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Obituary: The Man Who Let Communities Lead

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Mamidi Rama Reddy championed grassroots, community-owned cooperatives in Telangana, empowering people through facilitative engagement rather than patronage. A brilliant legislative draftsman, he shaped generations of cooperatives while remaining outside the spotlight-leaving an enduring legacy.

On the morning of 27 October, I received a message that Mamidi Rama Reddy had passed away. Rama Reddy headed the Co-operative Development Foundation (CDF), an organisation where I did an internship and started my career as a young Development Officer. Rama Reddy was an enigmatic and distant figure, even though I saw him every day and we interacted in various settings. My ongoing connection with the co-operative movement and the organisation itself was primarily through Shashi Rajagopalan, my immediate boss.

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When I received the news of his passing, I simply tried to take it in-processing the circumstances of his death, forwarding the message to a few friends, and seeking some sense of closure. Around this time, a friend called, wanting to know more about Rama Reddy. He had interacted with Rama Reddy before and mentioned some of their conversations. As we spoke and he recalled various events, I realised that, although Rama Reddy's work had always been understated, it was both deeply impactful and fundamentally important. His contributions truly deserve to be remembered and acknowledged.

Origins

Rama Reddy came from a well-off family from Shamshabad village in Rajendranagar block of Rangareddy district, Telangana. His father, Bhoj Reddy, was a prominent landowner but also promoted a string of educational institutions under the Indira Seva Sadan umbrella. That is what we know about the family, and Rama Reddy wore the legacy light on his sleeve. We never met any of his family members or even got to know what his family was like.

This was quite interesting, given that I had more than four decades of interactions with him. Apart from some friends who visited him towards the last part of his life, I am sure, nobody knew his family. All we knew was the man: stern, putting principles above everything, honest to the core, no sugar coating whatsoever, deeply committed to co-operatives, and unwavering in his mission.

The story of Rama Reddy's work with the cooperative sector started in the mid 1970s after visiting the Mulukanoor Co-operative Rural Bank (as it was called then) near Hanumakonda and interacting with A.K. Vishwanath Reddy, a towering figure and president of the Mulukanoor Co-operative. Rama Reddy was the President of the Panchayat Samiti, Rajendranagar.

He thought that the 15 primary agricultural co-operatives (PACs) in the block needed to grow like Mulukanoor. They had to replicate the model by providing farmers with six services-credit, input supply, agricultural extension, produce marketing, consumer goods (including agency for public distribution scheme), and welfare services-and operate with six co-operative principles. With Shashi joining forces, he quit politics, and moved on to set up the CDF.

Unusual partnership

Shashi, a Tamilian who studied in Kolkata, started her work with rehabilitation of refugees from Bangladesh and had moved to Hyderabad and was working with the Hyderabad Archdiocese Social Service Society. This was a very unusual duo-Rama Reddy, earthy, with a feudal background, and completely rooted in the local Telangana ethos. And Shashi, very middle-class, English educated, trained in mathematics, and an outsider who had just learnt Telugu.

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This unlikely combination worked for decades-strongly disagreeing, fighting constantly, but agreeing on the cause, sorting out differences when it came to implementing plans. Rama Reddy was the intellectual. He had great conceptual clarity, was adept at reading legislations, regulations, and policy. He worked mostly out of office, while Shashi drove around in a Jeep, carrying out field work.

In contrast to the single product model propagated by Verghese Kurien, Chairman of the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation (Amul) and the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), Rama Reddy believed in a decentralised grassroots co-operative movement. After Shashi joined him, their work expanded through undivided Andhra Pradesh, though the focus was largely on the Telangana region.

At their peak, they were working intensively with about 50 primary agricultural co-operatives to provide six services, without compromising on the six co-operative principles. The principles were non-negotiable and were embedded in their thought process. So much that it decided the strategic direction of the organisation.

Around this time, the CDF embarked on an ambitious project. At that time, distributary canals from the Sriram Sagar Dam on the Godavari River were being built, to bring water to Karimnagar and Warangal districts. The plans of the Command Area Development Authority indicated that the cropping pattern would move from maize to paddy.

Rama Reddy's approach was to collaborate closely with the primary agricultural co-operatives in these districts, aiming to strengthen their finances through member thrift, better governance, and sound management. This goal was to be achieved by providing training and capacity-building programmes focused on co-operative principles, democracy, accountability, transparency, and best practices. Such efforts would help create the ethical and financial foundation needed to establish rice mills.

Primary agricultural co-operatives were intended to perform basic value addition by handling local storage and milling. A slim federation was envisioned-for sharing information, coordinating levy, and meeting regulatory requirements. There were also attempts to explore whether processing by-products such as bran and husk was feasible. This model was as decentralised as possible, acknowledging that rice, as a commodity, offered limited opportunity for significant value addition.

First challenge

Up to this point, the work of the CDF had been moving in a steady and progressive direction. The first major challenge arose around 1983, when the newly sworn-in Chief Minister, N.T. Rama Rao, took control of all co-operatives by suspending their boards and appointing administrators.

It was a common practice for state governments to take political control of institutions such as co-operatives and panchayats, ensuring their alignment with the ruling party. The co-operative law included a standard clause allowing boards of co-operatives to be superseded en masse, even though these institutions were, in theory, autonomous. NTR would eventually call for fresh elections and legally secure power.

> Though not formally trained as a lawyer, Rama Reddy was so engaged in the law-making process that his skill in drafting legislation often surpassed that of many trained lawyers.

While this was a routine administrative decision for the government, it brought the work of the CDF-whose mission was to promote co-operative principles, including democratic control-to a halt. Primary agricultural co-operatives were no longer democratic, as they now operated under direct state control, functioning like para-statal organisations.

