

Remembering Gopal Raju

■ A friend's ode

'Gopal Raju's legacy: Can we rise upto the challenge?'

By Krishnan S. Chittur, Esq.

Gopal Raju was a beacon light to Indian Americans for the past few decades. His fingers were on the pulse of the community; indeed, he was primarily responsible for cementing a sense of fellowship amongst Indian Americans. His unswerving commitment to our community's interests was buttressed by his uncompromising integrity and willingness to fight for his principles. The challenge for us now is to keep his hard-earned, hard-fought legacy alive.

I first met Gopal Raju over a couple of decades ago. I had mailed to *India Abroad* an unsolicited article analyzing a ridiculous anti-India legislation which had been proposed in the U.S. Congress. Two days later, I got a phone call from Mr. Raju inviting me for lunch. Reflexively, I burst out laughing, saying, "I've been published many times, but this is the first time that the editor of the newspaper has invited me for lunch in response to an unsolicited article!" He had read my writing, and enthused by the underlying passionate pro-Indian sentiment, moved immediately to embrace, fertilize, and stoke it. Thus began our relationship over a couple of decades ago.

Given his commitment to the community that I know now to have permeated every cell of his being, this was hardly surprising. Since that momentous day, he used to call me occasionally suggesting that I write on a specific legal development which was of importance to Indian Americans. My solace today is that I never failed him; he was always glad at the piece, although sometimes surprised by the analysis.

During the last couple of decades, I also represented and counseled him on scores of occasions - including the now-famous *India Abroad Gujarat Samachar* litigation which culminated 'Gopal Raju's Legacy' in his victory in a jury trial in Manhattan federal court, and subsequent appeals. What struck me consistently was his unswerving adherence to principles. He bartered when he was right, but even then, he would never stoop to employ sharp practices to win.

The ends never justified the means for him. He would scrutinize draft affidavits with a scrupulous eye to accuracy. Even in the witness box, when confronted with inconvenient questions, he responded unhesitatingly with the unvarnished truth, whether that response would help or hurt his legal position. I know; I was there. I never had to worry about putting him on the witness box at trial.

His earlier epic legal battle concerned the Bofors scandal. In the late 1980s, a major Swedish newspaper published the Bofors scandal, naming names, and shortly thereafter, published an apology therefor. *India Abroad* - which he then ran - published both, the original publication as well as the apology, contemporaneously, with the same prominence. Nevertheless,

a libel action was brought against *India Abroad* in the United Kingdom. It is well known, the libel laws there are much more pro-plaintiff. All that was demanded of *India Abroad* was an apology, and the lawsuit would be withdrawn. He refused. When he discussed the case with me, I pointed out that while he raised serious issues of press freedom and journalistic integrity, the decks were stacked very strongly against him in London. "Krishnan, what have I done wrong?" he said. I could only point to the financial consequences, i.e., the cost of the litigation and the potential loss. He bartered in London, and, as expected, lost.

The U.K. judgment was then sought to be enforced in New York. Press organizations supported him in court, and even the famous *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis wrote an op-ed piece in his favor. Eventually, he won, with Justice Shirley Fingerhood of the Manhattan Supreme Court upholding his position foursquare - and refusing to enforce the U.K. judgment here as being contrary to New York public policy. Epoch making, indeed!

That litigation battle must have cost him well into the six figures (this was in the early 1990s) in legal expenses, in the United Kingdom and here. Such was his commendable commitment to journalistic integrity and press freedom.

On many other occasions, he refused to spike news items which dismayed - and sometimes, destroyed - Indian businessmen or politicians. This steadfastness certainly cost him dearly in advertising dollars and other patronage. However, over the years, it also built a reputation for *India Abroad* as a newspaper of integrity and trustworthiness. That was what let *India Abroad* thrive. I'm sure his colleagues in the news media will bear this out with similar examples.

People like this are the stuff of legends, we don't see them in flesh and blood. I was privileged to know him, and even more, assist in some of his battles - and learn from him along the way.

After the evanescent passion of the moment has passed, what survives is the light on a man's character shed by his conduct at that moment; that is his legacy. Mr. Raju's character and legacy stand brilliantly illuminated by such lights.

Not enough has been said about Mr. Raju's enthusiasm to help young Indian Americans. He counseled and even extended financial help to many youngsters to help them launch their dreams. Through the years, many a recipient was not worthy of his largesse, and simply forgot him after taking his help. But that never changed him; he would still help if he could. Perhaps those who forgot his help will repay the debt by returning his largesse to the nonprofits he established and nurtured.

Mr. Raju's most important legacy for our community is, of course, the Indian American Foundation and the Indian American Center For Political Awareness. He was singularly responsible for both organizations, and the very successful Washington Leadership Program.

With single minded devotion, he raised the political profile of Indian Americans, and gave promising Indian American youth an opening into the world of high power politics. It is also the single biggest contribution to the development of our community's political influence over the last decade.

In fact, we were in the process of duplicating that WLP program for Indian Americans in the judiciary. There is only one Asian American on the federal Bench in the entire country outside the Ninth Circuit, and only one Indian American on the Bench in New York. We need to increase the presence of Indian Americans there. Mr. Raju and I had extensive discussions on this challenge, and talked about establishing internships for Indian American law students in the New York courts. The success of such a program would lead to a significant increase in Indian Americans in the judiciary.

The future of the WLP program and his nonprofit organizations are upto us Indian Americans. It would be a fitting tribute to this legend of a man to keep these institutions alive and prosperous, and duplicate the success of WLP in other fields. Can we rise up to this challenge? Can we create an endowment to make these institutions permanent, and start similar programs for advancing the interests of the community? I can see Mr. Raju, optimistic as ever, smiling amidst the stars - I'm hoping you can too.

In Memoriam: Gopal Raju, Pioneering Publisher 1928-2008

There has been an outpouring of grief and heartfelt words of sympathy at the passing away of Gopal Raju. We are deeply touched by these sentiments and are overwhelmed by the kind of feelings that he generated, not just in the community but in all those who came into contact with him. A lot of people wanted to send us flowers. We request mourners to send in checks instead in the name of the Indian American Foundation (IAF, 501(c)(3)). The funds will be utilized to fund causes that Mr. Raju held dear.

We deeply appreciate your support and sympathy at this hour.

Please send your contributions to:

Indian American Foundation

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