

Obituary

Mr Vijai Kumar Agarwal



(August 11, 1940 – February 14, 2022)

Mr Vijai Kumar Agarwal, FNAE, born on August 11, 1940 passed away on February 14, 2022. He was elected to INAE Fellowship in the year 1999 and was affiliated to Engineering Section I (Civil Engineering).

Mr Vijai Kumar Agarwal, FNAE, formerly Chairman, Railway Board & Ex-Officio Principal Secretary, Govt. of India and Former Director, Indian Oil Corporation and Steel Authority of India had made significant contributions in the areas of Civil Engineering and Human Resource Development. He was Chairman, INAE Forum on Technology Foresight and Management for Addressing National Challenges. He was also an author of repute having written a book titled “Managing Indian Railways-The Future Ahead”. He had also been writing articles on diverse topics like science& spirituality; Environment & ecology as well as on promoting and trying to re-energize Engineering as a profession apart from writing on Railways.

A TRIBUTE

To say that Mr V.K. Agarwal had many sterling qualities, which (formally or informally) moulded a generation of railwaymen, would be a huge understatement. Why so?

First and foremost, he had that most exceptional quality of lending a personal touch to any relationship, he got into, short or long term. He would relish at the idea of making people, feel important (who-so-ever came in contact with him, high or low, small or big) so as to be able draw the best out of them, something which endeared him to one and all. And that was the cornerstone of his management philosophy too, which he displayed over an array of varied management skills.

One such attribute was his reach, or should we say his outreach with his team-his people. In no time, in any set up, he could establish a rapport not just with the usual ring of people fencing a senior, but go effortlessly down and across. No artificial barriers of protocol could stop him. He had an intrinsic empathy with people-people by droves felt him as his own.

On the flip side, at all times, he was accessible to one and all-He had ample time on his hands. His juniors always vouchsafed, that when talking to him, you as a person could run out of ideas and issues with him, but he almost never would ever hustle or bundle you out.

Mr Agarwal maintained that people who had worked with him were dear to him. But then what about people whom he didn't know at all or he had never met up with? Mr Agarwal insisted that they on the contrary were very dear to him and explained that because they had dared to cross the barrier and reach out to him, so he at all times was extremely mindful of their needs and concerns.

In other words, on balance-what was he was trying to drive at? He was attempting to introduce a flatter organizational structure. And when, in which era? Way back in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s in the highly hierarchical world of our governmental organizations, when such flat structures were only

seen and heard in the private sector. In management ideas, he was clearly ahead of his times by at least a generation, if not two.

Second, when tackling staff Unions, his skills were straight out of a textbook and beyond. Incidentally to say the least, Indian Railway Unions are one of the most articulate and most proficient across all industries. It was never a case of they vs us. He was intelligent to judge that such a large workforce of railwaymen are an asset and essential part of the setup to be charged and motivated fully. So, he saw in them, his eyes and ears.

When tackling them, he would first try to understand their point of view. He would take care to read the fine print in their Demand-Charter, over and over again. And then only get his point of view across with the Unions, very subtly, amplifying, deliberating on it no-end, till he evolved a consensus. When handling Unions, he always kept two things in mind.

First, he always had ample time on his hands-he was never hurried. He maintained that infect all sensitive matters in life, official or personal, required time and patience to be sorted out.

Two-he was always very firm-He strongly advocated that fearlessly say no to the Unions, but with a reason.

Another of his outstanding personal traits was that he was always very composed at all times, whether in office or in the most stressful of conditions, such as at the accident site. Shouting or being rude was an option he almost never exercised. Infect he never behaved like a Boss, but always like a Leader. Truly speaking he always wore his Crown lightly.

The same cool, composed behaviour of-course extended into his personal life as well, he drawing his amazing strength from-His innate goodness, basically his deep spirituality. And concurrently but most importantly, from acquired strengths honed regularly to perfection. He would maintain a Diary scribbled with copious notes on varied subjects, ranging from Science and Engineering to Ontology and Metaphysics. So, he was in a constant learning and evolving mode. So, he was both current and scholarly.

Last but not the least, another of his beautiful traits was that he was always without rancour. People who knew him well, always vouchsafed that they never ever heard a word of malice from him for anybody. On one occasion it was pointed out to him that somebody somewhere had written something very nasty for him, but he dismissed it by saying that the gentleman concerned was a scholar of sorts and must have had some compulsions to have passed those untoward remarks! In any case he added, it gave him a good chance to do a course correction if any, and maybe improve upon himself.

So not just me alone but many others of my generation in the Railways owe a lot a lot of gratitude to him for setting very high standards of morality, rectitude and ultra-high sensitivity towards peers and juniors, leading us individually to our own paths of success and glory.

May God Bless his Soul to Rest in Peace

By Mr Keshav Chandra, FNAE, Former Railway Board Member