

# In Defence of Civil Rights

## A Biographical Sketch of Dr Ramanadhan

*A doctor who renders help to political activists often comes into conflict with oppressive state apparatus and is himself a target of repression. Dr Ramanadhan's life and death exemplifies this. He was a civil liberties' activist, a human and rational doctor's who fell to a police bullet in Warangal in September 1985. This sketch is reprinted from an anniversary tribute to him published by the P U D R New Delhi.*

MUSTIKUNTALA is a village in Mahira taluq, Khammam district that separates the Telengana from the Andhra region. In the thirties the village had a small population of about three hundred, subsisting on cultivation of dry and barren land. But now the village has become prosperous thanks to canal irrigation and even has a high school.

It was in the village that Dr. Ramanadhan was born on October 16, 1933, third son of Anatarama Rao and Rajyalaxmi. The family had about 30 acres of dry jowar land. Ramanadhan was the first person in the family to insist on higher education and had to struggle his way to become a doctor. He completed his primary education in the village and did his secondary school is nearby Khammam. Despite family opposition he went to C.R. Reddy College, Eluru for his intermediate, and then to the famous Nizam College, Hyderabad, for his B Sc. degree. During his Nizam College days he become part of a group of students who were peripherally associated with the All Hyderabad Students Union. The house of Dr. Balachandra Paranjpaye, well-known veteran of the Telengana struggle, was the centre for all young men in those days. Dr. Paranjpaye remained a source of guidance to Ramanadhan all his life.

After his B.Sc he took up a number of irregular jobs for more than a year, which included teaching and a job as a medical representative. Around this time he also got married. Then he got admission in M.B.B.S. in the newly-established Gandhi Medical College, Hyderabad. Financially, these were his bad days, having to live on the limited amount sent by father and his house surgeonship. He joined Osmania College for his Diploma in Child Health. It was during this period that he became a student of the famous left wing intellectual, Dr. Rajagopalan. Both were to work together, twenty years later, in the APCLC. Throughout his student career he remained on the periphery of then student movement. In fact, later on too he never became part of any organised political group.

After completing his studies he joined government service. First he taught in Kakatiya Medical College and worked in Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Hospital where he was to die later. Then for over four years he worked in the listless primary health centers at Chityala, Vangara and Husnabad in the Warangal and Khammam districts. Primary health centres then and now are private clinics for those who wield social power in the village and not clinics for the people. Invariably Ramanadhan could not

adjust himself to work in this kind of framework. Husnabad became his last job.

Husnabad, a taluq centre, is a big village with around a population of 10,000. If Health Centre serves a number of the neighbouring villages. The earlier doctors and compounders had established a routine pattern of corruption. They did not attend the centre, but used the medicines and equipment of the centre to run their own private clinics. When Ramanadhan took charge, he put an end to this practice. This earned him the wrath of the compounder, the Block Development Officer, and the Samiti president who all used to share the booty. But Ramanadhan struggled against these forces and became a very popular doctor. Eventually things came to a head when he was asked to issue a death certificate for an unidentified young girl in the house of the Samiti president. The doctor refused. And soon after, he resigned from government service.

He set up his own children's clinic on Jayaprakash Narayan Road, Warangal, in 1968. He was the first pediatrician in the town and soon became very popular. It was from this period that he consciously engaged himself in social activities outside his profession.

In the early seventies, before the APCLC was formed, he became a kind of supportive centre for a number of people involved in a variety of problems and issues. He helped his friends run a monthly that became a well known non-commercial journal in Telegu, *Srjana*. In fact, be it a writers' organisation wanting to hold its first meeting in Warangal or a young couple facing family opposition to their marriage every one sought his help and received it. In a dramatic incident he rescued a young girl and conducted her marriage. The girl's parents were influential people with powerful connections. In the midst of the marriage function, the police arrived and arrested the bridegroom and his friends, on charges of abduction. Eventually the girl won her battle in court.

