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DERIK FERNANDEZ PRABHU*

BHASKAR RAO

FAR FROM RESIGNED

This month would have been 20 years since Dr Nagulapalli Bhaskar Rao first joined the market research agency, Operations Research Group (ORG). But the anniversary isn't one for celebration: Rao quit as president last December under circumstances that can only be described as intriguing. His resignation came in the wake of the widely reported sale of ORG by the Sarabhais to Ashok Advani, publisher of Business India (and a lot else besides).

The sale hurt Rao, 52. "I resurrected ORG from the grave when I took over in my second tenure (as vice president) in 1983," says Rao. "Until then, it was just an audit organisation." Rao possesses a definite streak of stubbornness as his quick resignation showed. He attributes the step, however, to principles he values: "If I had gone along with the sale to one of the buyers, if I had kept my mouth shut, I could have had a more peaceful and prosperous time."

With his khadi clothes and safari suits, Rao doesn't fit the mould of today's market researcher. His hasn't been the typical graduate-MBA-market research route.

After schooling in his native village, Mudunuru in Krishna district, when Rao graduated from Vijayawada, the influence of his Gandhian father on him was strong. He got involved with the Bharat Sewak Samaj, the social service organisation headed by Jawaharlal Nehru. In 1962, the 22-year-old joined Jan Jagran, the mass-awareness wing of the Samaj, fulltime in Delhi. When the India-China war broke out soon after, Rao was part of the effort to combat rumours that accompany any conflict. It was his first major experience in mass communication.

1963. The green revolution was beginning. Rao quit Jan Jagran to work with the Japanese mission that was in India to help increase the consumption of urea. He liaised with farmers in Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat, educating them on the use of fertilisers to increase yield.

His work among farmers led to his receiving a fellowship to do an MS in social science at the Manhattan Kansas

State University in 1967. The political part of him was never dormant and soon after, Rao enrolled for a one-year course at Martin Luther King's School for Social Change. He completed his doctorate in mass communications from the University of Iowa. Then, Rao did the unthinkable: he and his wife surrendered their green cards and decided to return to India.

The young doctorate's first encounter with market research was accidental. In 1970, only 30, he'd joined Ford Foundation and was deputed as consultant to the Ministry of Health and Family Planning. The ministry decided to conduct a survey of people's perceptions of family planning. The market research agency Rao had to deal with was ORG, set up only some years earlier by the legendary businessman and scientist, Vikram Sarabhai. Sarabhai provoked Rao, telling him that someone with his rural and social activist background should be trying to "inspire people and build institutions" instead of working for a western funding agency.

Both impressed and moved, Rao quit and joined as manager at Baroda where ORG was based. Like most of the other organisations that Sarabhai helped create - among them the Indian Space Research Organisation, Physical Research Laboratory, Nehru Science Centre, National Institute of Design and IIM, Ahmedabad - ORG too was a society. It was, however, informally structured - so much so that its exact nature was not known to most.

The family planning project, with a sample of 25,000 was soon carried out. Work on the first National Readership Survey had begun and Rao was involved in the analysis of data generated.

An unexpected turn in Rao's career in 1973 came about because of an unplanned encounter with the then information and broadcasting minister, I.K. Gujral. As Rao remembers, a friend had dragged him along to attend a speech being delivered by Gujral in Bombay. After his speech Rao, an uninvited guest, couldn't contain himself and pointed out some flaws in the minister's assessment of the media



Photographs by VIRENDER SABHARWAL

THE PERSONALITY COLUMN

BHASKAR RAO

scene. Far from being offended, Gujral was impressed. Rao was invited to become the advisor (evaluation) to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. But Rao gained prominence as a media analyst only after 1977 when he quit the Government following Mrs Gandhi's defeat in the general elections. It was a time when, after the lifting of censorship, and the beginning of the magazine boom, there was a high interest in media, and Rao was suddenly quoted all over.

He returned to ORG - from where he'd been on leave - as director, consultancy services in 1977, becoming vice president in 1983 and president two years later. Rao, who is today

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reluctant to discuss the circumstances under which he quit, nevertheless feels compelled to point out that, contrary to press reports, ORG was in fact performing well financially. He claims that between 1985 and 1991, it grew from being a Baroda-centred outfit to have six branches, 350 employees, earnings rising from Rs 1.2 crore to nearly Rs 5 crore.

But more than that, Rao believes that his greatest contribution was in being able to lift ORG from being an organisation of 'mere data collectors'. "Until then, there had been no attempt at interpreting data or establishing linkages between two sets of facts. I helped them take a holistic - as opposed to an isolated - view of things. I also brought in analysis and strategy formulation."

While Rao concedes that the owners left him alone, trouble first cropped up in 1988 when ORG, a part of Ambalal Sarabhai Enterprises, was sold to Ranoli Machinery Co, also in the Sarabhai fold. When Rao was pressured to stop using the ORG name and use the Ranoli name instead, he resisted and then put in his papers. The resignation wasn't accepted and under a compromise, a separate company, Operations Research India Pvt Ltd, was registered (after an attempt to register ORG as a society failed).

Rao would have preferred it if it had been a society, foundation or trust: this would have been in keeping with Vikram Sarabhai's vision of ORG being an institution rather than a purely commercial venture. That's why the formation of a company was not a fact that either he or his executives chose to highlight. They preferred to let it be seen as a non-profit oriented group of professionals. This served them well since ORG was doing a wide variety of work for government agencies in areas as diverse as rural and urban development, environment and energy. As he always told employees: the priorities were impact, learning and only then profits.

Rao wanted to have nothing to do with the Business India deal because "over time, ORG had established its image as an independent, professional body, and that's how I have built it up. But now it will be seen as part of a magazine company."

What happens now? Although Rao has already received several consultancy assignments (in addition to advising three Central ministries) he isn't talking just yet. But considering his background, chances are that he will concentrate more in the area of social market research, a small but growing field.

- SREEKANT KHANDEKAR
in New Delhi

