

REMEMBERING RAUTELAJI

A CHRI tribute

Letter from the Executive Committee (India)

On behalf of the members of CHRI Executive Committee (India), I write to convey our deepest condolences to the family of Mr. KS Rautela on his tragic passing away on 5 June 2019.

Mr. Rautela was among the most senior in CHRI's staff and therefore mentor to many. As finance head, he worked shoulder to shoulder with the Director, board members and staff as a whole for nearly 20 years. Known for his strict adherence to rules and regulations which contributed to the financial propriety for which CHRI commands repute, Mr. Rautela was an asset to the organisation and with his demise CHRI has lost a committed member of its family.

Across the world, programme activities around human rights issues are difficult for their high sensitivity. The fact that CHRI has been steadfast in handling these over the last two decades, despite often-fierce challenges, gives credit to the commitment of staff members like Mr. Rautela.

It is my privilege to place on record our gratitude and heartfelt condolences to all members of the grieving family and to Mr. Rautela's many friends and admirers. We pray that they find the strength to forbear in this time of grievous loss.

Sincerely,
Wajahat Habibullah,
Chair, CHRI Executive Committee (India)



A Director's Tribute

*By Sanjoy Hazarika,
International Director, CHRI*

It's difficult to write about someone with whom one has worked so closely and interacted on a daily basis in the past tense. I wish I did not have to write this piece.

I had just landed that morning in Delhi from a trip and the first message I saw on WhatsApp was one from Vinu Sampath, our Strategic Planning Head, informing me of the "terrible news" of Mr. Rautela's passing. I just could not believe it. I drove straight from the airport to the cremation *ghat* in Nigambodh, on the banks of the Yamuna. The sun was blazing down as his body was carried to the banks for the final rituals. I had to keep reminding myself that this was real, it was happening and that we had lost Mr. R.

Rautelaji -- I alternated between that and 'Mr. R' while addressing him -- was perhaps among the first persons I remember from my days on the Executive Committee of CHRI. He would come for board meetings and present issues relating to finances and accounts with a relaxed demeanour, always smiling, seemingly quiet, comfortable within his space and the heavy duties that he carried with a lightness of being.

When I joined as Director, I insisted that colleagues call me either by my first name or as Sanjoy da (how an elder brother is addressed in Assam -- none of this 'Sir' and 'Mr. Hazarika' stuff; it was to denote a sense of informality and family in a mid-sized office) and that's how he would address me with a hearty declamation.

As a person who was committed to organisational probity, he expressed frustration to me and senior colleagues when staff members