In early 1974, along with another well-known doctor of Warangal, Dr. Amjad Ali Khan, he became a founder member of APCLC in Warangal. Around the same time, he also organised a polyclinic in Warangal. When emergency was declared in 1975 all activities ceased. The General Secretary of the APCLC, advocate Prattipati Venketwarli was among the first to be arrested. Ramanadhan was also arrested, which led to the closure of the people's clinic, virtually the only democratic activity in the town at that time. He was taken to the illegal camp

maintained by the police at Pakala reserve forest.

Pakala is a wild life sanctuary where two bungalows meant for tourists were turned into police camps during the emergency. A number of young people arrested during the emergency were detained here and tortured. Among them was the sole eye-witness to the Girapalli encounters in which four young men were shot dead in cold blood by the police. Dr. Ramanadhan, who was a fellow detainee of the eyewitness, as to be of crucial assistance to the Tarkunde Committee which brought out its famous report on these encounters after the emergency. He was shifted after three weeks detention at the Pakala camp to Warangal Central Prison, which serves as the main prison for five north-western district of Telengana.

After the lifting of emergency, the central government appointed the Shah Commission of Enquiry which managed to submit its report, although no action was taken on it. ~~But~~ anyone who has gone through the reports of the Commission can see that the largest number of crucial affidavits to the Commission from Andhra came from the Warangal region. Again, the aborted Bhargava Commission, which was appointed to enquire into encounter killings in Andhra, was helped by the mobilisation of crucial witnesses. In both instances, Dr. Ramanadhan played an unobtrusive but significance role.

In November 1977, a tidal wave hit Divi Seema in the Krishna district on the east coast. It led to hundreds of villages being marooned and to the death of thousands of people. Ramanadhan and his team was the first team of doctors to enter the inundated areas, before any government organisations or voluntary agencies. Later the team came back, raised funds, medicines and material necessities and went back to the flood affected areas and held a mobile medical camp for a month.

In late 1979, the junior doctors in Warangal along with their colleagues in the rest of the state went on a strike for over seventy days. The government attempted to suppress the strike at one level by repression and at another level by generating a mass hysteria against the striking doctors. Dr. Ramanadhan took the initiative and organised a people's clinic opposite to the government hospital with the help of the doctors on strike. The clinic became a centre for both the medical service and the strike. The ramshackle pandal outside the hospital became so popular that poor people requested the doctors to continue the clinic even after the eventual withdrawal of the strike.

In an unusual incident, Dr. Ramanadhan assisted a Brahmin widow whose husband had been the priest of a temple. After his death the widow managed the temple. But the trustees rejected her, presumably because of the land value of the temple, on the ground that a woman cannot be a priest. APCLC Warangal, under Ramanadhan, took up her case and eventually won the battle for her and also set a precedent.

What earned him the wrath of the Warangal police was systematic efforts by the APCLC to expose the lawlessness of the police. Hundreds of illegal arrests, torture, setting up of armed police camps in villages and colleges alike have become routine in past years. Since 1983 at least 12 people were killed in either police lock-up or in so-called encounters. In Warangal district, the APCLC investigated each of these instances and brought police violence to the notice of the public. In a number of cases it provided legal help to the victims of police harassment. It challenged the constitutional validity of the armed camps in the colleges and villages of Warangal. As the APCLC stepped up its campaign, it has become a fetter on the arbitrary behaviour of the Warangal police establishment.

Initially the police began with a systematic campaign that APCLC was a extremist front organisation. APCLC's own diversified activities was projected as an organisation that is working in the interests of extremists. Later, APCLC activities began to be implicated in false cases. In 1984, two of the activists were implicated in a case of obstructing police from discharging their duty. The case was later dismissed.

In January 1985, Dr. Ramanadhan was arrested along with Dr. K. Balagopal and K. Seetarama Rao. They were charged with, among other things, distributing arms to the extremists. The doctor was released on bail a week later. While he was in police lock-up, in a telling incident, the policemen who had arrested him brought his child for treatment to the doctor. The incident indicates the extent to which he had become popular, even among the policemen of Warangal.

