

Of course, the trumps came as a sweet follow-up to the teething troubles that had beset the project. There were times when Rao and his partners were close to despair, even tears.

Perhaps their most anxious moments were when the consignment of livestock was due in India. The entire mountain of formalities involved in getting the requisite licences for import had itself been trying.

And on one cold day in January, as Rao stood awaiting the arrival of his shipment of birds anxiously, catastrophe struck. The aircraft carrying the birds developed a mechanical fault and there was an inevitable delay.

Rao spent the time in-between the scheduled arrival and the delay on tenterhooks. If the air-conditioning and

temperature controls weren't kept functioning smoothly through the entire transit period, the birds could die — and his entire project would be in jeopardy. Not only because of the loss of investment, but because there would be little chance of getting another licence for a fresh import, thanks to the interference of jealous competitors.

**T**HE tension lasted all of 24 hours, perhaps the most painful that Rao ever spent in his entire lifetime. Finally, when the aircraft arrived with its precious cargo, Rao discovered that, of the entire lot of 9,000 birds, only about 70 had died en route. He could have heaved a sigh of relief, but not

yet. He had to save the remaining birds first.

Exhausted after their long and trying journey, most of the birds could hardly stand. And, they still had to be put through the Customs, who went through the routine of counting the birds, one by one, to ensure the sanctioned number had not been exceeded!

Rushing the birds to safety, Rao's team, headed by a Dr. Patil, monitored their health, feeding them liquid glucose with ink fillers. Then both Rao and the doctor crawled into the bird shed to sleep with their wards, watching over them just like an anxious mother hen would brood over her chicks. But the worst was over.

## OVERCOMING STORMS

Another time, disaster met the project in the guise of a



Family ties that hold a dream together: Dr. B. V. Rao with wife, Uttaradevi, and children, Anuradha, Venkatesh and Balaji





Dedicated to the birds: Dr. B. V. Rao, in the early days

freak storm that blew over the hatcheries on May 15, 1972. The stock had grown considerably by then, the grandparent birds had come into production, and Rao had established a chain of hatcheries all over Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, M. P., Delhi and even Bengal.

The storm, raging all of 10 minutes, blew the top off two of the hatchery sheds. It was late in the evening, and Rao sat as if thunder-struck for an entire minute, as the sound of the tin sheets being torn apart reached him. Then, galvanised into action, he rushed to the shed, fearing the worst every step.

While one of Rao's aides rushed to the city to get tarpaulins, another climbed to the roof to assess the damage.

Watching with bated breath, Rao was horrified to see him burst into tears. But luckily, closer inspection revealed that, though shaken and dazed, the wet birds were comparatively unhurt — only one of them had died.

HE anticlimax of the event though was twofold. Rao missed his daughter's birthday party and the farm received its first present from the birds — their first egg. It was like a promise of hope for Rao.

### A RESCUE MISSION

Anyway, with those teething problems now well behind, and

enthused by the way his project had taken off, Rao was on his way to becoming a poultry magnate. In 1973, again with Todd's help, he added a flock of broiler birds to his farm, diversifying into the bird meat market.

Yet, with the poultry industry still in a fledgling state, the immunisation of the chicks was a major bugbear — vaccines were not only expensive and had to be imported: they were often unsatisfactory due to reasons like poor storage during transportation.

So, Rao tried to find a way of getting the vaccine legally. Meanwhile, even as he sought to solve the bureaucratic tangle that prevented legal import, his flock seemed to be in immediate danger again — this



time from the dreaded Mareck's disease. For which, once again, the vaccines had to be imported. Rao had to move fast, to save his birds.

Working with the acumen of a chessplayer, Rao managed to make the right moves to bring in the much needed vaccines without the usual delays. He flew to London, bought the needed vials, packed them individually among his clothes and carried them safely into Mumbai. His timely action saved the birds.

Perhaps Rao felt the safety of the birds justified all the trouble he took. But he couldn't but have felt a stab of real pleasure when at a function held to commemorate the hatching and rearing of his commercial flock, a friend complimented him by saying, "I'd prefer to be a chicken here than a human being in Mumbai."

### THE FIRST VACCINE PLANT

By 1978, Rao had firmed his resolve to manufacture the Mareck's vaccine. He lobbied with the government on behalf of the farmers, and, finally, the vaccine was included in the list of allowable imports.

