

On Vinod Raina

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It is easy to get depressed about contemporary India: about its inequalities and manifold injustices; the squalor, material degradation and social indignity to which so many of its citizens are condemned; the widespread lack of respect for basic human rights; the violence that can be quotidian, sporadic or periodically fierce; the cynical manipulation of sentiments that are divisive and destabilising for uncertain political gains; and so much else.

Yet this is also a country that has produced – and continues to produce – some of the most remarkable and inspiring individuals to be found anywhere in the world. What makes them so remarkable and inspiring is not only that they can transcend the muck around them, but that they actually engage with it, remaining continuously and deeply involved in the society that they keep trying to improve in their own ways.

Vinod Raina was one such person, encompassing in his life and personality many of the things that are best about Indian society. He was a child of privilege, who did not renounce it so much as simply move beyond it, shrugging off the more obvious markers of professional success and personal mobility to move into unexplored waters, driven entirely by his own sense of what is meaningful and important, and with a confidence that did not require shallow external reinforcement.

Vinod received a doctorate in Physics from the University of Delhi, joined the department there as a lecturer, and could so easily have continued along that safe and stable path to become an eminent and respected academic. In that way, he could have kept his generally progressive credentials and dabbled like so many others in progressive causes, without sacrificing what was a promising professional scientific career or a reasonably comfortable material existence.

Instead, he chose a very different, and at that time uncharted, path. A visit to Hoshangabad in the early 1970s proved to be transformative in setting the course for his future. He became convinced of the urgent and compelling need to take science education down to the people, moving beyond the rarefied confines of an elite university to the often less than basic schools of ordinary children in villages and small towns. From his early involvement in the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme that sought to bring an understanding of and excitement for the principles of science to children and young people who would not otherwise get such exposure, he went on to become a co-founder of [Eklavya](#), the organisation devoted to the improvement of curricula and teaching methods in villages and towns.

Thereafter he spent the rest of his all-too-short life in tirelessly, even relentlessly, mobilizing and working for his dream of seeing all children in India get access to good quality education that would not just provide “knowledge” but instill in them rationality and a spirit of enquiry, awaken their minds and spur their creativity. The [Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti](#) that he was involved in founding and helped to run for many years and the broader umbrella of the People’s Science Movement were both very much driven by this desire.

In the process, he found himself constantly engaged in many important causes. He plunged into the relief and rehabilitation efforts for the Bhopal Gas Leak victims, and

was part of their struggle for decades. (Incidentally, is anyone tracking the explosive incidence of cancer two decades later among people who were there at the time?) He was a willing fellow traveler for many other important movements, from the anti-Narmada agitations to the demands for right to information and right to work. His involvement in the [Total Literacy Campaign](#) was almost legendary, as he visited possibly administrative block in the country and worked with local people to develop new curricula, appropriate teaching methods and material for use by the newly literate.

Probably his most important efforts in the past decade were directed towards ensuring the passing of a national [Right to Education](#) Act. He was one of the most important, consistent and influential campaigners for this law. The enthusiasm, energy and commitment to detail that he brought to this task were unparalleled, and he certainly played a key role in much of the background work and open advocacy that went into ensuring the passing of this into law.

There were critics on both right and left – those who criticized the law for not including common schooling and adequate financial provisions, and those who panned it for insisting on uniform standards for all schools and teachers in varying conditions. He was among the first to recognize the many flaws in the final legislation, but always pointed out that such compromise is inevitable in such a large and complex society with so many different vested interests pulling in different directions. This attitude was crucial to the success of the process of bringing the idea of free and compulsory education for all children into law, and it has also been hugely important in the subsequent and continuing struggle to ensure that the law is properly implemented in letter and spirit.

But this attitude of compromise (without ever giving up on some fundamental issues and principles) was very much part of his personality. He was deeply non-sectarian – remarkable in itself because so much of his life and work was bound up with working with people who were in fact very sectarian. Partly it was his rather high level of tolerance that enabled him to be this way, along with his generally non-judgmental approach to other people.

But also, his fundamental instinct appeared to be to search for the practical solution, to find some common ground to move forward, in a desire that therefore necessarily had to bring different people and groups together rather than drive them apart on the basis of relatively minor differences. This meant that the firmness of his resolve never translated into rigidity of practice.

Vinod Raina was a born teacher: not simply a pedagogue in the generally understood sense of the term, but someone who lived through sharing knowledge. One of the features of good teachers is that they keep learning themselves, and are genuinely excited by the interaction that constitutes the exchange of information and views. This was evident in the way that he could connect to the young, because he did not perceive or present himself as the benign bestower of wisdom. Rather, he often had the same sense of wonderment and infectious enthusiasm about some scientific principle or some new way of transmitting a concept or even about achieving basic literacy, that would be evident among those who were being taught.

An extraordinary life like this is difficult to live alone, but fortunately he did not have to. To refer to the brilliant and distinguished educationist Anita Rampal as his wife or

closest friend or lifelong companion would somehow be a significant underestimation of the enduring bond between this couple, almost a rarity in our brittle society. Over the decades, they really did seem like a unit, self-sufficient unto themselves in some deep sense even as they engaged with and enjoyed the wider world. The grace and courage with which they both handled the last painful phase of his life as he fought a rapidly spreading cancer clearly could not have been possible without the strength this provided.

Finally, he was more than someone who dedicated his life to a cause and remained consistently devoted to it, or a cherished comrade to some or a teacher to many. He was also a bon vivant in the truest sense: someone who appreciated the truly good things in life – good music, good food, the company of good friends, the curving ball of a good joke. So though it was a life that was much too short, it was also very much a life well lived.

*** This article was originally published in the Frontline, November 1, 2013.**