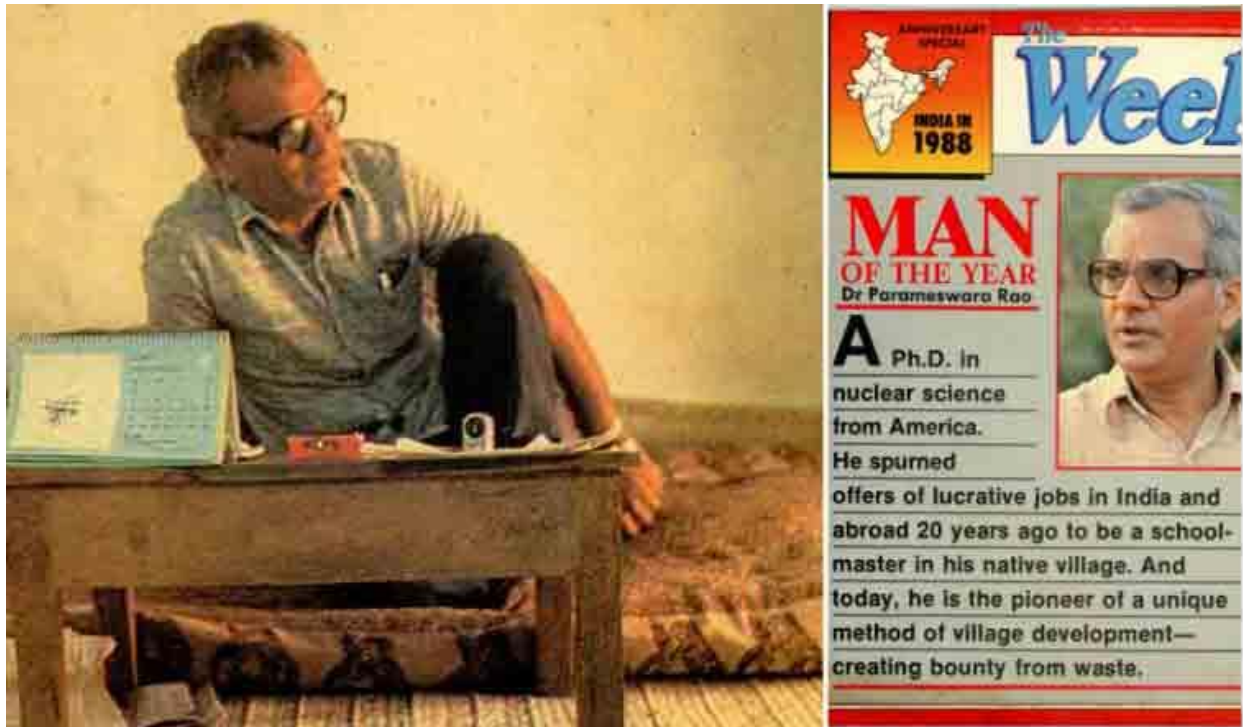


# THE WEEK ARCHIVES: Dr Parameswara Rao: A trust that has transformed life in Andhra villages

Dr Rao, who dedicated his life for community service, breathed his last on Sunday



By R. Prasannan and G.S. Radha Krishna Issue Date: January 02, 1987 Updated: June 11, 2019 18:50 IST



[Left] Parameswara Rao photographed for THE WEEK's Man of the Year issue [right] in 1987

One evening in mid-1967, a strange meeting was coming to a close in a professor's chamber in Pennsylvania State University. There were just two persons in the room—the American professor and his young Indian research student whose dissertation on nuclear chemistry had been accepted by the university. Tears were rolling down the cheeks of the professor; the other man was as silent as a Buddha.

At long last the professor said: "In the 32 years of my career I have never come across such an original idea. I wish you good luck." The two shook hands and the young man rose to leave. At the door he heard the professor saying: "But remember Parameswara, the job here will remain open to you for two years. If ever you change your mind, take the next flight and come here. If it

is after two years, give me 15 days notice." The young man replied, "I shall remember, sir. Thank you," and left.

But Parameswara, now Dr B.V. Parameswara Rao, forgot. He forgot about the offer of an associate professorship in Pennsylvania State University at a salary of \$2,500. He forgot about the jobs offered by two American companies at higher salaries. He forgot about the top job in India's Atomic Energy Establishment which he had left two and a half years earlier and which was waiting for him in Bombay.

On his flight back to India the next day, he remembered only one thing: the sight of two illiterate old men in his ancestral village of Dimli reciting the Gita and the Bhagavata Purana. Over the years the recollection of that childhood encounter was only growing stronger when his authoritarian father forbade him to go to the village, when he got married, when he applied for that job in Bombay thinking that he would not get it, when he said goodbye to Dr Brahm Prakash who asked him to come back to the Atomic Energy Establishment after getting a doctorate from the US, when his colleagues in the States scoffed at his constant talk about the Indian villager's infinite genius.

