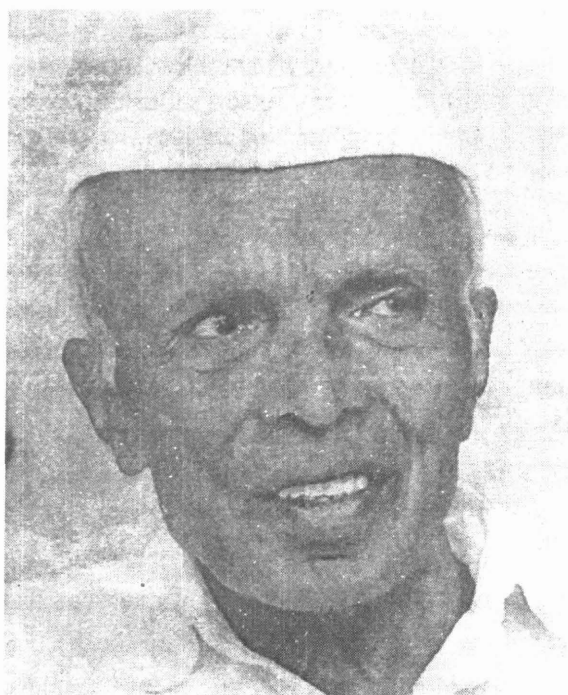


Hosur Narasimhaiah (HN)

The Story of a Village Boy Who Rose to Become Vice-Chancellor

Many Bangaloreans may not be aware of the existence of an institution styled 'The Bangalore Science Forum' where lectures on various science subjects of special interest are arranged, once a week, at the premises of the National College, Basavangudi. Once a year a festival is arranged where eminent scientists are invited to talk to the students and tell them details of their special field of study. This unique experiment at popularization of science has been going on uninterruptedly since 1962, the originator being none other than Prof. H. Narasimhaiah, popularly known as HN by his numerous students and well wishers. He was particularly beloved of the student community below the age of 15 and



this was the first effort at popularizing science attempted anywhere in India. We have heard of men hailing from an obscure background and rising to positions of great responsibility: from Log Cabin to the President is the phrase with which we are familiar. Not so well known is the story of a much humbler individual rising from a condition of dire poverty to the position of Vice-Chancellor of a famous university. This heroic tale of a person is one worth repeating to students to invoke in them the qualities of self help and devotion to duty.

Humble Origin

HN was born on 6th June, 1920, the eldest son of a poor school master of an obscure village, Hosur, some 50 miles from Bangalore in a remote part of Kolar district. It is a dry

district with very low rainfall and most villagers were poor, HN being the poorest among them. His mother was a domestic drudge. The family lived in a single room tenement. From his childhood HN had an ambition to come up and succeed in life and studied hard borrowing text books from his fellow students for he could not afford to buy them himself. A favourite of his school masters, he stood first in his class. He particularly remembered with gratitude the encouragement received from one M.S. Narayana Rao, Headmaster of the school and when Narayana Rao was transferred to Bangalore, HN followed his teacher who had promised to help him by providing food and shelter. The poor boy walked the 84 km to Bangalore on foot, with a halt at Doddaballapur where the philanthropist Kongadiappa provided food and shelter.

National High School

A National High School had been set up by Annie Beasant in 1917 at Bangalore with the object of developing national pride in the students as Government schools did not give any scope for development of such a spirit. Eminent teachers, under the influence of Gandhiji, had forsaken government positions and came to serve the new school with a life dedicated to service, accepting a low salary, just enough to maintain themselves. HN joined the school in 1939, considering it the greatest event in his life. Gandhiji had come to Bangalore and was staying at Nandi Hills to recover from his broken health. Some of the teachers, along with a few students, went up the hills to see the great leader. Gandhiji, speaking in Hindi, wanted someone to translate what he said and young Narasimhaiah was pushed to the front as a boy knowing Hindi. Gandhiji bent down and putting his hands on the shoulders of the young boy with a Gandhi cap, asked his name and whether he could speak Hindi. Prompt came the reply '*thoda thoda*' (a little, a little) and Gandhiji patted the boy encouragingly, an action photographed by a reporter of *The Hindu* which formed a priceless possession of Narasimhaiah in later years.

His career did not run smoothly, as obeying the call of Gandhiji, HN left Central College cutting short his education to join the Satyagraha movement and had to spend his time in jail. He returned later, re-joined the college and qualified for the B.Sc. degree. He had no home but managed to get free boarding, a place to live for only three days in a week, at a poor boys home.

Central College had the reputation of being the best science college and Narasimhaiah graduated in B.Sc. (Hons.) and later in M.Sc. He had his first experience of jail life as a college student for participating in the 'Quit India' movement. Through the interest taken in him by Thyageeshananda of Ramakrishna Ashram he secured a seat in the student home where food and lodging were provided free and was then able to study comfortably in the profoundly peaceful atmosphere of the Ashram. After graduation in 1946, he decided to serve as a lecturer in the same National School where he had studied earlier and gained the reputation of being a good teacher.