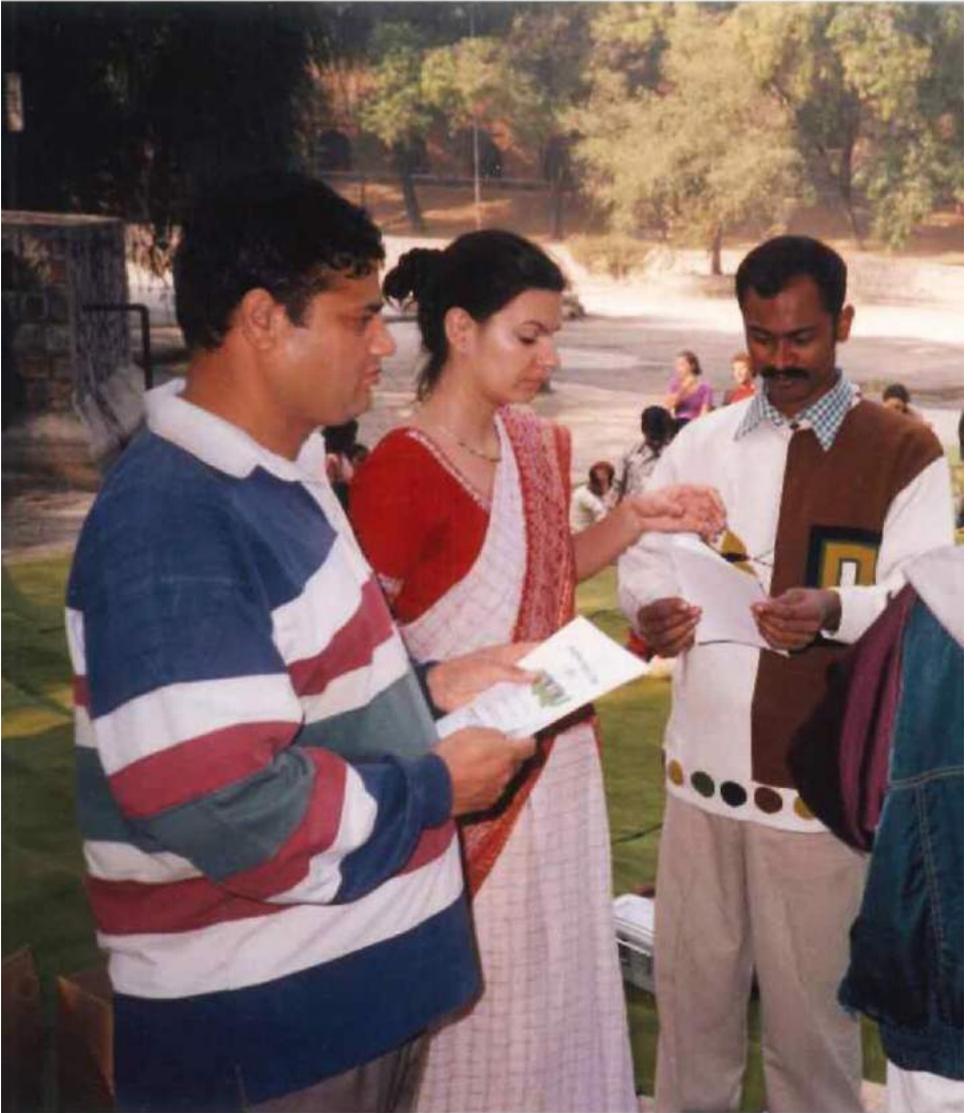
delayed in submission of accounts or did not adhere to project deadlines. But he was always willing, even during arguments, to find the right way out. He always sought to do the best for the organisation, putting its interests' first, whether it was interpreting a new rule or dealing with issues of statutory compliance, which he followed with diligence. He would be on top of things -- whether it was saving money, investing in fixed deposits, finding a good insurance policy for all staff, suggesting initiatives of leave travel allowance and expanding medical allowances as well as insurance.

Rautelaji was a deeply religious man. He sang the *Gayatri* mantra during the office pooja while praying to Laxmi during the Diwali period, urging blessings on the office and the colleagues he loved, in the presence of believers and non-believers. He played the role of Rama in community renditions of the epic, the Ramayana. And he loved his village up in the *pahar* where he could get away from the frenetic pace of life in Delhi – he purchased a car after much urging from colleagues such as Ajay and Subhash and would drive five hours to office and back home in Burari. That's a punishing schedule for any person – but he would turn up every day almost exactly on time to give a ride to one of his younger office colleagues without fail.

He was one of the four-member Programme Management Unit (PMU) that I had created to help the smooth running of the office during my frequent travels for office assignments – the others were Mohan Sundaram, Vinu Sampath and myself. These meetings would be usually called at short notice to discuss a specific issue or set of issues and were for the main, business-like, short and purposeful. But sometimes, they would spill over with exchanges of anecdotes and laughter on things mundane and important.

His chair is empty on the fourth floor. We miss his smiling presence. But he remains among us.





Rautelaji with the team on Human Rights Day, 2001

A note from Maja Daruwala, Senior Advisor, CHRI

When Mr. Rautela first arrived at the office, we were both much younger. I was starting out to build an organisation -- at least looking back on it, I can say those words. When you are actually at the very beginning of what is going to turn out to be the next 20 years of concentrated attention to one thing, you don't know it, can't discern it. You don't know what the end product will be or what the building blocks are. Possibly, focused and terribly well-educated young 27-year-old MBA graduates know. But this 50-year-old didn't know what it takes. You just dimly sense that with some common sense and good conscience, you'll get by nicely. And we did. Luck happens too. And that luck for me came in the form of a Mr. Rautela.