The mind that was in such trouble 20 years ago is at peace today. It has found its destiny in the little Dimli and its primitive neighbourhood. It seeks its joy from the fact that the primitiveness of the environment is rapidly giving way to a new village order, one in which the most primitive of people prosper in harmony with the most primitive environment. It takes pride from the fact that the prosaically named Bhagavatula Charitable Trust is not a model but only a catalyst of change.

The Dimli neighbourhood today gives one a picture of constant activity. The vast acres of wasted bad lands on the rocky slopes of the Panchadharia Hills are now prospering into lush green farmlands. The damned marshlands of Vakapadu, once ravaged by the tidal waves from the nearby Bay of Bengal, are now rich prawn-breeding and salt-producing areas. The ancient, but once moribund, lacquerware art of Etikoppaka village is now in the pangs of a reincarnation as a sophisticated handicraft. And above all, the once-starving bipeds in the 50-odd villages in Yellamanchili block of Visakhapatnam district are now looking forward to a better condition of living with better nutrition, with more income coming from their land and livestock, and with better health facilities provided by Parameswaragaru and his dedicated team of workers in the Trust.

But, achieving this has been no small task even for that American-trained scientist. First of all, there were a lot many things to unlearn—all those non-rural and even non-Indian values imposed on him by the urban culture. After all, how much of rural India did he know from those short summer vacations in his ancestral house at Dimli, having lived and studied in Visakhapatnam or Bombay or the United States?

And before that there was the problem of his father. He had always lacked the guts to defy him; that was why he had gone to college, instead of to the village, after school final. He had applied for the job in Bombay thinking that if rejected he could tell his father that he was unfit for such jobs. But the father had always won, and when Parameswara had written to him of the research

project in America the father had difficulty in concealing his joy—the old man had replied by sending him an air ticket to the US.

But this time the son had his way. On the very day of his return to Visakhapatnam he told his parents of his plans, though not yet concrete. He had already got the consent of his wife to whom he had written a four-page letter from the US describing his dreams only to receive a four-lined letter which stated: "Do whatever you like; but always remember that I am with you."

The father finally consented reluctantly. Within hours Parameswara and his wife were cleaning the cobwebs in the abandoned ancestral house at Dimli, 50-odd kilometres from Visakhapatnam. The next day he went out for a walk in the village where he met a bunch of schoolboys. On inquiry he was told that their school was at Yellamanchili, five miles away.

So the first thing Dimli needed was a school. But where was money to start a school? Parameswara began to talk to the villagers. But everyone was sceptical not only about the need for a school, but also about the genuineness of this strange man's purpose. At a meeting, Chilukama, the richest, and hence the most miserly man in the village, asked him; "What is the guarantee that you won't run away with the money to America?" Parameswara replied calmly: "My brothers are here to dissuade me from the project. Will you please talk to them?"

The brothers told Chilukama that Parameswara had come to Dimli refusing jobs which would pay him enough to start more than one school in a year. He wanted the people to contribute only because he wanted the school to be a people's school.

The next morning when Parameswara was having what he thought was the last meeting with the villagers at the Rama Mandir, Chilukama walked in, took out a wad of notes from the fold of his dhoti, counted Rs 1,000 and gave it to Parameswara. The rest of the villagers did not want any more guarantee. That Chilukamma had trusted his money with this strange man was enough.

With Rs 57,000 collected this way and Rs 19,000 given by the American Peace Corps the school building was ready by June 1968. But then the state government suddenly withdrew permission to private parties to start schools.

Parameswara met Chief Minister K. Brahmananda Reddy, but to no avail. He then sought an appointment with Governor Khandubhai Desai. After many failures he met the Governor's ADC who, amazed at the aspiring village schoolmaster's command over the English language, asked him: "Are you a graduate?" When Parameswara reluctantly told him that he was a PhD from the US, the ADC rushed into the Governor's room. The long meeting ended in the beginning of a close friendship. On Gandhi Jayanti day in 1968, the Dimli High School was opened. The school received ad hoc grants from the government to pay the staff till 1976 when it was handed over to the zilla parishad.

The courses taught to the children at the school included tanning techniques. Parameswara was always conscious of the fact that mere literacy would not solve the village's problems. On the contrary, it would only accentuate the problems with a large number of literate young men finding themselves misfits in the village milieu.

The village schoolmaster again began to look around. By then his two and a half year savings from the USA were exhausted. It was then that he spotted the 1,000-odd acres of marshland at Vakapadu, 12 miles from Dimli. The cyclonic storms from the Bay of Bengal had left the area hospitable only to dangerous reptiles of the bog. The people on its periphery led a sub-human life, their few small-scale salt pans constantly destroyed by the tidal waves.

