

Abherajji Hirachandji Baldota

(1916-2005)

It is with deep regret I record the passing away of Abherajji Hirachandji Baldota, a pioneer in iron ore mining in the State of Karnataka, a great self-made industrialist, a leading Banker, a gentleman to the core and a person who took great interest in all the activities of the Geological Society of India. Abherajji was originally from Maharashtra, being born at Urulikanchan, Pune district, on 1 August, 1916. He had his High School education at King George High School, Bombay, studied Law at St. Xavier's College and practiced for some time as a lawyer. He was married to Smt. Vasanti Devi in 1935.



It is difficult to single out any activity of Abherajji for special emphasis as he was a multifaceted personality with wide range of interests. I met him more than 40 years ago during my first visit to Bellary (a district transferred to Karnataka as the result of States reorganisation), to acquaint myself with the iron ore mining activity in the region. It was then that I met many noted personalities of the area – Y.M. Mahabaleswarappa, Gogga Gurushamappa, H.R. Gaviyappa, Y. Nagappa and others. In the midst of these, who had

considerable local and political standing, Abherajji Baldota, a fair, khadi-clad personality, stood apart as a gentleman of distinction. As the years wore on he steadily developed his property near Hospet into a big mine and became the leading Mine Owner and Exporter of iron ore of the Bellary-Hospet region. Prior to coming to Karnataka he was deeply involved in the import of non-ferrous metals and was also, for some time, President of the Bombay Metal Exchange. Respected as a great Banker, he was the founder President of the Greater Bombay Cooperative Bank, a cooperative bank with a high reputation.

Abherajji was no ordinary industrialist but one with a vision. In 1983 he started the Vijaya Oxygen Company near Munirabad, close to Hospet, producing to date nearly 2.5 million tonnes of liquid oxygen and also helped development of the mining industry by producing liquid explosives. Another notable achievement of his was the harnessing of wind power. Today his company is the largest producer of wind energy in Karnataka with the establishment of a battery of wind mills having an installed capacity of 140 MW involving an investment of Rs.160 crores around Chitradurga and Kappat hills near Gadag.

The presence of minute quantities of gold associated with iron ore made him take a lively interest in the development of the gold mining industry which was languishing without attention. When the P.V. Narasimha Rao government at the Centre, and Manmohan Singh as the finance minister, took a major policy decision to throw open gold mining, till then a monopoly of the Public Sector to private participation, Abherajji saw an opportunity for advancement and applied for prospecting permits over a number of promising areas in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh but concentrated his attention initially on the Gadag Gold Field. The exploration so far carried out has proved sufficiently encouraging to warrant active mining. The lethargic policies of the State and Central governments in granting mining leases, however, has prevented the Gadag field from becoming a new centre of gold mining.

Abherajji's latest interest was the development of the Steel industry. The country has been busy hitherto in exporting iron ore in the raw state without giving any thought to the production of iron and steel indigenously. After a great deal of negotiation the Baldota group has been successful in obtaining permission for establishing a pelletisation plant of 1.2 million tonnes capacity per annum and a Steel plant of 1.05 million tonnes capacity per annum located at Koppal. The project also envisages production of 125 MW of electric power using waste gases produced in the process of steel making.

Apart from these developmental activities Abherajji took interest in the affairs of the Geological Society of India. Seeing that the work of the Society was suffering from want of space, he came forward with a munificent grant of Rs.12 lakhs for the purchase of an additional flat adjacent to the Society's office and developing it as a lecture hall for holding meetings of the Society. Abherajji was a pillar of strength, a builder of institutions and a very pleasant person. His son, Narendra Kumar Baldota, and grandsons Rahul and Shrinik have now the responsibility of carrying on with the work initiated by the elder Baldota and taking it forward to greater heights redounding to the credit of the founder – Abherajji Baldota.

B.P. RADHAKRISHNA