

The Passing of a Parapsychologist Koneru Ramakrishna Rao (1932-2021)

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He was known as Ram to his many colleagues and friends in the West; as Prof. Rao, to those in the more formal circles in which he tended to move in his native country of India. His career straddled East and West, and he vigorously pursued his many intellectual and academic interests until the very end of his life. Here is his story for today's JP readers. Hopefully you will find it an interesting and relevant slice of history.

The Guiding Hand of Destiny or Guiding the Hand of Destiny?

We all have a sense of what is meant by the term Destiny. The word conjures up its synonyms such as fate, luck, chance, design, happenstance, kismet, and, of course, karma. In our everyday lives, we get plenty of chances to look back and wonder whether and what role Destiny might have played in the outcome of a certain event, be it petty or significant.

Destiny is a weighty word, a nagging concept, one which haunts people each time they encounter it, churning up the great debates of Determinism vs Free Will, which go all the way back to the Greeks and other early philosophical systems. An interesting current view, espoused by Prof. George Steiner of Cambridge University, expressed in reference to such constructs as Determinism and Free Will, states that "something much deeper is going on--a *psychical* manifestation of the creative energy loosely thought of as the human "spirit," rather than the *physiological* workings of *biology*. To describe someone as a Free Spirit is just another way of saying he or she exercises a strong Free Will. Psychologically, I have always considered that the force we call *Will* is the operational side of the force we think of as Spirit; that they are partners in a mental process operating beyond the normal sensory and rational workings of consciousness. The human spirit yields insights of surpassing importance, while the Will provides the drive to act..." (Collier, 2014).

Koneru Ramakrishna Rao was 89 years of age when he passed away on November 9, 2021, in his hometown of Visakhapatnam in southern India, the home of Andhra University. Andhra figured prominently in Rao's life, having been his alma mater, which, rather remarkably, one day he would go on to lead, as the appointed Vice Chancellor, essentially the president of the university.

¹ No relation of K.Ramakrishna Rao, Hanu Rao, along with his wife, well known parapsychology researcher, H. Kanthamani, who had closely worked with K. Ramakrishna Rao, had long known Rao both in India and the United States. We were also personal friends with the Rao family. We thank John G. Kruth of the Rhine Research Center for giving us this opportunity to write this article on the life of our departed friend, for the Journal of Parapsychology, of which Rao was a longtime editor.

During his unusually eventful, productive and fulfilling life, K.R. Rao had accomplished several things besides serving as the longtime leader of the Institute for Parapsychology, based in Durham, North Carolina. The Institute was a research center originally established by Prof. J.B. Rhine, the progenitor of the new discipline, who had been shepherding the organization since its inception. Rao's involvement in American parapsychology, which lasted for over twenty years, was the longest he had spent on any single assignment. It happens to be one among many assignments of consequence, all very diverse, and most of them unexpected.

Of all the various projects K.R. Rao had taken up, the most consequential, and possibly the most gratifying one might be his lifelong, self-imposed and ceaseless writing of scholarly works. Beginning early with his master's thesis-- which he made sure was published-- Rao kept writing throughout his long career. It was as if he had considered it his sacred duty to spend a good portion of his free time writing. This cultivated habit resulted in the publication of numerous authoritative books and articles on philosophy and allied subjects. As a result, his bibliography is extensive. The older Rao got, the more he became focused and prolific in his writings and commentaries. He chose subjects and topics with care, selecting only those he considered to be of lasting value, focusing on areas which needed further exploration or needed to be revived from becoming totally obscure. Rao had a clear desire to personally contribute to posterity, concerned that the coming "digital generations" might be increasingly deprived of works conveying human essence and meaning.

One of the last publications that Rao had authored was his autobiography, titled *A Child of Destiny*. (Rao, 2020). It appears hastily written, using a fairly casual tone and style, precisely why, perhaps, we get an authentic representation and assessment of his life experiences. The title of his autobiography is reflective of the significant role so-called Destiny might have played during crucial junctures while he was engaged in various high-profile international endeavors over a period of seventy years. Unfortunately, in his autobiography, Rao provides only a couple of lines in the preface of the book to explain the intriguing title--remarking that while volition has an important role to play, "one's intentions alone are insufficient to determine the outcome." Rao underscores "the significance of circumstances in shaping one's destiny." During this brief examination of some of the highlight events in Prof. Rao's remarkable life, it may be fetching for us to look for "any hidden forces or agencies" that might have been at work, at key moments.