Someone had recommended him as an accountant of experience and honesty. That, and his no frills demeanour was enough. He came to work for CHRI and a short 15-minute interview turned into 20 years of effortless professional companionship.

Undoubtedly, we came from different cultures, Mr. Rautela and I. He was quite startled and more than a little amused in those first days when I addressed him as Kirpal. I tried to ameliorate this contravention of his internal code by insisting he call me 'Maja', but no amount of coaxing would lure him to such a transgression, and I, through thick and thin, remained 'Ma'am' or 'MD'. For myself, after a few forays into Kirpal, Kirpal ji and 'Mr Rautela', I settled for the respectful 'Rautela ji'. A respect eminently deserved.

He would often chide me for being too permissive and not insisting on imposing a stiff hierarchy on the organisation, but as time went by, he grudgingly accepted he'd have to live with a certain level of collegiality and added to that with his own sense of humour and critique of us all. As 'accounts' though, he was comfortable with being 'the

monitor of all' and from that height, was happy to be accommodating of all the small dereliction that came his way. His financial reviews of underspends, overspends, slow activity rates, inattention to mandate, late reporting, lost receipts, incomplete trip reports and missed deadlines would inevitably begin with complaint and exasperation and end with accommodation for all faults. His stock phrase "*lekin kaam ko chalna chahiye*" ("but the work must go on") ended each review. He was convinced that CHRI's work was of value and his support of it was complete, unequivocal and unswerving. His long tenure and complete loyalty to the organisation helped in no small way to mould its internal character of scrupulous financial rectitude. This in turn brought us credibility and material support.

As the head of the organisation, one anxiety I never had to suffer was vetting accounts. I relied on Rautelaji's' acumen and accuracy to get me through the thickets of planning, projections, board meetings, external audits, tax and FCRA queries and he never steered me wrong nor failed me. And for that one freedom he afforded me and for that one relief alone, he will have his place in heaven. Thank you, Kirpal -- if I may now call you that!





Letters from the international offices

Mrs KS Rautela
C/O Mr Sanjoy Hazarika
International Director
Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative

7 June 2019

Dear Mrs Rautela,

My name is Alison Duxbury and I am writing from Melbourne, Australia, on behalf of the members of the International Advisory Commission of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative. From across the world, we were all deeply saddened to hear of the unexpected passing of your husband, Mr KS Rautela, and wanted to send our condolences to you, your children and your extended family at this very sad time.

Mr Rautela was a respected member of the CHRI family for twenty years. The work of a human rights defender comes in many forms and the ability to ensure that the operations of a non-governmental organisation run smoothly is an integral part of that work. Mr Rautela's role, as Head of the Accounts Department, had many facets – it ensured that CHRI fulfilled its legal requirements, that funding was carefully accounted for and distributed, and that donors were kept informed of the way their money was being spent. This was only a small part of Mr Rautela's role, but it is indicative of the crucial work he played in ensuring the continued success of all members of CHRI in promoting and protecting human rights. We have all been fortunate to have met Mr Rautela at meetings of the International Advisory Commission in Delhi and have been impressed by his commitment to the organisation. To have someone of Mr Rautela's standing as part of CHRI's family for twenty years is an inspiration to all who work for the cause of human rights.

We send our deepest sympathy to you and your family at this sad time and wanted to let you know that you are in our thoughts and prayers.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Alison Duxbury
Chair, International Advisory Commission, CHRI
On behalf of the members of the International Advisory Commission
Mr Wajahat Habibullah (India)
Mr Sanjoy Hazarika (India)
Mr Edward Mortimer (United Kingdom)
Mr Sam Okudzeto (Ghana)



Members of the International Advisory Committee, the India EC chair, International Director, Senior Advisor, and part of the CHRI Delhi team in Manesar in April 2019

London Office
Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative
Room 219
Institute of Commonwealth Studies
London
WC1E 7HU

6th June 2019

Dear Mrs Rautela,

We are deeply saddened to learn this morning of the loss of Mr R.S. Rautela. I am writing to express our heartfelt condolences to you and your family on behalf of everyone in the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative's London office.