But that did not discourage him. Scientific methods of production should be able to withstand the onslaught of nature, he knew. If his experiments succeeded, he could impart the technology to the villagers. Parameswara approached various government agencies with a request for a lease of 380 acres of wasteland at Vakapadu. After a long pursuit the papers were ready, but they were not just reaching him.

Once again he travelled to Hyderabad and tracked the papers down to a clerk's desk where he was asked for a bribe of Rs 25. Showing his wallet which contained Rs 50, he told the clerk: "My return ticket will cost me Rs 25. I have to spend the night in Hyderabad. And moreover, why should I bribe you?" The papers did not move from the table and Parameswara had to approach the chief minister. Fortunately, P.V. Narasimha Rao remembered the man whose school he had opened a few years earlier as education minister.

Salt production began at Vakapadu in 1973. In its early days, the neighbouring villagers used to laugh at the man who used to make the regular trips to Vakapadu—part of the way on his bicycle and part of the way carrying his bicycle across the bog. But the derision soon gave way to admiration when he showed them how useful even the boggiest land could be made. He also helped them take up salt manufacture as a worthy enterprise using modern technology. And recently he has also started experimenting with prawn culture in the reservoirs of his salt pans.

Even before the Vakapadu project recovered from its teething problems, Parameswara began looking for other avenues of development. And in one he badly burnt his fingers because of his inexperience with local political powers. In 1973, he invited the local people to invest in a cooperative factory which would manufacture sugar from a drought-resistant variety of cane, thus helping the farmers of the area to grow this variety. But the local sugar lobby suddenly woke up realising that it would soon be deprived of the cheap raw material. Facing opposition, Parameswara abandoned the project, and just as he had done to collect the money, he went from door to door to return it.

The incident, however, helped him in a way. Suddenly the local people's confidence in him grew and so Parameswara did not have to do much canvassing to start the Divvela Cooperative Farmers' Service Centre in 1974. The cooperative was launched to help farmers with agricultural loans, meet their equipment needs, provide them additional sources of income like poultry and dairy. Again money was the big problem. Finally, he contacted a German organisation called EZE (Central Protestant Agency for Development Assistance) which asked him to form a trust. Once again Parameswara went around the villages, but yet he was short of a few thousand rupees.

One day, his 78-year-old father called him and said: "I know you are doing some good work in the village. I will give you Rs 10,000 if you will start a hospital in Dimli and name it after me. I have 3,000 in cash and 7,000 in other assets to give you."

Parameswara replied: "Father, give me that 3,000. I shall develop the whole village and my scheme will include the health of the villagers without actually having to start a hospital. A hospital will require much more money than what you can give me." The next morning the father again called him to his side and said: "I know nothing of what you are talking. But I have trust in you. Take the money and name the trust after the family."

The Bhagavatula Charitable Trust (BCT) was registered in November 1976 and it had its first experience of relief and rehabilitation work following the 1977 cyclone disaster in coastal Andhra. The trust put in eight lakh man-days to bring relief to the people. In the event 6,000 people benefited from it.

Then began the ambitious wasteland development schemes. "I noticed that 25,000 acres lay waste in this block (Yellamanchili). Why not develop it?" said Parameswara. So, he contacted the district collector who finally sanctioned 50 acres on a 20-year lease on the slopes of the Panchadharia Hills with a warning: "You are being foolish".

From any reckoning it was a foolish attempt. Buried in the land were huge boulders. The land had never been touched with a plough or a spade for hundreds of centuries. In short, a primeval land, greened only by thorny shrubs and weeds.

But Parameswara only saw the rose among the thorns. On the rocky slope of the hill was a centuries-old temple around which were five perennial springs. (The Panchadharia Hills had got their name from these springs.) So, there was water—and hope.

The work began immediately with hired experts. "We went to the agricultural laboratories and collected information about plant species that grow on dry land. We did nothing original. We were only implementing what the agricultural universities found was possible."

"I guess I was being foolish," was the remark of the collector who sanctioned the lease when he visited the prosperous Panchadharia farm three years later. One can say there are today six springs on Panchadharia Hills. The five springs of water and the spring of hope that is the BCT whose activities are coordinated from there.

But mere wasteland development does not benefit the villages except that it provides them employment. Parameswara is always particular that the technology has to be taken to the villagers. That is why the BCT has taken small farmers' plots on short-term leases to develop them and return them to the owners. In the case of one small farmer, the trust has even liberated his plot from a moneylender (thus liberating him, too) and undertaken to develop the farm.

Meanwhile, Parameswara was also understanding the life of the villagers. His contact with the farmers and salt workers made him realise that development work oriented merely towards economic uplift was meaningless. One evening as he was walking to Morakada village, an old

woman stopped him and said: "You have all these programmes for men, who squander them. They rarely benefit women and the family. Don't you have anything for us?"