As a child, Rao led a life of privilege and enjoyment. He recalls that he was a pampered child, the first born, and a boy, on whom everyone in the family doted. He grew up in a rural village, part of a prosperous agricultural region, amid green rice paddies and many fruit orchards. Rao became a confident, even cocky youth, who did not suffer from self-doubt. He was quite bright, did well at his studies, but otherwise care-free and not very focused. Rao began to show sparks of leadership during his adolescence, even trying his hand at youth politics, for a time.

At this point, our story gets more interesting. When it came time for college, Rao was unsure about a major, as the offerings were paltry at his four-year college. So, he switched around some, before ending up at Andhra University, the flagship school in the state of Andhra. This move on his part was based purely on the advice of a friend who casually suggested for Rao to go to Andhra "and try to enroll in any

suitable post-graduate honors program.” Rao did entertain vague preferences to pursue conventional professional studies, but had not prepared or planned for them. At first glance, the subject of Geology appeared to be a possible discipline for the young applicant to pursue. The couple of university deans whom Rao had casually approached, took much interest in him, probably for no other reason than his youthful charm and his apparent state of helplessness. However, after they did some exploration on his behalf, they advised Rao that he did not have a sufficient math background to enter Geology. But one of the deans refused to give up—he personally drove Rao across the campus, in his own vehicle, to the Department of Philosophy, of all places! For that was the only subject of study left open to Rao. Once there, the professors were able to convince Rao that he should study Philosophy, assuring him that he would still be able to make a good career path out of it. To his credit, the young man who was usually quick to form his own opinions on things, decided to heed the advice of the deans and professors. Precisely at that moment, when he made the decision to go into Philosophy, a subject matter of which he had little familiarity or personal inclination, aware only that it was not the most sought-after major on campus, the karmic die was apparently cast for Koneru Ramakrishna Rao’s general life direction, and an extraordinary journey was thus begun.

Rao would turn into a serious student of Philosophy, under the patient and diligent tutelage of a veteran professor, one Saileswar Sen. Prof. Sen, quite incidentally, goes on to make Rao aware of an unconventional new discipline called parapsychology, which was being developed by an American professor by the name of J.B. Rhine.

Consider this. Our hitherto provincial youth, opinionated and excitable enough to consider the field of rough and tumble politics, one who was ill-prepared and quite lost for an academic direction just a few months earlier, quickly becomes immersed in the speculative subject of academic philosophy. He contacts Rhine in far- away North Carolina, writes his master’s thesis exploring parapsychology-- a very unconventional, emerging field-- and, most unusual of all for a typical Andhra University student of the time, Rao has his thesis published and disseminated far and wide! Make note that the published thesis has a foreword written by J. B. Rhine himself, whom Rao is yet to meet.

Destiny? A case of unusual initiative and drive on the part of the individual? One can only debate. It is certainly intriguing, when one considers the entire admission episode described above, which includes the helpful, paternalistic admission deans—not the most common state of affairs with regard to university faculty in most places—the Philosophy mentor who was directly instrumental in pointing Rao towards Rhine, and, in so doing, clearly paving K.R. Rao’s life’s path and direction, for the long term. For Prof. Sen, the name J.B. Rhine was most likely just a scholastic reference, no more than an ethereal American figure referred to in the dusty pages of old philosophy periodicals lying around the department. However, there was nothing ethereal about Rhine or parapsychology for Rao, the precocious and practical-minded student. Rao picked up the Rhine reference that had been casually given to him, and went straight into action! Destiny or not, it’s very intriguing. Perhaps, a case of “Aided Destiny,” as in ‘good luck favors those who work hard?’