But real self-sufficiency was what Rao wanted, especially after the time he lost 2 million doses of vaccines due to a delay in the handling of a shipment. So, Rao moved swiftly — touring the vaccine institutes in the US for expertise and then convincing the government of the need for collaboration. Six months later, a vaccine plant was set up.

**P**RODUCTION began in 1978 and the Rao empire now had, to its credit, two more companies that manufactured vaccines to face any poultry disease: Ventri Biologicals (manufacturing Mareck's and Gumbro vaccines) and Sрни Biologicals.

### A SAGA OF SUCCESSES

The rest of the story is a saga of one success after another.

**“A self-made man, he rose from nothing to a position of pre-eminence in India. A successful industrialist in his own right, he has outstanding achievements to his credit.”**

— Rahul Bajaj, prominent industrialist

Rao seemed to have got the formula right — he'd face any problem that cropped up with a strange mix of equanimity and patience, and before it could get him down, the problem would be part of the history of his saga.

1980 saw another milestone — a ban on the import of livestock by the government, which prompted Rao to enter

into a 40-60 collaboration for the breeding of Babcock chicks. A genetist, Dr. Jain, was hired, and pureline breeding began in earnest. Not surprisingly, the locally bred lines did better in Indian climatic conditions than the imported birds.

A training institute came next. Rao set up a 40,000 strong layer farm and a 5,000 per week broiler farm as the best available training ground for students who received hands-on training. During the course, only one hour would be devoted to lectures. The rest of

the day would be spent by them in actual farming duties — tending and feeding the birds and learning the ins and outs of poultry farming. Many of the students of the four month course ended up having farms of their own. Others, who joined the more intensive courses, learnt

management techniques too. The Institute of Poultry Management of India, the first of its kind in Asia, has trained over 1,000 prospective entrepreneurs and employees in the industry.

Also very successful was the setting up of a mother lab, where all problems connected with birds could be tackled. Satellite labs all over the





Young layer hens at the farm

country tackled the smaller problems locally.

### TO THE VILLAGE

If Rao's life were to be summed up in a nutshell, it would be appropriate to say that it all began with the egg. For him, there was no question of which came first — the chicken or the egg. Each had its focal point in his life: The chicken brought to him prosperity and the status of being the man who lifted poultry farming to the level of an organised industry. The egg was instrumental in bringing into focus the visionary and crusader in the man. The Egg Coordination Committee (ECC), as it exists today, was the result of much hard work and foresight.

### THE 'EGG' MOVEMENT

It all started when Rao met a few farmers who wanted to form a co-operative for egg marketing on the lines of Dr. Kurien's milk co-operative.

**“R**ao is responsible for giving the Indian poultry farmer access to modern technology and raising rural income.”

— Dr. Y. K. Alagh, minister of state for planning and programme implementation

Rao didn't think it was possible but took to the idea of setting up a system that would stop the exploitation of farmers by middlemen. The idea manifested itself in a forum of poultry farmers with government backing. (Such forums existed in the U. K. and U. S. A. and functioned beautifully.) But it didn't take long to realise that Rao's plan would have to do without the government quotient.

**T**HE alternative was the touring of all farm areas across the country, mobilising farmer opinion. 'My egg, my price, my life' slogans made it clear to the egg farmers that their interests were primary in this movement. His own ill-health (he had recently suffered a heart attack and undergone bypass surgery) prevented Rao from undertaking the tours. But such was his missionary zeal, that a team of devoted poultry

farmers and hatchery owners came forward to carry the torch of his idea. Yet, when the movement gained momentum, undeterred by the doctor's warnings, Rao placed himself at the head of the

touring team. The response from the farmers was overwhelming — whenever news reached that Rao and his team were headed their way, farmers would gather to give them their support.

The tour spanned every poultry pocket in eight states — from Haryana and Delhi in the north, through U. P. and M. P. in central India and Gujarat in the west, to Andhra Pradesh in the south. Sleeping in



humble huts, eating with farm folks, talking to them of the teachings of Gandhi and the spirit of unification of Shivaji, Rao and his team convinced the farmers of the need to band together.

## VICTORY TO THE FARMER

After months of campaigning for a cause that would empower the egg farmer, at last, in May 1982, a national egg price was arrived at, and publicised. It had the approval of all the poultry owners across the eight states.

