

Gullapalli Nageswara Rao

"In order to appreciate a great man, we must know his surroundings. We must understand the scope of the drama in which he played - the part he acted - and we must also know his audience." — Robert Green Ingersoll.^[1]

A few years ago, I was privy to a conversation among a few medical school classmates of Dr. Gullapalli Nageswara "Nag" Rao. They were reminiscing their days at the Guntur Medical College in the 1960s, and I asked them what he was like in college. They painted a picture that would not surprise anyone who knows Dr. G. N. Rao: a stickler for punctuality, always well turned out in his polished, black shoes, and always passionate about his patients—characteristics that are all very evident when you meet him even now!

Seldom does one come across an individual in one's line of work which at once serves as an inspiration to many but is also accessible, available, and attentive to each person who seeks him out. From interacting with heads of state and discussing policies for reducing the burden of vision impairment to enquiring about the health of an employee, Dr. Rao embodies a range of values that seem difficult but necessary to emulate.

In his acclaimed book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell makes an interesting note on how we can learn from high-achievers. Gladwell says that we pay too much attention to what successful people are like and too little to where they are from: that is, their culture, their family, their generation, and the idiosyncratic experiences of their upbringing. In trying to know Dr. Rao, it is important to not just know him as a successful founder of L. V. Prasad Eye Institute but to know what made him one.^[2]

Residency training is a defining period for most medical practitioners. For Dr. Rao too, the seeds for his particular approach to ophthalmology were sown during his residency training at the Rajendra Prasad Centre for Ophthalmic Sciences, New Delhi, in the 1970s. Prof. L. P. Agarwal, who had founded the R. P. Centre, inspired Dr. Rao with his scientific rigor and discipline [Fig. 1]. This empirical and evidence-based approach to delivering eye care put Dr. Rao on a completely different path from what he had thought would be his life. By that point, his father had established a thriving practice as the first ophthalmologist in the town of Guntur in Andhra Pradesh. A young Dr. Rao could have looked forward to a bucolic career in Guntur, building on his father's practice and becoming a very successful eye specialist as well.

His taste of rigor at R. P. Centre made Dr. Rao decide instead that he needed to learn more. After much effort, he took up a cornea fellowship position with Dr. Jules Baum at Tufts University School of Medicine in 1974, where he spent time enhancing his clinical and research skills. Following this, he completed a second fellowship under Dr. James Aquavella at the University of Rochester Medical School. It was under Dr. Aquavella that he embellished his surgical skills and learned the value of discipline and hard work. His time at Rochester also helped him hone his management skills [Fig. 2].

Midway through his fellowship, Dr. Aquavella offered Dr. Rao to stay on and work with him. This was a big opportunity, and a young Dr. Rao thought he had found his calling. In his ten years at Rochester, he established his reputation as an excellent corneal surgeon and published dozens of research papers. At the age of 36, he was also a sought-after speaker at ophthalmology meetings in the United States and India. He had worked on one of the first models of the specular microscope and had described the subtle changes in shape and size of the corneal endothelial cells as markers of an unhealthy endothelium, terms we now know as polymegathism and pleomorphism. However, this was not enough for him, and a nagging restlessness to do something more remained. During his numerous visits to the All India Ophthalmological Society's annual meetings, he encountered many young ophthalmologists and patients with corneal disorders and the realization that the need in India was far greater than where he was dawned on him.

In 1982, Dr. Rao and his wife, Mrs. Pratibha Rao, decided that their true calling was to return home to India and establish a world-class ophthalmology facility to help treat patients and train young doctors in the state of Andhra Pradesh. This was not an easy decision. They were



Figure 1: Dr. G. N. Rao during his residency days at the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Centre for Ophthalmic Sciences, AIIMS, New Delhi (First from left)



Figure 2: Three individuals who helped share Dr. Rao's early ophthalmology career (sitting in chairs L to R, Dr. James Aquavella, Prof. L. P. Agarwal, Dr. Jules Baum. Dr. Rao is sitting on the stage)

leaving behind a thriving practice when a full professorship and a stellar career as a cornea specialist beckoned. In 1984, Dr. and Mrs. Rao set up the Indo-American Eye Care Society in Rochester to help raise funding to set up an eye institute in India. They chose Hyderabad as the location for this not-for-profit eye institute, hoping that it would be easy for patients to access it^[3] [Fig. 3].

With support from the then chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, the late Shri N. T. Rama Rao, land was allocated for establishing this eye institute in Kismathpur on the outskirts of Hyderabad. However, the dream began to take shape when the late Mr. L. V. Prasad, a film producer and his son Mr. Ramesh Prasad were convinced by Dr. Rao's vision and decided to support the cause. They gave the initial funding for building the institute and donated a tract of land in Banjara Hills, Hyderabad [Fig. 4]. The Raos invested their life savings from their time in the United States to help buy the first surgical and medical equipment. Clinical services started on June 1, 1987, and this was how L. V. Prasad Eye Institute (LVPEI) was born.