Rao’s career took off. Soon after his masters, he went to the University of Chicago on a Fulbright Scholarship, to pursue a Doctorate of Philosophy. Well, this Chicago story also smacks of Destiny, once again. Rao’s future doctoral advisor, Richard McKeon, a distinguished philosophy professor at the Uni-

versity of Chicago, happened to travel all the way to Andhra University in southern India, on a UNESCO sponsored trip. "As fate would have it," all other members of the philosophy faculty were away that particular day, leaving only young Rao, who had been recently hired on as staff, to receive and engage the American visitor. Thus, Rao had the opportunity to spend meaningful time with McKeon at Andhra. Not surprisingly, Prof. McKeon was sufficiently impressed with him that he invited Rao to go study under him in Chicago. Just think, How far was the University of Chicago from the sleepy Philosophy Department of Andhra University of the mid-1950s.

Consider also the fateful timing of the visit. A chance meeting? Precisely. Preordained? A different word for the same effect, isn't it?

Those of Rao's American parapsychology colleagues, and his other academic contacts who are still active today, probably remember Rao as someone who came from India, joined Dr. Rhine's parapsychology research team, and was eventually appointed to lead the institute. They also would recall that Rao's services as a parapsychologist were in big demand during the seventies, both in America and India, at the same time. This is because Rao was simultaneously developing the first ever University-based academic Parapsychology department at Andhra University, while running the Rhine Institute. Thus, there were many interruptions to his tenure in American parapsychology research. These interruptions were caused mainly by the demands made not only by Rao's parapsychology role but his perceived general institutional role. He was called upon to return to India and assume the position of Vice Chancellor (VC) of his alma mater, Andhra University. The VC functions as the overall administrator, or president. Fortunately for Rao, things worked out so that he was able to honor his commitments both in India and in the US. In order to do so, Rao had to call on his personal discipline, much of which he learned from the veterans, Prof. J.B. Rhine and Dr. Louisa Rhine. Finally, when his long tenure at the Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man (FRNM) was over, Rao returned home to India for good and began what might be described as Part Two of his life's work, which involved promoting philosophical research and studies in India. Rao observes that the second half of his career was as gratifying to him as the first, if not more so.

We have a final story involving the play of destiny which might have affected Rao's career arc, which seems promising in this respect:

Rao tells of the time, towards the later part of his career, when he was on a visit to New Delhi. While there in the nation's capital, Dr. Rao went to meet a congressman, a friend of his, on a casual visit. Interestingly, the congressman compelled Rao to accompany him on a visit to a high-level bureaucrat in India's Department of Education, without giving any reason. Once there, the congressman introduced Rao as one of the premier philosophers in the country, and suggested to the Education official that Rao be appointed to the role of chairman of the prestigious Indian Council of Philosophical Research (ICPR), a position which was vacant, at the time. "It so happened," that the Education official had just received the file containing the names of the candidates who made the short list for the high-ranking position, which was lying in front of him, on top of his desk. The Education official then had asked Rao for his vitae, which, he did not have. In lieu of a CV, Rao suggested that he could make a Xerox copy of the bibliography from one of his own books that he happened to be carrying with him. A quick look at it was enough for the senior official to recommend Rao for the ICPR Chairman's position, which was quickly

approved by the Prime Minister, who happened to be a sophisticated, world-renowned economist and an intellectual. Rao contends that he had no reason or basis to expect the above turn of events, when he woke up that morning. That Karmic event led to an extended six-year term during which Rao had reportedly served as a model chairman of India's main grant funding government agency for philosophical affairs, while thoroughly reforming the ICPR, in the process.

In 2008, the first author of this paper, Hanu, had opportunity to spend a day with Prof. Rao in his ICPR chairman's offices located somewhere in the bureaucratic labyrinths of New Delhi. "During the entire six hours I spent in his office, after making sure I was comfortable, K.R. Rao sat at his large desk, quietly thinking and writing—scribbling on a yellow legal pad. He allowed for short meetings with visiting academic philosophers from various parts of the country, but otherwise, he just wrote all day. My mind's picture of him from that day is that of a *Rishi*, a sage or a yogi, not unlike the ancient Pathanjali of whose teachings Rao wrote about extensively in his many books. Our accidental philosophy major had finally come home."

References

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