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Abstract

India has been home of many cultures. But there has been a unity in that diversity. Pre-Independence India was more diverse than the present political entity. Born in a small village in Andhra Pradesh with mother tongue Telugu, he worked as journalist in Sindh (now in Pakistan, Local language Sindhi), Madras in the South (Local language Tamil), Bombay (Local language Marathi), Lucknow, Patna and Delhi (where local language is Hindi with different shades. He worked in there diverse cultures but earned respect for his professionalism. There has been another aspect of diversity of culture. Culture of newspapers where he worked depending upon the ownership and aims of the paper. He excelled through his professionalism even while working for the Times of India and for National Herald. Even today he after so many years of his death he is regarded as one of the most respected professional journalist India has produced. The paper attempts to look at his life and work from the intercultural angle.

Kotamraju Rama Rao is one famous name from yesteryears of Indian journalism. Mahatma Gandhi called him, “My fighting editor”1 and Jawaharlal Nehru considered it a privilege to be associated with him for a number of years when he was the Editor of National Herald. “He struck me as a man with ideals and a mission. He was an outstanding figure in Indian journalism.”2 Rama Rao was born on 9 November 1896 at Chirala a small village in Andhra Pradesh. Telugu was his mother tongue. He started his journalism in Madras where the native language was Tamil. From there he went to Karachi in Sindh where the native language was Sindhi. Other destinations in his 40 year long journalistic career were Bombay where the native language was Marathi, Allahabad, Lucknow, Patna and Delhi which fall in Hindi belt, Calcutta where Bengali and Lahore where Punjabi was native language. He made his mark as journalist in all these different places where culture was different from his own.

He did find some difficulties. At least two incidents are mentioned in his memoirs. First when he was working with New Times, Karachi. “I was reporter-cum-subeditor. After the day’s work I had to go out to report meetings and other public functions. My first account of a municipal meeting brought letters of protest from some members; I had “madrasified”3 the spellings not being familiar with Sindhi names; I had got confused between one speaker and another, between one subject and another, and made a mess of it on the whole.”4

Another incident mentioned was when Rama Rao was working in the Leader of Allahabad where C.Y.Chintamani, another great name from Andhra was editor. “Chintamani did not believe in dividing work into water-tight compartments. Subeditors were asked to report and the reporters were asked to edit. Told of for a meeting, I came back one day without a scrap of notes in my
hand. Explanation asked, I said I could not follow Hindi. I was promptly warned to learn it, though the chief himself had not mastered it during his many years in Allahabad.”

These must be the two striking examples that Rama Rao found interesting enough to be mentioned in his memoirs written almost at the end of his innings, as the book came out only after his death. After such experiences in the field he must have adjusted himself to cultural environment of the area where he worked.

There is another aspect of cultural diversity in his career as he has worked in newspapers, which had different cultures of their own. His career began with the *Humanity*, Madras, a Brahmosamaj weekly brought out by his brother Kotamraju Punniah. Brahmosamaj was a social and religious reform movement, which originated in Bengal and was propagated all over the country. It preached vigorously against caste and communalism, idolatry, *devadasis*, drink and a number of other evils. Politically its policy was free and vigorous.

As Punniah could not afford staff his two brothers Byragi Das and Rama Rao had to help him. As “Byragi Das left for Mesopotamia in the middle of the First World War, and so I had to take over his work also. I looked after advertisement, circulation and management. But my main work was to help Punniah in preparing copy for the press. We were too poor to afford a typewriter, and I had to copy out legibly much of the accepted….I had often to “sub” copy and go to the press when my brother was out of station…Humanity was a considerable success editorially. It had some of the best writers in India, if only for the reason that many of our intellectuals were members of the Brahmo Samaj for which it spoke. Some of the contributions were first rate, none of them paid for.”