Over a period of 20 years your husband made a substantial commitment to furthering the cause of human rights across India, and the Commonwealth, through what is probably one of the most important roles within the organisation – enabling its wheels to run smoothly whether the going was good or the road rocky. He was also a kind and warmhearted man who will be missed greatly by all who were lucky enough to know him.

Although we sadly will not be present at today's funeral to show our respect, please know our thoughts are with you and your son at this difficult time.

Our sincere sympathy,



Joanna Ewart-James
Chair
Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative UK

Sorry to hear the sad news of our colleague KS Rautela.

Please extend the African Office's condolences to his wife and sons.

Sincerely

Sam Okudzeto SAG, MOV, FCIS, MCI Arb.
Inner Temple, London
Barrister at Law
Solicitor & Notary
1st Floor Total House, 25 Liberia Road, Accra

A friend remembers

*By Mohan Sundaram,
Manager Administration, CHRI*

6 June 2019



Exactly at 2.13 am today, I got the unclear message that Rautela is no more. It took me a while to actually comprehend the message. Then I started calling people and the moment I realised that the news that I heard is true, a sudden rush of inexplicable and unbearable pain, shock and a terrible sense of disbelief took me which I'm yet to recover.

A person who was part of my everyday life for over 13 years, a person who stood with a rock solid resolve and support for whatever I did in CHRI, a person with whom I argued, fought and laughed is just gone and disappeared.

Like a piece of music that dissolved in the air.

In a way, my relationship with Rautela was built on no-holds-barred criticism for each other's sphere of work. Being the finance head, he had the knack of knowing where we faltered. All through, he zealously guarded CHRI and never allowed anyone to waste a *paise*.

When we planned to purchase this place, then when the new office was built, Rautela took control of its most difficult part – the budget and finance -- and kept me under control. Ensuring financial propriety in everything we did was his job and he would see to it, regardless of its cost.

With a great sense of humour, he would make you to laugh uncontrollably. Once when I asked him about his birth certificate, he said, "Mohan, the day I was born, my father wanted to register my birth but that day there was heavy rain and flood in Uttarakhand, and at that time, little did he realise that 50 years later, a person like you would ask for it."

Very recently, when I was applying for a staff member's visa application, he came to my desk and asked me, "Do you know who is the first Indian who travelled abroad without a visa?" Annoyed with his question, I asked him who it was, and he said "*Hanumanji*".

That was Rautela. A simple man, rustic; a man who didn't know how to show his love to others.

Rautela, I will miss you and the way you call me *bade saab* sarcastically.

May your soul rest in peace.





The team bids goodbye

*By Richa Udayana,
Media and communications officer*

Tears, muffled sobs, choked voices mixed with occasional smiles as members of the CHRI family's remembered KS Rautela, one of the organisation's pillars, and its cheerful and exceptional accounts manager, who passed away suddenly late on 5 June 2019.

Rautelaji, as everyone called him, was the Manager of Accounts but he was much more: concerned about the welfare of his younger colleagues, attentive to detail, supportive of staff when they made mistakes, sticking to his views when he felt they were right and an anchor for CHRI's ship. He was the financial and accounting spine of the organisation for nearly 20 years, a much-loved team member and an invaluable asset who maintained not just our books, but also the spirit of collaboration, honesty and kindness within the CHRI family.

The Delhi office was devastated when most learned of his passing early on 6th; many have not yet overcome the shock of the news. Those who knew him had much to say of their time with him and of the many ways in which he had touched all their lives.

"A person who was part of my everyday life for over 13 years, a person who stood with a rock-solid resolve and support for whatever I did in CHRI, a person with whom I argued, fought and laughed is just gone and disappeared. Like a piece of music that dissolved in the air." Mr. Mohan Sundaram, Manager Administration, and one of his closest colleagues, wrote in an email.

At a team memorial meet, Mr. Sanjoy Hazarika, International Director, said, "It is difficult to speak of Mr. Rautela in the past tense. He was one of our pillars as I said to all of you recently, and now all of us have

to work together to build a new pillar to strengthen CHRI. He was always smiling, even through differences.” Later, Mr. Hazarika shared how Rautelaji “would walk into my room with an idea, papers to be signed, a suggestion for savings, support and strengthening the people in the organisation – including, recently, an insurance policy for staff with better benefits” just two weeks back, before the Director left on a trip and Rautelaji went off on a visit to attend a marriage in his beloved home village in Uttarakhand.

