

Rasubhai: A tribute to a Rishi and a Guru by a CEPTian

Kirtee Shah*

Let me start with calling Rasubhai (as he was known to his friends and colleagues) and Dr. Vakil (to his students and others who knew him in his official capacity as the Dean of CEPT for close to a quarter century) a Rishi. It is a strange sounding title for someone who played a stellar role in making CEPT one of the best learning places for the architects, planners, interior designers, construction technologists and others in India. I do not think anyone else in his peer group, across the country, would fit in with that description. And it is that makes him special.

He was a Rishi in many ways. Deeply spiritual and philosophical. Constantly in search of a meaning to life and its challenges. Contemplative. Seeking to go beyond known definitions, descriptions and title of things. A researcher who dug into subjects as wide and diverse as structural design, medicine, health, education, agriculture and language. He brought all those personal traits to his professional work as a highly rated structural consultant, much admired and inspiring teacher who made a difficult subject look simple, and a lifelong educationist. He was a humanist to the core and that brought a special edge to his professional work, his other social pursuits, as a teacher and as an educationist. Simplicity was intrinsic to him. He shunned publicity intuitively; disliked being center stage. Enjoyed placing others in that role and seeing them grow and develop. He silently contributed to their growth like a backup. And this is not about his formal role at CEPT, wherein literally hundreds of students graduated while he taught and directed the institution. This is about a large number of ordinary individuals—or who thought themselves as “ordinary”—who either worked with him in his professional firm or got connected in pursuing other causes. He made them look special, treated them as such, encouraged to assume responsibility and gave confidence that it was in them to deliver and excel. He molded people effortlessly and shaped their lives silently. And, believe me, those stories are not just the handful.

As a structural consultant—he had doctorate from Wisconsin in USA—he was not only a professional serving his clients. He was an ongoing researcher deepening his knowledge, sharpening his tools and widening his understanding for better solutions, not for his clients and the projects alone but for the sector’s and the society’s need. He was an ever evolving professional. Deeply committed to grooming young professionals he was always ready to guide, teach, train and inspire. He was a born teacher. For someone who worked on many things and therefore kept busy he was accessible to anyone for anything any time. He was a patient listener, encouraged innovations and new beginnings. He hardly ever said “no” to a new initiative or a fresh idea. He was a compulsive giver: be that guidance, help, service, advice or even money.

Long years, almost five decades that he served the School of Architecture with its gradual transformation as CEPT University, his contribution was significant in making it the country's premier institution. He believed in institutions, their freedom and autonomy and the society's as well the state's role in supporting them without interference. One of the three remarkable individuals – other two being Prof. Doshi and Prof. Bernard Kohn -- who got together to lay the foundation for liberal and liberating professional education it is hard to say who brought what to the table. They were different in their making, attitude and background but had complementary skills and were mutually supportive, almost synergistic, world view. All three saw the professional not in his/her conventional mould, in the limited role of a designer building for the paying client. They had a vision and they saw the products of the school in a leadership role to shape a new habitat, even a new society. At the risk of being misunderstood and looking judgmental I feel that while the other two thought of liberalization and creativity in shaping of a new future in the professional practice in the sectoral parlance (human settlements, in absence of a better word) Rasubhai was the one, who professed a much wider societal vision, beyond limited professionalism; that made him emphasize teaching of humanities in the curriculum, interdisciplinary work and a high stress on value orientation. He was a man of virtues guided by a deep sense of ethics and commitment to values.

It is his social vision – a vision for a better, more equal, disadvantaged-caring and more just society – that made him commit more than 35 years as one of the founders and chairman of ASAG, Ahmedabad Study Action Group, a nonprofit, visioned, started and run by some of his young students. ASAG, in a manner of speaking, was part of a protest movement – and if I could be excused for little indulgence, even a trend setter and a leader in that field – that not only questioned the elitism, exclusive urban and rich client base, “monuments” orientation and total disconnect of the professional with the challenges of the emerging India – millions of homeless and inadequately sheltered in the villages, growing urban slums, unplanned urban growth, disfiguring urban fabric and evolving crisis on the sustainability front, just to mention a few – but also inspired, encouraged, trained and put to creative work the young design professionals with the “unconventional” clients – urban and rural poor – and hitherto uncharted areas – slums and un-reached villages. ASAG is still in action with the same philosophy and work culture – seeing housing for the poor, for instance, in the context of poverty alleviation and affordable and appropriate human settlements development – after over 45 years.

He saw ASAG's role in the wider societal context – reaching out to the unreached, with new approaches, perspectives and solutions in form of demonstration projects in the early years, and policy advocacy support work in the later – and contributed to its work and growth in his inimitable un-obstructive and un-imposing style. He was a democrat at heart and in practice and believed in participative and consultative ways of working. I, as his colleague for over 35 years and Hon. Director of ASAG, cannot remember a single instance when he imposed his will, views or decision. He maintained that he – and other ASAG trustees – were

there to help and guide and not to control or dictate, and the final decision making was with those who were on the front in the field. And that was not in good times alone. Even in case of serious differences of opinion on direction or strategy he left it to the field staff to making the final decision.

Not many know that Rasubhai's contribution to formation of ASAG was in the concept development, not only in helping to shape or run it. His was the idea contribution. The root cause for the churning that started among some of the senior students at the School of Architecture was an elective course he offered called "Rationalization in Building Practices" while the first batch of the new school was in its fourth year, after a short study visit to the USA. The course encouraged students to ask questions about the profession and the professional practice, which led to deeper questioning of the orientation of the professional and greater awareness towards the need for the "de-professionalization of the professional", "retooling and re-schooling", "de-learning and relearning" in preparation to work for the "alternative" and the non-conventional client – the poor, the needy, the villager, the tribal, the slum dweller, the poorly planned city, a neglected village or an ill fitting solution.

Let me end this with one of his last writings, following the diagnosis of terminal illness, in response to my note seeking his views and guidance on setting up a new Civil Society Think Tank on urban matters. He wrote, and I quote him verbatim. "There needs to be a philosophical base, a vision for India, in the next twenty years, which can evolve through consensus. Urbanization, and for that matter rural development, as an appendix to urbanization (should be independent in the vision) will follow naturally from the overall national development vision and the Millennium (Sustainable) Development Goals. Urban and rural should be viewed as a continuum within the overall national development vision."

The night he died I wrote the following in my diary: "Not many hide their greatness so gracefully," and "The God no longer creates such people." Emotional? Yes. It was a rare privilege to know, learn from, associate with him, to be inspired by and share with such an immensely virtuous individual. It is hard to be rational having seen his lifeless body in the flames yesterday. He never liked someone singing his praises. Now that he is not there I feel like defying him.

In faith, admiration, respect and love

Kirtee Shah

kirtee@ksadps.com; ahmedabad@ksadps.com

099250 10706