

FAREWELL, PROFESSOR MADHUKAR RAO

He called it The House of Bamboo, a thatched pavilion on the roof of his house that served as our MA classroom. And he welcomed me to it on my first day with a smile so big it made his eyes disappear. Professor Madhukar Rao was already the stuff of legend, stories floating around of science students sneaking into Shakespeare lectures during his days at Maharaja's College.

I'd once dreamt of Oxford and Cambridge. Princeton, perhaps. Seen myself in a graduate's gown and mortarboard cap. But, with the benefit of hindsight, I know that the finest educational establishments in the world may never have taught me some of the lessons I learnt at those tutorials in the House of Bamboo.

You could say it was simple things: kindness, humility, tolerance, acceptance. Lessons that life itself might have taught me along the way. But what if I had gone to some hallowed establishment of ivy-clad stone and grassy quads and begun to think rather too much of myself?

What if I had never sat before Professor Madhukar Rao, and watched his enthusiasm brim for a group of girls whose mixed circumstances had led them all to have to register as private candidates for an MA. We formed the motley-est group of students that must have existed on the planet, mothers and housewives, some too unwell to keep pace with University life, some declared not good enough.

But this motley-est group rubbed along, day after day, rushing into class and squeezing onto pitted wooden benches, with a growing love for our teacher, for each other and for our subject. The rules were clear: we had to leave our egos with our chappals at the bottom of the stairs before climbing up to the House of Bamboo. We also left our worries somewhere far outside as this was a place for scholarship and, better still, warm chatter and concern.

We got adopted by Sir's whole family: his gentle wife who was universally 'Aunty', Ajith, his son, Lalith his pregnant daughter-in-law who, excitingly, produced baby Sadashiv alongside our MA.

Many of our batch have stayed in touch in the twenty-six years since and AS Priya went on to translate my debut novel into Malayalam as a labour of love. While attending the Cochin Book Fair recently, we went back to see Sir together, Priya and I, and wondered at how much more sharply than us he recollected our time with him as students. I don't doubt he was like that to all old students who visited, calling each of us 'edo', although he apparently remembered the name of every single member of his vast alma mater. He also recited favourite quotations better than either of us writers could that day, producing them with beautiful timing and a magician's flourish.

I visited him again, with my husband this time, and they talked of cricket, not literature. Sir judged situations better than most and cricket was quite simply another of his loves. When I learnt this morning that he breathed his last while sitting on his sofa and watching India play South Africa, I knew that was exactly how he would have wanted to go.

Among the things Professor Madhukar Rao conjured with his magician's flourish was overweening good cheer in a sad time. Whatever our circumstances, he made us laugh uproariously with his literary quizzes, and by telling us he never said 'Michigan' for fear his teeth would come shooting out. But he also made us cry by reciting Shakespeare as though it came straight from a broken heart. That must have been what those science students at Maharaja's College sought in escaping the mundane material of their own classes.

What we all learnt from him was that literature isn't merely a collection of stories and poems and plays but a way to understand life itself.

I was told this morning that Professor Madhukar Rao's body was being donated to medical science at his request; how typical that he should want to be useful to students not merely till the end but beyond. No wonder then that a line from one of his many lectures finally leapt in timely fashion into my head:

'And flights of angels wing thee to thy rest ...'

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