Rama Rao’s next paper, the *New Times*, Karachi, which he joined in 1919 was “a venture of faith, as the proprietor-editor put it to me when I was leaving after ten months for pastures new. T.K. Jaswani had money to burn, given by an indulgent father. Being a sensible youth, he thought that he should burn it patriotically for a newspaper, of which the nationalists of Sindh stood in need. T.L. Vaswani, recently retired from the principalship of a college in Patiala, was behind it as *de facto* editor…We were in difficult times, with a war on the Frontier and martial law all over the Punjab. With his ripe age and mature judgement, Vaswani guided the paper carefully through the shoals. Not a politician, but a saint, a *Sadhu*. Not a day passed when he did not invoke the blessings of Providence on his Sindhu Desh, but Providence has been very unkind, as it generally is, and he has lived to see Sind go out of India.”

It is interesting to recall the environment when we are discussing inter-cultural angle. Rama Rao recalled, “The house in which we were living was under surveillance. Once the hoof of a police horse narrowly missed trampling me down – not its fault nor of the sowar, but I dodged deftly…A large Punjabi population lived in Sindh. Eager and anxious inquiries about the fate of near and dear ones in the Punjab were being made every day at the newspaper offices which were the only sources of information about the happenings in the beleaguered province, but even these sources were tainted and restricted. For any news of the happenings whatever it was worth, we depended on the Anglo-Indian papers, which were in a privileged position. They supported the soldiers’ atrocities with unabashed gusto. *The Civil and Military Gazette* published reports of the major and minor crimes of the soldiers with a relish which showed that Imperialism’s camp followers could be as blood-thirsty with the pen as its soldiers were with sword and gun…These was a blockade of news under the martial law regime, and those papers which published the news somehow were penalised. Strong comments on the administration brought the gag or
imposition of securities on the press. Correspondents who smuggled out reports were punished under a new law specially made for the purpose.”

Thus there was this cultural difference between Anglo-Indian papers and nationalist papers. Rama Rao had opportunity to work for both. But there were different shades of culture among these two general categories too. Chintamani’s leader was a nationalist paper but: “There had been a strike and a labour demonstration at Jamshedpur, which set my soul aflame. I blazed away with the headline ‘Bayonets Lose Their Terror’ in order to bring out the force of the news that the angry striking labourers had refused to be frightened by the threats of the police to charge them. A ten-minute lecture by the editor followed the next day, and I was admonished that the leader was not an ‘extremist rag’ for such an explosive headline. Sensational display of news was among the major taboos.”

Rama Rao’s next job was with Advocate of India, Bombay edited by James Cunningham. Culture of the city as well as of the newspaper differed here. As many people were in Bombay from his region, some of them came together to establish the “Andhra Home” and even conducted a manuscript weekly for private circulation. This is longing for your own culture in metropolitan environment.

The work culture was different. Rama Rao describes, “I was not allowed to send even a line of what I edited for the first two or three months. Every line was examined, every other sentence rewritten. Not a single headline of mine survived. It was a general massacre, but I liked it, being determined to learn from a real guru. I was lectured on my mistakes as the process of re-editing went on. It would have taken me years to learn all this if I had been left to myself…The lesson that Holsinger taught me to respect no copy unduly, once I sat at desk to handle it. The mistakes of expression even in the King’s speech must be corrected…Modesty is not a virtue in the subeditor and excessive modesty is a fatal weakness. I won Holsinger’s good opinion when I pointed out the collapse of a sentence in Sir Malcolm Hailey’s financial statement of 1921. Another time when I found three proof reading mistakes in an editorial of the Times, London.”

Rama Rao has worked in European owned the Times of India and had high regard for many things in that paper. ‘One thing I discovered immediately after entering the Times. Subject to the natural limitations of European-owned institution, there was freedom from race prejudice, certainly on the editorial side. I shall give an example. The communiqué of the Government of Bombay announcing the release of Gandhiji came one midnight in January 1924. Under the instructions of the Governor it was to be personally handed over to the principal newspapers by a top European official. He walked into subeditors’ room in the Times, looked around startled, went back and asked the sepoy (peon) on duty whether it was really the subeditors’ room. On being assured it was, he unwillingly handed over the communiqué to the subeditor on duty. Next day at Byculla Club, exclusively European, he chaffed the editor before a number of friends that the Times of India was a black man’s show, which explained why he was startled when he walked into subeditors’ room. The editor promptly wrote to the Governor asking whether high officials of the Government were permitted to talk racial nonsense about editors and papers in the Club. An apology by the indiscreet official followed.”