The movement stood the test of a concerted move by the Mumbai traders to break the price levels set by farmers. Banding as one unit, the farmers ensured no eggs reached the Mumbai market — even though it meant great losses to their pockets. At last, a starved Mumbai market forced the traders to relent, and the

NECC won its place in the sun.

TODAY, the NECC holds a unique place in the country's organisational map. Besides its role as a helpmate to egg farmers, it has taken on itself a social crusade — every May 14, the anniversary of the founding of the NECC, boiled eggs are distributed free of cost and the benefits of egg consumption are extolled. Pamphlets with a variety of recipes and complete nutrition information are distributed. And, thanks to the NECC, the egg has become available to anyone who cares to imbibe this pure, unadulterated and nourishing food.

The NECC adventure was followed by an organisation

for the marketing of eggs. Agrocorpex was formed as a model egg marketing agency to show the way to both farmers and traders. It succeeded so well that, in three years, it was handling 10 lakh eggs a day, and the venture won the admiration and support of a financing organisation of the level of NABARD!

## ON A NEW TRAIL...

So much for the poultry movement. But the visionary in Rao sought greater highs. Not for him the luxury of resting on his laurels; and settling down to watching his endeavours hatch rich returns — both for his organisation and for the poultry farmers in general.

His mind turned to more futuristic projects. Despite the fact that his health was now giving him enough cause for anxiety, he strove on. His children had taken on part of the responsibility of managing his many corporate divisions; and Rao felt the urge to blaze a new trial.

With Bill Todd playing godfather once more, he managed to convince a U. S.



Heirs to a legacy





A Padmashri award winner: Dr. B. V. Rao with ex-President R. Venkatraman

based company to impart their technology to his expert team. The technology Rao sought was to produce specific pathogen free eggs (which

being free of certain known diseases could be used to manufacture vaccines). And while he waited for government approval for his

If brought out into the open air, the birds would die very quickly, of disease or the air (Desai explains, "They are so used to sterile air, they cannot

latest project, Rao trained his technical staff, built a laboratory and got it ready to swing into operation.

The moment the green signal was given by the Indian government, Rao got his flock of 2,000 SPF birds. It was a costly purchase — the bill was to the tune of Rs. one crore!

Till date, Anuradha Desai feels a sense of wonder when she confronts the daring venture. The birds need to be maintained in air that has been cleaned of all pollutants and has been thoroughly disinfected. The grain given to them as feed is sterilised to the point of it not harbouring bacteria of any kind. And only select handlers are allowed to enter the hatcheries where these special birds are housed.



breathe the air we do).

**B**UT Rao's venture, though it took a while to float on its own, achieved a standing success. Today, as Desai says with pride, the eggs, each costing Rs. 40 at least, are exported to the U. S. (high testimonial indeed for their standards!). Closer home, laboratories like Hoescht buy the eggs (instead of importing them from Germany) for making the rabies vaccine.

On the commercial front, Rao found himself on even firmer ground. The broiler farm he had taken over at Karla was the base for a fast food, ready-to-eat production line of poultry products. Thus, Venky's Fast Food Division swung into operation — and

'kebabs', chicken legs and wings were made available in sterile, well packed packages

world.)

Rao's friends doubted the realisation of his dream — but knowing the spirit behind the man, they grudgingly decided to work towards it. Rao himself, knew this task was the most mammoth of all. It included involving all levels of bureaucracy, the hotel

**“H**e was a living legend. Had he lived ten years more, our nation would surely have become a global leader in the poultry industry.”

— Dr. N. A. Kalyani, prominent industrialist

for the Indian consumer.

In the course of a decade, Rao had set a unorganised floundering home industry firmly on its feet. Poultry farming had become both organised and profitable.

### THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE OF 'EM ALL

The next step was to declare to the world that India's poultry farming was something to crow about. Somewhere in the '80s, Rao first conceived the idea of holding the next World Poultry Congress (WPC) in India. (The WPC is the most prestigious and the largest congress of poultry and related industries in the

industry, convincing the competition to join ranks and participate and putting together a massive workforce to play organiser to the event. The logistics were mind boggling.

Yet, Rao felt that with seven to eight years to prepare for it, the Congress could be a viable venture in his homeland. So, in 1988, at the WPC at Nagoya, he extended an official invitation for the delegates, to decide on India as venue in 1996. To convince the WPC, he played every card in his pack — inviting delegations to review the Indian scenario, and working, simultaneously, on national bodies, to make the idea work.

