

In conversation with Ratnakara Rao P: the ISRO journey and life

“Hailing from Ettumanoor, a small village in Kottayam, completing my education from government schools and colleges, initially I did not have any grand dreams. I was always focused on my studies and confident about myself.”



Ratnakara Rao with A.P.J. Abdul Kalam

Humble and confident, Ratnakara Rao, former Deputy Director at ISRO talks about his journey with great reminiscence and a sense of accomplishment. Now in his late sixties, leading a retired life, for the past eight years, Mr. Rao talks about his golden days at the Indian space research organisation with great zeal and pride.

“I did not have any ambition of working at ISRO at first, but when I used to see the ISRO buses pass through the college campus, a small curiosity sparked in my mind which grew into passion as I started working there.” Mr. Rao joined the space research field in 1977 after completing his degree in engineering from the College of Engineering Trivandrum (CET). He recalls being lucky enough to clear the interview where he was the first among the forty selected candidates.

Thirty-eight years of rich experience did not come easy. Mr. Rao faced personal and professional challenges on his journey but, he is extremely grateful for everything he has experienced and achieved. He joined the space research workforce as a Project Engineer for the SLV3 (Satellite Launch Vehicle) project led by the esteemed A.P.J Abdul Kalam. “Working for four years under Mr. Kalam was truly an enriching experience for me. Kalam was a highly knowledgeable person passionate about his work and this inspired me to work harder and move ahead in my career.”

According to Mr. Rao, these first four years were a challenge as well as a great opportunity that helped him fight greater battles. He also worked with other important figures at ISRO like Dr.G. Madhavan Nair, and S.Srinivasan on projects such as PSLV (Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle), Chandrayaan and SLV3.

Mr. Rao speaks highly about the exposure and the resources available at ISRO: “ISRO was so much more than just a workplace for me. It was a space for me to grow personally, intellectually, and professionally. ISRO had an excellent library and apart from that, the organisation gave its employees numerous opportunities to pursue higher academic degrees from top-tier institutions. It was never short on exposure and opportunities.”

Mr.Rao feels that his presence and work at ISRO have been highly rewarded and recognised in many ways. One of the major milestones in his career is the Team Leader Award that he received for the Suryagrahan project. He has also won various other awards from prestigious societies like the Society of Energy Engineers and Managers and from the Govt. of India. Mr. Rao has been a member of many societies and been offered fellowships in these organisations. Mr. Rao was also the chairman of the Aeronautical Society of India in the year 2013.

He laughs on when asked what his “mantra” is and replies, “There is no single, fixed method that leads you towards your goals. The journey involves learning, listening, and trusting yourself.” Mr. Rao believes that there is no substitute for hard work and that we always must be ready to learn new things and adapt and grow in the ever-changing environment of life. Mr. Rao is extremely grateful and thankful for all the support and love he has received from his family throughout his journey, especially his wife, Mrs. Mitra. He says, “My job at ISRO required constant travelling and had unpredictable work hours. My wife was highly educated and wished to pursue a career but she understood my position too and obliged to support me by managing things at home and taking care of their two sons.” He completely agrees with the fact that without her support and co-operation, he would not have been able to make it this far in life.

On being asked about the future of the space research field, Mr. Rao thinks that it is a highly significant field that is vital for the scientific development of the country and our lives. He feels that it is a truly promising field which has contributed a lot to the technological advancements that we benefit from today. “ISRO has done a lot for the society and will continue to do so. Ranging from the remote sensing technology that helps fishermen in their work to the newly emerging field of telemedicine, the contributions are numerous.”

Even though, he is not working at ISRO, Mr. Rao is not one to sit idle. He believes in “social improvement” and wishes to improve the overall social well-being of the society, for which he has delivered various lectures at several colleges and been a part of activities conducted by organisations that promote both social awareness as well as about the space research field. Along with this, he is also an Arbitrator at the High Court of Kerala and is also helping in the family business run by his wife’s side of the family.

Ratnakar Rao is truly a man of principles, who believes in a life of discipline, hard work, and determination. “I personally stand by the act of proving ourselves before the world instead of just preaching about what we think and what we are.”