Indeed, this was a recurrent theme in many recollections that morning – his innate ability to respect everyone, to accommodate and amicably reconcile differing views while holding his ground, to exemplify integrity and honesty every day through his work and values.

“He had quite a journey, from being a simple lad from Uttarakhand to having established himself through sheer hard work. He continued to be this hard-working and honest person through the years,” said Ms. Vinu Sampath Kumar, Head, Strategic Planning and Partnerships. “CHRI is a functional family where each person has a unique role. Suddenly, we find that a pillar of the organisation has disappeared and in the coming days, we will have to face what this absence means. His work ethic will be a hard act to follow.”

“This is a difficult moment,” remarked Mr. Venkatesh Nayak, coordinator of CHRI’s Access to Information Programme, who had joined CHRI in 2000, a year after Rautelaji. Venkat spoke of Rautelaji’s commitment to financial propriety, which was recognised not just by CHRI but also regulatory agencies. For three successive years, Rautelaji handled detailed Income Tax audits of CHRI’s accounts. At the end of a three year-process, the IT officer remarked, ‘How do you have such perfect paperwork?’

“This, to me,” said Mr. Nayak, “reflects the integrity in Mr. Rautelaji’s work.” He ensured that all of the organisation’s spendings and accounts were above board, and the ease with which he did all this

was something very few financial managers could manage. “Now, we no longer have this gentleman who always found solutions to problems.”

We cannot remember Mr. Rautela without marveling at his ability to face any situation, no matter how complex, with equanimity and grace. As Venkat said, he always had solutions for problems, whether it be engaging with regulatory authorities, or the teams at work.

“He was one of the three people who would always represent CHRI in board meetings, when I was on the board. He had his finger on every financial button of every project.” said Mr. Hazarika.

Mr. Bruce Lee, who worked closely with Mr. Rautela in the accounts department said, “I sat with Mr. Rautela, ate with him, worked with him. He helped me with everything, regardless of any mistakes I made. He would solve any problems that came up and support everyone. It is now difficult to work in [the accounts] room without him.”

We also look back fondly at his cheerfulness and his ability to find humour in the simplest of subjects. “I remember our lunch hours -- they used to be full of jokes and laughter because of his jokes. Rautelaji was always jovial; it was his tone that made even regular subjects seem funny. It is difficult to accept that he is not around,” said Mr. P. Ajay Babu, Office Assistant.

“I knew him since 2003,” said Ms. Aditi Dutta, Senior Programme Officer with the Police Reforms team. “At first, we thought he was a serious, even grumpy man. But then we discovered his sense of humor. Mr. Rautela was a humble man, honest and gentle. A good man. From him, I learned that we must treat everyone respectfully for as long as we live. And that it is people who matter the most – more than projects or work.”

Ms. Pavani Nagaraja, project officer with the Prison Reforms team said, “He treated all of us younger staff as kids. He would chat with us every day after lunch, showing us videos, discussing politics. He made us feel very comfortable and treated us like his own.”

Mr. K S Rautela was indispensable to the working of this organisation. When CHRI began, he single-handedly ran the accounts department, looking after all finance, taxation and insurance details. He ensured that every team member received their salary on time. He fixed problems. He coordinated with everyone. He welcomed every new member of the organisation with an enthusiastic narration of its organisation’s history – a rite of passage for CHRI members that newer entrants will never know.

“He had real integrity. He was a fine accounts officer but he was a finer human being,” said Mr. Hazarika.

An Uttarakhand resident, Mr. Rautela always brought back sweets for the entire team after every visit. Merely two days earlier, he had come to the office bearing ‘bal mithai’ (a local sweet) for everyone. The mithai, we now feel, paled in front his own sweetness.

We are humbled and grateful to have known Rautelaji and will carry his memories and laughter in our hearts. He had a huge role in shaping CHRI into what it is today. We will cherish that as we continue his legacy of honesty and integrity, as individuals and an organisation.