Finally, at a vote, his invitation was accepted — though by a narrow margin. It was time for jubilation again.

But Rao knew that much hard work lay ahead —



Yet another award: Dr. B. V. Rao with President S. D. Sharma





**A life of fulfilled dreams:  
Dr. B. V. Rao**

technical details, seminar subjects, exhibitions, guest comforts, hotel accommodations, travel plans and public awareness... He personally looked into each of them, ironing out problems even as he envisaged them. As daughter Anuradha puts it, "From 1988 onwards, all my father dreamt of was the WPC."

## HIS DREAMS LIVE ON

The dream was not to turn real — not for Rao at least. But even as plans were being laid out to enable the WPC to be a success — recognition for the services he had rendered came thick and fast. He was awarded the Padmashri in 1989, and in 1992, an honorary doctorate by the Kakatiya University in Andhra Pradesh. It was a tribute not only to Rao, but the entire poultry farming endeavour in India!

Life settled into a routine every corporate king is familiar

with — conferences, meetings, collaborations, expansions, mergers, meetings and his work schedule. He spent less time on day-to-day work problems, leaving them in the capable hands of his three children, who held the reins of his many corporate ventures.

**T**IME flew. And Rao lost the main inspirational force of his life, when Uttaradevi succumbed to an illness in 1992. But even in her death, Uttaradevi influenced Rao, by making him realise the value of relationships. He began spending more time with his family at his bungalow in Pune.

When 1996 came around, Rao was almost ready for the WPC. But before that he had an assignment to complete. A visit to the Atlanta annual show, the biggest event in the international poultry industry, was one he couldn't miss. Rao flew to Atlanta in January, planning to combine a health checkup in the U. S. with the exhibition visit. He was not to return alive from that trip.

Anuradha Desai describes



**At the hatcheries in Pune**

the last days of her father with regret. Maybe if he had been in India, he may have lived, is the unspoken message in her narrative.

Though Rao suffered another heart attack while doing his yoga exercises, it was some time before it could be detected. When he was told of it, Rao insisted on being moved to New York, to the best cardiac hospital there. Doctors decided then to perform a catheteric section test on him. Safer than an angiography, the catheterisation procedure has a success rate of 999 to 1. There seemed no cause for worry.

Rao was in constant touch with Pune — speaking to his daughter daily. His trusty lieutenants were with him, as was his second wife Roopa Devi, who he'd married after Uttaradevi's death. With no premonition of disaster, he went into the operation theatre, talking cheerfully all the time. He would be out in a while; and ready to meet his sons, who'd be coming down, after finishing the WPC work.

It was not to be. Proving to be the one case in a 1,000, the operation failed. Rao died on the table; throwing his family, friends and the international

poultry community into shock! His body was flown back to India — and a two km. line of mourners walked behind, as he was carried to his final resting place. The father of poultry farming was dead. But his dreams, secure now, live on!

BY SATHYA SARAN



## **CORPORATE PROFILE OF THE GROUP'S MAIN COMPANIES**

**Venkateshwara Hatcheries Ltd. (Parent company)**  
(July 15, 1971)  
**Balaji Foods and Feeds Ltd. (Jan. 21, 1974)**  
**Western Hatcheries Ltd. (July 1, 1976)**  
**Venco Research and Breeding Farm Ltd.**  
(Oct. 17, 1980)  
**Venkateshwara Research and Breeding Farm Ltd.**  
(Oct. 17, 1980)  
**Shivalik Hatcheries Pvt. Ltd. (May 14, 1980)**  
**Uttara Agencies Pvt. Ltd. (Sept. 7, 1982)**  
**Venkateshwara Farms Pvt. Ltd. (June 10, 1982)**  
**Eastern Hatcheries Pvt. Ltd. (Nov. 11, 1985)**  
**VJ Equipment Ltd. (March 24, 1988)**  
**Omni Biosearch Ltd. (March 1, 1990)**  
**Srivenk Finance Ltd. (Aug. 16, 1993)**  
**Step-up Fabricators Pvt. Ltd. (Sept. 20, 1993)**  
**VR Equipment Ltd. (March 26, 1993)**  
**Uttara Foods And Feeds Pvt. Ltd. (June 4, 1996)**