A Gandhian from his young days, what struck Narasimhaiah as a boy of 13 years was the spartan simplicity of Gandhiji. From that day onwards he decided to wear Khadi; a dhoti, jubba and a Gandhi cap were the three pieces of his dress which he never foresook.

His occupying high position as Principal of College or even as Vice-Chancellor of the University did not effect any change in this simple dress. He began living in a small room in the college hostel and a striped coloured mat spread on the floor with rolled up bedding at one end was all that adorned his room. Later a bench and a couple of folding chairs were added intended for his visitors to sit. Except for a brief period during his Vice-Chancellorship, when he moved to a rented house, he continued to live in this tiny room for the rest of his life. The doors of the room were always open and any body could walk in and talk to him.

His morning recreation was a brisk long walk in the Lalbagh gardens closeby. Humourously he used to observe the well dressed officers who joined him in his walk addressing their pet dogs only in English and never in Kannada!

Narasimhaiah was a beloved teacher, liked and admired by his students for his sincerity, earnestness and a sense of subtle humour.

Higher Studies in US

Narasimhaiah, once he joined the National College, had no intention of leaving it and there was every chance of his becoming the principal of the college in the course of time. A thought struck him that the M.Sc. degree he had secured was not enough and that he should secure a higher degree, preferably from a foreign university. Since he had no resource except his meagre salary he applied to several universities of US for admission and a modicum of financial support but only one university, the State University of Ohio, gave a favourable reply. As he had no money for travel and there was no one prepared to assist him, he applied for a Fulbright Travel Grant, which he secured without much difficulty. He left for America in August, 1957. The station platform was full with students to give him a hearty send off.

Narasimhaiah lived a Spartan life in America, *Uppittu* being his staple food which he prepared himself. He used to claim that he was the only person who carried on with *uppittu* and nothing but *uppittu* for four long years and could gain an entry in the Guinness record book.

It is strange that he chose Nuclear Spectroscopy of all subjects for his study. His guide first asked his name and when Narasimhaiah spelt it out in block letters and placed it before him, he studied it and gravely said that by the time Narasimhaiah completed his PhD he would have learnt to pronounce his name correctly! Both guide and pupil had a sense of humour. As Narasimhaiah was hard-working in his studies, it was not difficult for him to get good grades in all the subjects and he secured his PhD degree. After that he went on the usual round, visiting important places in America. Luckily for him there were branches of the Ramakrishna Mission at many places which took care of him during his stay in various cities.

HN did not develop friendship with any Americans for he found nothing in common between them. No one came to bid goodbye when he left the country. On his return journey he traveled through London, Paris and Geneva.

Returning to Bombay he felt miserable at seeing the squalor, dirt, crowded streets, and beggars, a scene, which he had missed for three years in America. A warm welcome, however, awaited him in Bangalore. His whole college was at the airport to receive him. But what

surprised all of them was that America had not changed HN and his life style and he was for all practical purposes the Narasimhaiah that they had known. The one thing that greatly impressed HN about America was the liberality of its education system and the integrity of Professors. They never felt offended at being questioned as they do in our country.

Principal of National College

By the time he returned, the famous Headmaster of the National College, K Sampatgiri Rao, had retired and another person had been appointed in his place. All the teachers however, unanimously voted for Narasimhaiah as the principal but the retiring principal had not the grace to welcome the new incumbent as he threw the bunches of keys at HN and walked out. Fortunately no one witnessed the scene and Narasimhaiah assumed the principalship with sorrow at the behaviour of his colleague.

Many improvements were effected during his principalship and the entire staff functioned with discipline and respect for the new principal. He, on the other hand, spared no efforts in attending to all the affairs of the college. In his 12 years of principalship he did not build groups — the bane of most university colleges, neither did he issue a single memo. The National College during this period had the reputation of being a college of excellence producing the highest number of rank students. What is more, students emerging from the college had a sense of discipline and became prominent persons in various professions later in life.

His supreme confidence was truly amazing, despite his lowly origin and dire poverty, he had no inferiority complex and mixed with the highest and lowest in the land with easy familiarity. His sterling personal character outshone on all occasions despite his simple dress and peasant like demeanour. HN could speak what he felt with courage.

'Bangalore Science Forum'

One of the services for which Narasimhaiah would be long remembered is the starting of 'Bangalore Science Forum' in 1962 already referred to. Popularisation of science and the development of the questioning spirit among students were the twin objects with which he started this forum. In order to emphasize that fact in science, a big question mark in red became the official logo of this forum and a science festival arranged in the month of July every year. The popularity of Narasimhaiah was such that none of the distinguished professors who were invited to lecture could say no to his request. Educational films were also put on show every Sunday. The programme, a unique one in any part of India, has been in progress for the last thirty years with nearly 2000 lectures delivered. Narasimhaiah would invariably be present to welcome the speaker and introduce him to the audience.