Rama Rao expressed his regard for one editor, Sir Francis Low. “During his editorship the Times of India touched heights it had never reached before and outstripped other papers in the point of circulation and the volume of news printed. Fundamentally a newsman, Low kept a constant and regular vigil on that side of the paper. As I worked directly under him, first in the Times of India
and then the *Evening News*, our contacts were intimate. When the *Evening News* was started in November 1923 with him in charge, he drafted me on to it, as he thought I had the essential qualifications for working on an evening paper, namely speed and accuracy of ‘subbing’, bright headlining and quick writing up of the leads. When later I was transferred to the *Times* at my own request, he warned me: ‘None of your smart headlines here. The *Times* is a sober paper.’ He was not only kind but affectionate to me and he watched me rise the profession with the pride and love of a old chief.”

It is interesting to mention here how Rama Rao puts his departure from the *Times of India*, particularly from the intercultural angle. “After four years and four months in the *Times of India* and the *Evening News of India* (June 1923-September 1927), I could say to myself that I had served out my novitiate, and could confidently don the robes of a junior priest in the temple of journalism. When I was leaving the paper the editor asked me the reason. Anybody who had a chance to work on a first class paper like that, he thought, would only be too glad to continue, but here I was leaving voluntarily. I remember my answer: ‘I have been long enough here and have learnt my work pretty well. I have my own ambitions. Can I ever be the editor of the *Times of India*?’ He understood and smiled.”

After 10 months in his hometown Chirala, Rama Rao joined the *Pioneer* in July 1928. His comment on the new editor F. W. Wilson is interesting from intercultural point of view. “Wilson was a live-wire journalist; he had the reputation of being one of the ‘most brilliant of the younger man of Fleet Street.’ One recognised this as soon as one came to know him. He had some of the best qualities of a journalist. Being new to India, he was deficient in his knowledge of Indian politics, but he remedied this soon by careful study, by cultivating valuable contacts, by talking to men who knew.”

But though he adjusted to the culture of the country, and the readership increased, there was trouble with the culture of the old readers of the *Pioneer*. As Rama Rao puts it, “His pro-Indian policy lost the old readership. Angry colonels and majors, who had been regarding their Pioneer as the true gospel of imperial righteousness, sent frantic telegrams demanding their names to be removed from the subscribers’ list. Wilson, on one occasion, attacked the Commander-in-Chief over the lack of progressive army policy. ‘Pray, who the devil are you to do that?’ a choleric colonel wired. What right had a mere civilian to call in question the wisdom of the supreme deity of the Indian military pantheon? The very legitimate right, Wilson replied, that the writer too was among those who had bared their chests to enemy bullets in the World War.”

F.W.Wison moved from *Pioneer*, Allahabad to *Indian Daily Mail* in Bombay and Rama Rao joined him as news editor in May 1930. This paper died in 1931. Rama Rao has described, “Lady Wellingdon, the Viceroy’s wife, had dropped her parasol at a party and the ADC was somewhat tardy in retrieving it. That never too sweet-tempered lady flew into violent tantrum at this. That any rate was the story that Wilson put out in gossip column. The humourless Political Department, bringing it to the attention of Sir Akbar Hydari (Senior), then Dewan of Hyderabad, wanted to know whether it was the paper to which the Nizam had been lending money. There was panic in the capital of Deccan. Another installment of debentures, which had been promised by the Nizam, was not taken up and the last hope of money flowing into the paper’s coffers disappeared. I reflected wryly that next to Desdemona dropping her handkerchief, Lady Wellingdon’s parasol dropping must be considered the most tragic trifle in history.” From
the intercultural point of view of this is an interesting example from Indian media history. This was interaction of colonial, princely and journalistic cultures that resulted in the end of *Indian Daily Mail*.

