

Dr. Antapur Venkoba Rao

Bhaskar Katram

PG Resident, Dept. of Psychiatry, Institute of Mental Health, Osmania Medical College, Hyderabad, Telangana

Email: drbhaskark@live.com

Introduction

Dr. Antapur Venkoba Rao was born on the 20th of August 1927 in the village Kavuttalam which is presently in Andhra Pradesh to Mr.A. Raghavendra Rao and Srimati Lakshmi Devi⁽¹⁾. He was the eldest of eight children (six brothers and two sisters). He grew up mostly in his grandfather's house and was influenced by him. His general interest was towards botany, zoology and agriculture.

Dr. Rao studied Intermediate in Ceded District College, Anantapur and topped in Natural Sciences, Physics and Chemistry. He did his MBBS at Madras Medical College and secured prizes in Medicine, Obstetrics and Gynaecology. He got his MD in General Medicine and DPM (Psychiatry) from NIMHANS, Bangalore. He was awarded PhD and DSc by Madras University.

Dr. Rao married Parvathi Devi on the 26th of February 1950. She was the best outgoing student and held posts of Director, Institute of Physiology, Madras Medical College, Madurai Medical College and Government Rajaji Hospital, Madurai. He has a son who is a professor in English Language and a daughter who is an eminent pathologist.

Work

He began his career in 1954 at the Madras Mental Hospital in Kilpauk and joined the Madurai Medical College.

He was an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the Stanley Medical College and Madras Medical College, Chennai. Later, he served as a Professor and Head of the Department of Psychiatry in Madurai Medical College from 1962 to 1985. After retirement he continued to be associated with Madurai Medical College as an Emeritus Professor. Besides he was officer-in-charge, Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) Centre for Advanced Research in Health and Behaviour, Madurai Medical College and Rajaji Government Hospital, Madurai. He was a Visiting Scientist at the National Institute of Mental Health, Bethesda, USA.

Professor Rao served as the Editor-in-Chief of Indian Journal of Psychiatry from 1970 to 1978. He has been in the Editorial Board of Indian Journal of Psychiatry, Social Psychiatry, NIMHANS Journal, Transcultural Psychiatric Review and Crisis. He was associated with ICMR, National Academy of Medical Sciences (NAMS), Department of Science and Technology (DST) and Medical Council of India (MCI)

in various capacities. He was the founder and president of the Indian Association of Psychiatry and Indian Association of Suicidology. He has contributed to the field of psychiatry with around 400 national and international publications including a dozen books including 'Psychiatry of Old age in India'.

He was pioneer in the research associated with the clinical profile of depressive illness⁽²⁾ in the Indian setting, in epidemiology, genetic aspects, long-term course and outcome and interpreted the phenomenology of illness with reference to the cultural and philosophical context. On suicidal behavior, contributions about etiological factors and most importantly on prophylaxis and the relationship between pineal hormones, depressive illness and suicidal behavior were made^(3,4). He was one of the few who have constantly applied themselves to research on diverse aspects of depression as evidenced by publications on the subject spanning several years. Also known as the 'Father of Geriatric mental health', he evolved a model health care delivery system for the rural aged and work on Geropsychiatry for the treatment of psychiatric morbidity for the aged.^(5,6)

For over thirty years, he had focused on the following aspects of depressive illness:

- a) Neurobiological: He described "low melatonin syndrome", a sub type of depression where low levels led to relapses and increased suicidal risk.^(2,7)
- b) Psychopharmacological: He was the first to start a lithium clinic which had on its rolls 200 patients with affective disorders, one of the largest in the world and has investigated its clinical effects, safety and mode of action in depth and reported on correlation between dosage and serum levels, change in electrolytes, thyroid, ECG⁽⁸⁾, renal structure and functions⁽⁹⁾ and memory. Efficacy of long-term lithium-prophylaxis was documented⁽¹⁰⁾.
- c) Experimental: Studies included effects of psychotropics, tricyclic anti-depressants and melatonin secretion. He studied the "PINEAL RESPONSE TO LITHIUM" and also named a phenomenon of 'Tilak Effect'⁽¹¹⁾
- d) Neuropsychiatric: His publication on General Paresis of the Insane (GPI) highlighted incidence, serology, clinical types and the outcome of the illness following therapy. He demonstrated "Treponema pallidum" in frontal lobes of these patients and their disappearance on treatment⁽¹²⁾.
- e) Philosophical⁽¹³⁾ and trans-cultural: He claimed Indians had knowledge about mental health and

illnesses associated with it since ancient age. He said, "undated Indian scriptures written even before the days of the Ramayana or the Mahabharata dealt at length with mental and spiritual health and neural disorders," and elaborated the intrinsic connection of Bhagawat Gita⁽¹⁴⁾. He considered Gita to be a masterpiece of psychotherapy and thus has added a new dimension to psychotherapy in India.⁽¹⁵⁾

Awards

He is known as 'Father of Indian Psychiatry', has won several national and international awards, including the prestigious Dr. B.C. Roy National Award, of the Medical Council of India⁽¹⁶⁾. He had also received the International Research Scholar Award from the American Psychiatric Association and All India Institute of Medical Sciences. He has been nominated by the Neurosciences India Group to receive the Life Time Achievement award for his valuable contributions.

Final years

Dr. Venkoba Rao was active till his last days. He was interested to listen to lectures in Physics, Metallurgy and Chemistry which is unusual for medical practitioners especially at the age of 77. He breathed his last at a private hospital due to acute renal failure on 25th September 2005^(16,17). He will be remembered for his great contributions to the field of psychiatry.

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