In the earlier years lecturers and students actively participated and attended the evening lectures in large numbers but gradually interest waned as the writ of Narasimhaiah did not have the same effect as it had before. Many senior citizens, however, continued to attend and added importance to the occasion.

Other experiments Narasimhaiah conducted was the introduction of sex education among boys and girls by inviting eminent doctors like Anupama Niranjana and S. Jayaram.

A more important of his innovations was the holding of examinations without supervisors, the whole object being to produce students who were honest and truthful.

Second Visit to America

Narasimhaiah went once again to America, this time as a visiting Professor after he had served as Principal of a College for six years. He had a desire to make a study of modern educational methods in that country and also wanted to meet old students of the college and persuade them to contribute a share of their earning for celebrating the Silver Jubilee of the National Education Society.

Vice-Chancellor of Bangalore University

Bangalore University had come into existence in 1962 as an offshoot of the Mysore University, which was older by nearly 50 years, but had a chequered history, none of the Vice-Chancellors having a smooth time. A very large area in the outskirts of Bangalore had been earmarked for the University but no serious attempt had been made to shift the University departments, till then housed in the Central College, to the new campus. One day Narasimhaiah received a phone call informing him that he had been appointed as the Vice-Chancellor of the Bangalore University. Even in his wildest dreams HN had never dreamt that he would become the Vice-Chancellor and was therefore taken by surprise. Being a member of University committees and senates he knew the tremendous pulls and pressures in effecting appointments to high office. Instead of feeling pleased Narasimhaiah was worried about the onerous responsibilities he would have to shoulder. Leaving the National College he reported as Vice-Chancellor and took to his new duties seriously. First and foremost was the shifting of the Central College from its present crowded location to the new sprawling campus at Nagarbhavi to which there was a great deal of reluctance, and even opposition, on the part of senior professors. To set an example he himself moved to the new campus, which still retained the look of a scrubby jungle and named it 'Gnana Bharathi'.

The construction of buildings for the different departments was no easy task and he established a record, not only in securing funds but also in executing the various works on time. With the cooperation of Dr. Mari Gowda, then the Director of Horticulture, number of trees were planted all over the campus with mature trees transplanted, and the whole campus was transformed into a woody hermitage.

The meetings of the Senate and Syndicate were formerly unruly, with an instance of an irate member even throwing a paperweight at the previous Vice-Chancellor. Narasimhaiah, with his characteristic winning ways and maintaining a stubborn stand where firmness was required was able to go through busy agenda without giving scope for any untoward incidents. Government extended his service for a further period of three years. Although some of the aspirants for the post of Vice-Chancellor were greatly disappointed, the staff and student community welcomed the decision.

His Fight against Godmen

In this extended term Narasimhaiah took an unusual and controversial decision. From

the beginning he was against 'Godman' who performed miracles, hoodwinking gullible people. He constituted a committee – 'Committee to Investigate Miracles and Verifiable Superstitions'. The committee had many eminent men of vision as its members but its constitution and the letters that he wrote to the Godman created a furore. The Godman did not reply to the letters and refused to see the members. As a result the proposed investigation came to nothing but it did raise a wave of incredulity in the minds of some at least among the educated public. It is not clear what further steps he would have taken, but, in the mean time Government appointed a new Chancellor of the University, a devotee of the Godman, and had even called on him for a *darshan* before he entered into his new duties. Narasimhaiah came to know of this fact and, considering the relation between the Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellor would not be as smooth as before and in the interests of the University, resigned his Vice-Chancellorship and went back to his cabin in the National College hostel, the centre around which his life had revolved. He had least regret for what he had done, retaining a deep love for the university he had helped to grow. Whenever he passed on the Mysore road he would involuntarily turn his head towards the university to see how the saplings he had planted had grown and presented a grand sight in place of the barren mound which existed there previously. It is to be said to the credit of Narasimhaiah that he never criticized any act of the university after leaving it.

'Selfless Service' — His Sole Motto

This narration has become lengthy for I thought it best to give a first hand picture of a rare personality. The life story of Narasimhaiah emphasizes the paramount importance of working for the welfare of others subordinating all other selfish interests. He had no family, no children and no property of his own. He had renounced all desires and worked only for the welfare of his students who were very dear to him. He did not believe in god and idol worship and never willingly entered the precincts of a temple. He disliked the pretentious postures of godmen parading as messengers of God. He did however believe in the existence of a superior power which is holding the world together.

Narasimhaiah passed away peacefully after a brief illness at the age of 85. He wanted his body to be cremated quietly at the village where he was born and did not want any holiday to be declared on account of his death. But it did not happen that way, the body was kept on an elevated platform at the National College, taken to Goribidnur and later to Hosur. Unusually heavy rains fell and the ashes of Narasimhaiah became mingled with the soil of the school he had built — a fitting requiem.

Narasimhaiah was a rare but loving personality and it is good to remember him and his good deeds. His life itself was his message.

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