But then there is an interesting insight into the culture of the Fleet Street\(^3^3\) of those days, “Wilson’s advocacy of the Indian cause put him on the terrible black list of the British Union of Journalists and he could not get back to Fleet Street again. He died a poor, neglected, wretched man, as his last letter to me from England showed.”\(^3^4\)

Rama Rao worked for many papers with different cultures and one can go on and on. But the most important period in Rama Rao’s career was 1938 to 1946 when he was the editor of the *National Herald* founded by Jawaharlal Nehru. He was also sentenced to a jail term in 1942. The paper closed and reopened. It was time of the War too. From inter-cultural point of view some incidents in Rama Rao’s memoirs are significant. He published an article written by a former minister\(^3^5\) on restrictions to travel to Pashupatinath temple in Nepal under the heading, “God or Guns?” and got a warning. “Promptly I got a warning from Desmond Young who had been editor of the Pioneer and was now Press Advisor to the Government of India, that the article had been objected to by the military authorities as prejudicial to the safety of the country, and that if I committed a similar mistake next time I would be sent straight to jail.”\(^3^6\)

Towards the end of 1939 he was called by Commissioner of Lucknow division to communicate the displeasure of the Government of India about articles written by D.N.Pritt, the well-known King’s Counsel and Leftist which were sent for publication in Herald by V.K.Krishna Menon from London. Rama Rao asked whether he had read the articles, the Commissioner had not. “He had not evidently read the reports of the Russian attack on Finland\(^3^7\) and the very severe condemnation of that aggression that had appeared in Indian papers only that week.”\(^3^8\) This was the culture of officialdom.

Rama Rao went to cover August 1942 session of the Congress in Bombay that passed “Quit India” resolution. “The police round up was a blitzkrieg all right – but on unarmed forces. The British had learned Hitler’s technique but used it for not very heroic purpose. It was so swift, so well-organised, so comprehensive, that the historian of the Congress says: ‘some forgot to take with them their spectacles, some their purses and books, some their clothing.’ I dashed in a taxi to the Gowalia Tank maidan where a flag-hoisting ceremony was to be held. By the time I reached the place, the assembled volunteers had been severely beaten, till their skills had split and their bodies battered….Then off to the telegraph office. There I was told that censorship had already been clamped, and warned that I would be a fool to think of sending a message to my paper on the events of the last few hours…As I heard that booking tickets by rail was difficult, I stayed on for next twenty-four hours, collecting a mass of information that had been circulating, all over the city, a good part of it at the A.I.C.C. meeting. My friend P.D.Tandon, the *Herald* correspondent at Allahabad, who had attended the session, helped me in this business. He was arrested on his way back home. Expecting the police to lay hands on me, I put the reports in a number of separate envelopes and posted them to several inoffensive and law-abiding friends in Lucknow…It was decided that the *Herald* should close down voluntarily instead of waiting for the Government to strike it down 0 there was no question of our playing for safety so as to continue… I did the last article… Headed *Vande Mataram*,\(^3^9\) it issued the challenge to the British Government and the Indian Government to do their worst. It was an *au revoir*, not a farewell; it promised a phoenix-like resurgence…Within a few hours of the paper closing down the police raided my house and my office for proscribed material…The search
drew a blank, I had taken necessary precautions…For the trouble I was given by him, the departing police inspector remarked: ‘You have got very good books, sir.’ I asked, ‘Want any of them?’ He smiled and left.” Many of these cultures are thing of past, but they provide a significant insight into intercultural human behavior and therefore important.