Dr. Ramanadhan's social awareness helped him to understand the social origins of the diseases of his patients. He did not confine himself to giving medicines but tried to spread a scientific outlook. It was in this process that he wrote the famous book *Medical Guide* (in Telugu) which was addressed to the people and not to the health workers. The book became very popular. A second edition came out within an year and now, after his death, a third edition has been printed. Even after establishing himself as a popular doctor, his interests in studies remained. He took part in different seminars and meetings of the profession. A few weeks before his death he participated in a conference held at Nizam Orthopedics Institute. This professionalism was to remain with him till the very end. In the last twenty minutes of his life en route to the hospital, he kept discussing with the young doctor, who took him in his car, the diagnosis of his injuries and suggesting treatment.

In a sense his involvement with his profession helped the civil rights movement which in turn made him a better doctor. He was a doctor not only to rickshaw pullers, hawkers, and slum-dwellers but also to the policemen and their children. A few days before his death, an SI who

was leaving the town on promotion came to him and gave him sweets by way of farewell. The SI is believed to have said that for Warangal police he is not only a civil rights activists but also a doctor. Ramanadhan accepted the sweets with the confidence in human relationships which he had built over sixteen years of service to his patients and to the people of Warangal. Evidently the policemen who killed him did not share such values.

But perhaps his patients, people for whose lives he had fought and whose rights he had defended shared them. That is why on September 4, defying Section 144 and undeterred by the presence of armed police, they came in their thousands and paid their respects to the man who fought for them. His life and death will remain a defiant celebration of human values and a never ending source of inspiration for the democratic movement.

### Aftermath

The news of Dr. Ramanadhan's death reached Delhi on the morning of September 14, 1985. Two prominent Delhi dailies carried a report, filed by a national news agency, that Dr. Ramanadhan, vice president of the APCLC was killed by 'extremists' in his clinic on the previous day. In fact no correspondents of this news agency, which does not have a Warangal office, were present in Warangal on September 3. The report was filed from Hyderabad, within two hours of the incident. All other state-level and local dailies carried reports by their Warangal correspondents saying that the doctor was killed by armed policemen accompanying the dead body of SI Yadagiri Reddy.

Next day, the superintendent of police, Warangal, contradicted the local newspaper accounts and stated that Dr. Ramanadhan was possibly killed by some extremists. When eye-witness journalists pointed out that uniformed policemen were seen entering Dr. Ramanadhan's clinic, he stated that they had gone to the rescue of the doctor. On the same day, Vasant Nageswara Rao, home minister, made a statement on the incident in response to a notice under rule 329, tabled by 23 members in the state assembly. The home minister maintained that the suggestion that the police were behind the incident was 'baseless'. He added that the incident took place long after the funeral procession of armed police had left the place. He also indicated the involvement of extremists factions in the murder. Meanwhile APCLC had released its own report on the incident.

The postmortem report, quoted by the APCLC, states that the death was caused by a service revolver fired at point blank range. On that basis and other corroborative evidence APCLC demanded the immediate suspension of the senior police officials and ordering of a judicial enquiry. The government refused to hold a judicial enquiry. Instead a CBI CID enquiry was ordered. A few weeks later the government suddenly discovered that two

policemen were guilty of dereliction of duty. They had let their service revolvers be stolen from them two months prior to the incident! Presumably the stolen revolvers were to be traced to the 'extremists' who somehow became part of an armed police procession and killed the doctor without anyone ever noticing it.

Meanwhile police claimed to have identified the six people who were involved in the Yadagiri Reddy murder case. The case itself was brought under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, 1985 which came into effect in Andhra Pradesh from August, 1985. This was the first and the only murder case so far under the act in the state. Two of the accused, Nageswara Rao and Ramakrishna, were killed in a so-called encounter in April this year. The other accused include Dr. K. Balagopal general secretary, APCLC, who was let out on bail and Dr. P. Varavara Rao, general secretary of the Revolutionary Writers Association, who is still in jail.

Eventually the CB CID enquiry did take place. An SP who was till recently in the Andhra police was deputed for the enquiry. He visited Warangal in late October for three days and submitted the report to the government. It has not been released to the public or even to the assembly so far. But we understand that the report came to the conclusion that the "assailants remain unidentified".

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