If you ask staff what makes them stay on at the institute and what it is today, they pause to think, but the answer seems to always be the same: the culture of the organization. But what is this "culture"? It seems to be many things that appear striking when first witnessed: picking up a piece of paper littered on the floor, the door of the class that closes at 7 am each day, and ensuring that every patient gets the same level of care, irrespective of their ability to pay, and many more.

"Research suggests that once a musician has enough ability to get into a top music school, the thing that distinguishes one performer from another is how hard he or she works. That's it. And what's more, the people at the very top don't work just harder or even much harder than everyone else. They work much, much harder." - Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success*

The initial years were tough with challenges on many fronts, but with a small and dedicated team Dr. Rao built an institution. Right from the beginning, he was sure that LVPEI was not to be an eye hospital but an institute where research and education were part of everything that they did. It is a testament to Dr. Rao's leadership that several employees from the initial team still continue to serve at the organization, inspired by the founding values of the institute [Fig. 5].

These values were "excellence" and "equity", often not thought of together in the same breath, but excellence in every aspect with the unwavering stand of ensuring every patient received the same quality of eye care irrespective of their ability to pay are what define the organization even today. Dr. Rao worked with this team, juggling a full clinical schedule while overseeing all administrative aspects and ensuring the team was well cared for. LVPEI was always good at attracting the best talent around the country. At the same time, he continued to add value to Indian ophthalmology.

Dr. Rao helped establish the Eye Bank Association of India in 1989 and served as the editor of the *Indian Journal of Ophthalmology* between 1993 and 1998. The 90s saw Dr. Rao's vision expanding in two directions: community eye care and global advocacy for eye care. In 1994, on his way to that year's



Figure 3: Dr. Rao and Mrs. Pratibha Rao during their time in Rochester, NY



Figure 4: Shri L. V. Prasad with his son Mr. Ramesh Prasad



Figure 5: Dr. Rao interacting with a patient during the early days of L. V. Prasad Eye Institute

annual American Academy of Ophthalmology meeting, he stopped over at the International Agency for Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) general assembly in Berlin to understand what it was all about.

A chance meeting with a bunch of international public health ophthalmologists with deep ties to the World Health Organization (WHO) catapulted Dr. Rao into the global blindness prevention movement. His interactions and friendships with their counterparts in India showed him the scale of the public health need for eye care. Both of these aspects of eye care were at the cusp of change. On the global level, international NGOs, the International Council of Ophthalmology, and the WHO were discussing a powerful new approach to blindness prevention, what would eventually become VISION 2020: The Right to Sight global initiative. Dr. Rao was welcomed into this community of change-makers as one of their own. These included Dr. Ramachandra Pararajasegaram, a WHO consultant and that point the President of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB), Dr. Allen Foster with the International Centre for Eye Health (ICEH), Dr. Serge Resinkoff, Ms. Suzanne Gilbert, Ms. Victoria Sheffield, and many more. Together, this “golden generation” forged a global initiative that electrified eye care delivery around the world. Thanks to their efforts, eye care, a set of neglected public health conditions, found its footing and found remarkable support. The high point of VISION 2020 was the Seeing is Believing campaign by Standard Chartered Bank, which brought in over 100 million dollars into the sector over ten years. Dr. Rao served as the secretary general and then President and CEO of IAPB during this period.

This keen interest in delivering eye care to the people long under-served led to the development of the pyramidal, multi-tier model of eye care, which has been adopted in several countries around the world. The pyramidal model of eye care delivery is a seminal contribution to the world of ideas around public health delivery. It is centered on establishing permanent centers of eye care in communities that are far away from urban metropolises. At first glance, this might look unsustainable. In fact, even today, an itinerant model where screening camps are conducted and people are encouraged to visit hospital centers seems to be the norm. The eye care pyramid recognizes and ensures that health care provision is an ongoing activity. Engendering health-seeking behavior in communities depends on first building trust. Today, LVPEI’s primary and secondary centers are built with local support and employ local youth. They are an integral part of their communities and are therefore patronized by them. Many of them are self-sustaining and those that are not are supported by a network of communities that can. Did Dr. Rao see all this change when he pushed to start the first secondary center at Mudhole in rural Telangana? Perhaps not. But these outcomes emerge from his insistence on treating people, irrespective of their domicile and income, with respect and dignity [Fig. 6].

It is difficult to uncouple Dr. Rao’s journey from that of his lifelong friend and champion, Prof. Brien Holden. They were instrumental in strengthening the International Association of Contact Lens Educators (IACLE) and bringing in contact lens education and training to India. Today, the Indian Contact Lens Education Program (ICLEP) is the longest continuously running education program for contact lenses in the country. Together, they forged a formidable partnership that led to the development of some of the most successful innovations in contact lenses, including the silicone hydrogel contact lenses.



Figure 6: Dr. Rao receives the IAPB Vision Excellence award from the then President of India, Shri APJ Abdul Kalam in 2012

They also worked together at IAPB, helping to push for data on uncorrected refractive errors, myopia and presbyopia that informed the WHO policy on blindness prevention. They also worked to ensure that optometry was accepted in many countries as a partnership with ophthalmology and a critical team player in the mission to eliminate avoidable vision loss [Fig. 7].

