

1. EARLY LIFE (1887-1910)

Sir Benegal Narsinga Rau was born on February 26, 1887, one hundred years ago. He was the son of Dr. Raghavendra Rau, who was a surgeon by profession. Benegal, from where the family hailed, is a place near Mangalore in the district of South Kanara (now known as Dakshina Kannada) in the State of Karnataka. Dr. Raghavendra Rau had four sons—each of them distinguished in his own way. His first son Sanjiva Rau studied at St. John's College, Cambridge, England. On his return to India, he came under the influence of Dr. Annie Beasant and joined the Theosophical Society. He worked as a teacher for a long time in Benares. His work took him to Allahabad, Jaffna (Sri Lanka) and Madras. Ultimately, he returned to Benares and became the Principal of the Queen's College. He established an educational centre at Rajghat Fort, just outside Benares, on the bank of the river Ganges. The Centre consisted of a boys' school, a girls' school, a women's college, an agricultural school-cum-farm and a hospital for the benefit of villagers nearby. The second son of Dr. Raghavendra Rau was B.N. Rau. The third son was B. Rama Rau who studied in King's College, Cambridge, and later entered the Indian Civil Service. Rama Rau retired as the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India. The fourth son was B. Shiva Rau, a distinguished journalist and, for some time, a Member of Parliament and an Indian delegate to the United Nations General Assembly.

B.N. Rau studied at the Presidency College, Madras and became a graduate of the University of Madras in 1905 with English, Physics, Sanskrit and Mathematics, winning all the prizes and medals awarded at the examination. Thereafter he went to Cambridge and joined the Trinity College to prosecute his studies further. He was a contemporary of Jawahar Lal Nehru at Cambridge. There is a reference to B.N. Rau and his brother B. Rama Rau in a letter addressed by Jawahar Lal Nehru to his father Motilal Nehru in 1908. Nehru

wrote :¹

The Brahmin boy, who is alluded to in such complimentary terms is the brother of the Rau who just failed to get through the I.C.S. last year. He came here in same term as I did and is going to take the Maths tripos next year. I did not know before reading this letter that he was so frightfully clever. He certainly works hard enough. The only time I ever see him is in hall or going to hall or lectures. I believe he works all the rest of the time.

The 'clever boy' referred to in this letter was perhaps Rama Rau.

Mrs. Dhanvanthi Rama Rau, sister-in-law of B.N. Rau, gives a brief sketch of B.N. Rau's personal life and his traits in her autobiography :²

Narsing Rau was reserved, retiring, and self-conscious. His extraordinary qualities of mind and heart did not reveal themselves until he somehow felt free and emotionally comfortable. Then it was a joy to discover the elegant brilliance of his intellect and the progressive, fair-minded, balanced, and learned nature of his approach to life. He was a brilliant bridge player, an excellent tennis player, an outstanding golfer, and, in fact, excelled in all outdoor and indoor sports without becoming an addict, and, oddly, without a driving sense of competition. He spent hours alone, solving mathematical problems (higher mathematics had been his subject in college, in both Madras and Cambridge), solving difficult crossword puzzles or any other brainteasers that came his way. Perhaps it is not too surprising that he was at his best and most relaxed with children. My daughters adored him and he kept them amused for hours with funny stories, limericks, tongue twisters, and simple puzzles, of which he seemed to have an endless store.

1. S. Gopal (Ed.), *Selected Works of Jawahar Lal Nehru*, Vol. 1, p. 56, item no. 53, Letter dated 28 May, 1908.

2. Dhanvanthi Rama Rau, *An Inheritance* (Indian Reprint 1978) p. 126.

He was painfully shy about personal matters. He always came out of his room in the morning correctly dressed, shaved, and with socks and slippers on.

2. SERVICE IN BENGAL AND ASSAM (1910-34)

On passing the Indian Civil Service examination in 1909-10, B.N. Rau was allotted to the Bengal Cadre. Within a few years he became a District and Sessions Judge. The quality of his work attracted the attention of the Assam Government, which offered him in 1925 the post of the Secretary in the Legislative Council and Legal Remembrancer to the Government. He served the Assam Government for eight years. When the Simon Commission came to India, B.N. Rau drafted the memorandum pleading for a generous financial deal for Assam from the proceeds of the duty on tea. Impressed by that work, the Government of Assam deputed him to London after the third Round Table Conference in 1933 to present its case before the Joint Select Committee of the British Parliament. It appears that Sir John Kerr, the then Governor of Assam, requested him to prepare a note on the principle of election to the Council of States by the single transferable vote. By 1934, B.N. Rau had established himself as an expert in constitutional law.³

3. ADAPTATION OF LAWS (1935-37)

The passing of the Government of India Act, 1935 offered the major opportunity to B.N. Rau for creative legal work. The Act repealed the Government of India Act, 1919. This repeal rendered it necessary to make provisions as to certain legal matters, including provisions for adapting the law in force in India to the new constitutional structure and pattern. Section 292 of the Government of India Act, 1935 provided that notwithstanding the repeal of the Government of India Act, 1919 all the laws in force in British India immediately before the commencement of Part III of the Government of India Act, 1935 would continue in force in British India,

3. B.N. Rau, *India's Constitution in the Making* (Edited by B. Shiva Rao, Orient Longman 1960) pp. xv-xvi.