics. He was touched when I said that what I really wanted to do was to integrate economic and anthropological theories and methods because I too believed that the social sciences could not be studied in isolation. I remember telling him this during one of our walks together, and he gripped my hand with tears in his eyes. But, after a few years, when I told him about my dissertation topic – using the theory of hedonic markets to study the rise in dowries – he seemed quite disappointed that I had used economics to study social phenomena instead of the other way around.

Towards the end, in 1990, when I made my annual visit to Bangalore and went to see him and Kamala Aunty, he seemed increasingly dispirited and depressed. By then I was working at the University of Chicago and going through a phase of Chicago-infected free-marketism, and he did not have the spirit to argue with me - letting me insensitively rant on about how socialism had stifled the country. I was hoping for an argument – like those we had when I was an undergraduate - but what I got back was mute agreement. All he said was that I was perhaps correct, that it was possible that the economists of his generation had been wrong. But then, he said, the kind of socialism he believed in – Vivekananda’s socialism – was less about the macro-economy and more about compassion and making sure that the disadvantaged were not left behind.

As I write this, I realize how much those early conversations with him, particularly when I was an undergraduate, and his life’s work of integrating research with practical action, have shaped my thinking, and the choices that I have made in my research career. I feel utterly privileged to have had the good fortune to have known him and conversed with him during an impressionable period in my life. In the end, I feel I was not just his grand-nephew but his student, and he was not just my father’s uncle but my guru.