For his writings Rama Rao was put in jail for five months (six months minus the usual reduction for good behaviour) for his writings. “I had a famous time in jail, and a useful one too. I spent my forty-seventh birthday in it. It has made me more human than ever. It was a course in understanding of human nature. A short sojourn in jail should be made compulsory for the students of the humanities.” The jail was another culture and these sentences prove how adaptable was Rama Rao to different cultural environments. After independence Rama Rao worked for a congress party journal and finally became member of the upper house of Indian Parliament.

Working in different cultures also helped his children opportunities to acquire adaptability. Of his four sons, the eldest Pratap, after retiring from the Indian Foreign Service has settled in the US. He was India’s Ambassador to Tunisia. His second son Narayan retired from the Indian Audit and Account Service as the Director General in the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, New Delhi and is eminent astrologer, editing the quarterly Journal of Astrology. Third son Vikram is Lucknow based journalist and the fourth Subhash is a bank manager. Of his four daughters, the eldest Vasant and the youngest Hemant migrated to the US, the second Sharad and the third Shishir and the first granddaughter Kasturi, wives of Indian army officers, live in Lucknow, Secunderabad and Pune. Many people say that the children whose parents are frequently transferred from one culture to another suffer. Rama Rao’s case proves that such fear is baseless.

1 Quoted in Kotamraju Rama Rao A Profile in Courage, Birth Centenary: 9 November 1997 p 5.
3 In the North India many people call all southern Indians as madarasi. This phrase must have been used in complaints.
5 Rama Rao, K. (1965)The Pen As My Sword, Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Bomaby p. 18
6 This word in India means religious intolerance.
7 Female temple dancers of Southern India.
8 Rama Rao, K. (1965)The Pen As My Sword, Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Bomaby p. 8
9 ibid. p.8-9
10 Capital of Sind or Sindh now in Pakistan.
11 Then a princely state, now in Indian Punjab.
12 North West Frontier province was popularly called Frontier and bordered Afghanistan.
14 The person riding the horse.
16 Mainly owned by Europeans.
18 F.E. Holsinger, the Chief Sub-editor, “the real and effective figure in the office”, according to Rama Rao.
19 Rama Rao, K. (1965)The Pen As My Sword, Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Bomaby p. 21-23
20 From 1923 to 1927 Rama Rao worked with the Times of India and the group’s other publication Evening News of India in Bombay.
22 ibid. p 37.
23 ibid. p 43.
Rama Rao calls this period “ten happy months”.


According to Rama Rao: Wilson uttered a joke once in the columns of this paper, which proved to be a good prophecy. After attending a Fourth of July dinner (“grand annual gastronomic high carnival”) at a magnificent hotel, he wrote that he had seen a large number of Englishmen dining with the children of the rebels of the Thirteen Colonies, and felt certain that on a future day Englishmen will be similarly attending an Indian Independence dinner to honour the memory of Gandhiji and would toast the present victims of their wrath in the same way as they had honoured the memory of Washington and the Founding Fathers of the American Constitution that day. (p. 82-63)

The British government’s department dealing with Indian Princes.

Prime Minister

The ruler

There were two Hyderabads in undivided India, one in Sind (or Sindh) and the other in Deccan (South).

Rama Rao, K. (1965) The Pen As My Sword, Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Bomaby p. 82

The culture of the Fleet Street has changed now as most newspapers have moved out.

Rama Rao, K. (1965) The Pen As My Sword, Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Bomaby p. 82

Dr Sampurnanad who was Minister in Provincial Government led by G.B.Pant.


When some members of AICC (All India Congress Committee) said that Russia’s occupation of Finland should not be regarded as invasion, Nehru remarked that when one country entered another by force of arms it was unabashed invasion. (p148)

Rama Rao, K. (1965) The Pen As My Sword, Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Bomaby p. 147

Poem in Bankim Chandra’s novel Anand Math that became a national song and slogan, literally meaning worship to the mother (India).


In formation about family is from: Kotamraju Rama Rao A Profile in Courage, Birth Centenary: 9 November 1997 p 3.