Had Kurien been in this position, he might have continued working with the organisations while simultaneously fighting for democracy. However, for Rama Reddy (and Shashi), these principles were non-negotiable. The CDF suspended its developmental activities in order to fight for the restoration of democracy, resorting to street protests and litigation.

This was a risky move, but it fundamentally transformed the CDF. The organisation shifted from merely promoting co-operatives as autonomous institutions to actively advocating for the principles and practice of co-operation. The struggle was long, but a decade later, the state government-under the same NTR-enacted the Andhra Pradesh Mutually Aided Co-operative Societies Act in 1995. This new law (which ran parallel to the legacy law) granted autonomy to co-operatives and insulated them from state control, as long as they did not seek government funding.

This was a major victory for the CDF. Part of the success was due to the work of the Co-operative Initiatives Panel (CIP), established a few years before the Mutually Aided Co-operative Societies Act was passed in 1995. The CIP was a joint effort by the CDF and the NDDB, headquartered in Anand under the leadership of Kurien, with L.C. Jain and Mohan Dharia serving as members.

Although much of the groundwork was done by a young professional, Sudarshan Srinivas, Rama Reddy played the role of guiding force, without being its public face. The panel lobbied intensively for the enactment of the Model Co-operative Societies Act recommended by the Brahm Prakash Committee. The CDF had made significant contributions to it through Shashi, who was a member of the committee. With the passing of the 1995 Act, the panel pursued its agenda to have the liberal law adopted by other states. Eventually, more than a dozen state governments enacted legislation similar to the Andhra Pradesh Act.

Collectives and thrift groups

While the policy work continued, the CDF did not withdraw from grassroots efforts. However, operating primary agricultural co-operatives under the constant threat of state government intervention was not a viable option. The CDF therefore launched an initiative to promote paddy collectives in Warangal and Karimnagar.

> Rama Reddy-a man who preferred to stay in the background, self-effacing, yet accomplished fundamentally important work.

Returning to the same region, they shifted strategy, setting up specialised institutions that aligned with Kurien's ideas. These collectives, although run on co-operative principles, were incorporated under the Societies' Registration Act to avoid state interference. Despite these efforts, the initiatives achieved only limited success.

Another grassroots initiative was to organise women-and later men-into thrift groups. The women's thrift groups were established under the influence of the successful Mulukanoor co-operative. This demonstrated that, even in the presence of a strong co-operative, there were still gaps to fill.

The CDF's approach was unconventional: they emphasised member thrift, encouraging members to build their own stakes in the co-operatives. These thrift programmes imposed strict moratoriums on withdrawals, allowing members to accumulate financial resources over time. As a result, women's thrift co-operatives built up savings much larger than their members' usual borrowing needs, leaving the groups with surplus funds.

At this juncture, the CDF considered establishing a women's dairy co-operative in Mulukanoor. To help women reach the next level, it was essential to launch a new economic activity with strong market linkages. The dairy co-operative encouraged women to undertake entrepreneurial activities, and today Mulukanoor is home to the most dynamic women's dairy co-operative in the region.

In all these efforts-especially those involving work with the community-Rama Reddy adopted a facilitative, rather than patronising, approach. Because of this, the initiatives continued well beyond the initial intervention. The community willingly took ownership of the processes, the values, and the organisation. Rama Reddy also explored employees' thrift co-operatives, but after a few years of experimentation, he chose to let go of the initiative, recognising that these co-operatives did not require the level of external intervention that the CDF typically provided.

Reading the law

One of Rama Reddy's defining traits was his careful reading of the law. Though not formally trained as a lawyer, he was so engaged in the law-making process that his skill in drafting legislation often surpassed that of many trained lawyers.

> If anyone had a more than lasting influence on generations of co-operators and co-operatives, it was Rama Reddy.

When the Andhra Pradesh government excluded dairy co-operatives from the scope of the Mutually Aided Co-operative Societies Act of 1995 by a subsequent amendment, the CDF took the matter to the High Court. They argued their case on the grounds of Article 14 (equality before law) and Article 19(1)(c) (the right to form associations) of the Constitution, and won. The state government challenged this decision in the Supreme Court, but the ruling was upheld.

Later, when Parliament passed the Constitution (Ninety-Seventh Amendment) Act, 2011-which formally declared that co-operatives are protected under the right to form an association as part of Article 19(1)(c)-it was largely the outcome of the precedent set by the

Supreme Court case won by the CDF.

Policy forum

Given his reticence, Rama Reddy was never part of any policy forum-most of that was left to Shashi. Whether it was the Brahm Prakash Committee, which drafted the model co-operative law, or any other external engagement, Rama Reddy maintained a low profile. The only occasion he joined an important committee was when he agreed to serve on the Vaidyanathan Committee (2003-04), which was set up to recommend reforms for India's rural co-operative credit institutions and improve their financial sustainability.

Not only was Rama Reddy an active participant, but at his insistence, the committee's report included a model law to ensure a legal framework for the future of the reformed co-operative sector. Although most of his suggestions were accepted, he remained uneasy and disappeared on the day the report was to be signed. Despite much coaxing-including promises that a dissent note would be attached if he wished-he did not respond, and the report was submitted without his signature. It is possible that nobody even noticed this anomaly!

If anyone had a more than lasting influence on generations of co-operators and co-operatives, it was Rama Reddy-a man who preferred to stay in the background, self-effacing, yet accomplished fundamentally important work. We should pause to remember him and his contributions, and remind ourselves not to take such efforts for granted, as I once did. Rest easy, Reddygaru.

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