Dr. Rao also served as the President of the Academia Ophthalmologica Internationalis (AOI). The AOI is a prestigious 80-member organization of some of the most eminent academicians in ophthalmology from around the world. He has received several national and international awards, including the Padma Shri in 2002, several awards from the All India Ophthalmological Society, the World Cornea Congress Medal, the GOH Nauman award from the International Council of Ophthalmology, the International Blindness Prevention Award, and the outstanding humanitarian service award from the American Academy of Ophthalmology [Fig. 8]. He was also awarded the Kupfer award and the ARVO humanitarian award by the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology, and the Bernardo Streiff medal by the Academia Ophthalmologica Internationalis. Dr. Rao was admitted to the order of the Star of Africa by Nobel Laureate and former president of Liberia, Dr. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, for his outstanding contribution to combating blindness in the West African nation of Liberia [Fig. 9]. In 2017, Dr. Gullapalli Nageswara Rao was inducted into the Ophthalmology Hall of Fame by the American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery to join 55 others who have been inducted in the past 20 years [Fig. 10].

All through this stellar journey and recognition from across the world, Dr. Rao has remained firmly grounded and his focus on taking eye care to where the need is the most burns bright. He has spelt out a vision of setting up global eye health resource centers and creating a blueprint for a robust, high-quality primary eye care model for a 150 million population in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Odisha, where LVPEI serves.

On a typical day at LVPEI, when you watch Dr. Rao pause on the stairs to speak affectionately with Lakshmi—a housekeeping staff member—and enquire about the health of



Figure 7: Dr. Rao with Prof. Brien Holden



Figure 8: Dr. Rao receiving the Padma Sri from the then President of India, Shri K. R. Narayanan in 2002



Figure 9: Dr. Gullapalli N. Rao being inducted as a Commander, Order of the Star of Africa by Nobel Laureate and then President of Liberia, Dr. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 2017



Figure 10: Dr. Gullapalli Nageswara Rao was inducted into the Ophthalmology Hall of Fame by the American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery in 2017

her family, or when he seats himself in the cafeteria at a table full of young resident doctors and speaks about their dreams and aspirations, you pause to wonder if this is really the same person. And then it hits you that all of these personas cannot be separated. They blend in to make Dr. Rao the person he is: his firm belief in values, respect for each individual, care regardless of where they come from and the uncompromising values of excellence and equity. And these are the qualities that blend together to make the unique world-renowned individual we know today. One of Dr. Rao's inspirations is the great Dr. Edward Norton, founder of the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute. A tribute paid to Dr. Norton, quoting the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, applies to Dr. Rao too: "Wanderer... there is no road, the road is made by walking."

Today, the road that Dr. Rao made is well-paved and well-travelled. In 2019, Dr. Rao began a rigorous transition process to identify a new leadership team for LVPEI, a team that would continue to give life to his vision. We will always be grounded in clinical practice, and our strength is derived from Dr. Rao's vision of a "3H" doctor. In Dr. Rao's words, "We encourage our professionals to use their Hands with skill, their Heads to know, and their Hearts to feel—the 3Hs."

When asked what he believes makes institutions great, he says, "I strongly believe that any medical institution that can optimally combine Talent with Technology, and add an element of Tenderness, will remain a winner in future and be known as a caring institution."

When you pause to think if it really is so simple in this complex world, the reality seems that it is so!

Dr. Rao's has been an exceptional journey, and it has been a privilege to recount it again here in the pages of the *Indian Journal of Ophthalmology*.

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Dr Pravin Krishna Vaddavalli is the Network Director - Technology and Communications and is also the Director of The Cornea Institute and the Institute of Excellence at LV Prasad Eye Institute (LVPEI). He is the Secretary of the Cornea Society of India and was the founding Scientific Committee Chairman of the Telangana Ophthalmology Society.

Dr Vaddavalli has a keen interest in technology and its applications in medical science and hopes this blend will lead to the delivery of equitable and excellent eye and health care in the future. His main areas of interest are corneal transplant surgery, lamellar keratoplasty, keratoconus and refractive surgery.

An alumnus of Bangalore Medical College, Dr Vaddavalli did his Masters in Ophthalmology from Guntur Medical College in Andhra Pradesh and later pursued a fellowship in Cornea and Anterior Segment at LVPEI, Hyderabad, subsequently joining the Institute in 2004. Eventually, he also did a one-year fellowship in Cornea and Refractive Surgery at the prestigious Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, Miami, USA. He is a recipient of several national and international awards, including the Young Investigator Award for outstanding research in clinical ophthalmology by the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology, "Best Paper in Cornea" by the All India Ophthalmological Society and three consecutive best paper awards by the American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery. He serves as a reviewer for numerous international journals and has over 130 peer-reviewed publications and over 800 national and international presentations to his credit.