Thus was started the thrift schemes for women, the mahila mandalis in villages, whose activities are coordinated by the Mahila Samakhya, a federation of mahila mandalis. The programme began by giving women additional sources of small income like raising nurseries and stitching adda leaves. The women were encouraged to save small amounts against which the trust would give them loans to buy sheep and poultry and so on. The activities of mahila mandalis have become so successful that BCT is now concentrating on women as agents of social change.

"We have come to realise that when we work through the men, the benefits rarely permeate to the family. A man's world is mostly limited to him and perhaps to his farm or work," says Parameswara. "But a woman's world extends to her family, that is herself, her husband and children. Through them the village also develops. You can see the result for yourself."

There is no denying the fact that it was through the women that BCT's development message has reached the 50-odd villages around it. Women health workers educate the villagers about basic sanitation and attend to primary medical needs, women para-vets attend to the health problems of village livestock, women thrift workers collect the savings of village women and educate them about small savings and investment schemes like poultry and sheep, the mahila mandalis run the balawadis and supervise thrift activities—in every field it is the women who are in the forefront.

There is no gainsaying the amount of risk that Parameswara and his colleagues in the BCT have faced in such schemes which involve a certain amount of interference with age-old familial and social equations. In earlier stages the villagers quite often protested when Harijan women were appointed as balawadi teachers or health workers. Parameswara narrated an instance: "Once one of our villages wanted to have a balwadi. We selected a Harijan destitute girl of the village, trained her and sent her to the village as teacher. The villagers came back to us saying they did not want a Harijan to teach their children. Then we asked them: Didn't you ask for the balwadi? Didn't you say that you wanted this poor girl to be helped in some way or the other? They said, 'yes'. Then we told them: 'We can find only this one way to meet both demands. Do you have any complaints against her teaching qualities?' They said they had none. We then told them to go back and ponder the matter. Your children will come to no harm by being taught by a Harijan girl.' The next day they came back saying that the teacher was welcome."

It is this infinite capacity of Parameswara to use his patient reasoning that has won him the goodwill of the villagers. He has often used it to correct their erring ways. Once 120 people of one village were sanctioned loans by a bank to buy cows at the recommendation of the trust. Most of them got the money but did not buy the cows. When the bank complained to Parameswara, he and a few colleagues visited the village where some of the workers enacted a role-play which showed what had happened in the village. Some people shouted: "Yes, this has happened in the village." The clamour was such that the erring loanees came to Parameswara and admitted their mistake. He told them softly: "Now you go and buy your cows." Not one among the 120 failed to comply with that friendly advice.

Though a low-profile and soft-spoken man, Parameswara's pioneering work in wasteland development has been noticed by the high and mighty. In 1981 a team of World Bank experts led by its then chairman Robert McNamara visited Delhi. One of the visitors who had heard of Parameswara through an international funding agency asked Prime Minister Indira Gandhi about him, who, in turn, asked Narasimha Rao to find out about the man and get him to lunch with her and the World Bank officials the next day. Narasimha Rao contacted the state government and the district administration which finally spotted him in a remote village from where he was virtually put into the next train to Hyderabad and the next flight to Delhi. He was a few minutes late for the lunch.

From then on Gandhi had shown a keen interest in the activities of BCT. However, Parameswara does not seem to be happy to share the glory of the trust. "It is the villagers who are developing themselves. The BCT is only streamlining their work. And in the BCT it is my colleagues who are doing the actual work. I am just a head clerk," he says.

The man's aversion to personality cult is there for all to see. He rarely interferes with the work of his colleagues. He is particular that the villagers should not credit their prosperity to him. "It is their genius that is working. They are finding solutions to their own problems," he insists.

Perhaps it is this inherent shyness that has kept honours and awards away from him. But that in no way undermines the pioneering greatness of the work of Parameswara. A casual visitor to the region may even fail to spot anything concrete in the villages where BCT activities are going on. But if he asks around, he may learn that some of these villages have got drinking water from the bore-wells dug by BCT, that there is no one starving there, that they get plenty of medical attention from the trust's doctors and the village health workers, that all of them have been freed from bondage to perennial poverty and fruitless labour, that most of them have enough to eat and more to save.

Isn't that an Indian villager's dream?

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Author R. Prasanna speaks:

Parameswara Rao was the most diffident of all the altruists I have met—a really shy man with a quiet voice. He just wouldn't talk about himself or his work. "You can stay here and see all the work; there is nothing to talk," was his refrain whenever I asked him about how he had launched and nursed his community project. Finally, my colleague G.S. Radha Krishna and I had to work on him through his brother Srinivasa to make him talk. After my article on him was published as Man of the Year feature, Parameswara sent a short message: "Thank you for your good words about me. Now I hope I can live up to those words."