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EDITORIAL

Popularizing Science: Memories of an Icon

Malgudi, the magical town that came to life in R. K. Narayan's novels, may have been inspired by the author's life in Mysore of a bygone era; its name, however, is a felicitous blend of two of Bangalore's oldest suburbs, Malleswaram and Basavangudi. Even in the early 1970s these areas retained an old world charm, largely untouched by the frenzied pace of development that was soon to follow. Bangalore today is, arguably, India's 'science capital'. Delhi may boast of a larger number of institutions of science and Kolkata of a tradition of research that goes back to the 19th century, flowering into the high point of the 1920s; but it is Bangalore that is home to some of our finest institutions of science, both venerable and young. The city is also home to a remarkable institution, *The Bangalore Science Forum*, which was founded by H. Narasimhaiah in 1962. For well over four decades, the *Science Forum* has held weekly lectures to bring science to the people. Its record of an unbroken string of lectures, interspersed with film shows on science (slide shows in the early years) is unlikely to be rivalled; in July 2004 the forum conducted 'Lecture No. 1956'. When its founder-president died in Bangalore on 31 January, an extraordinary chapter in the history of science in India, ended.

Hosur Narasimhaiah (HN to his legion of admirers) was born on 6 June 1920 in Hosur (Kolar district) and grew up in extremely modest circumstances. According to legend, he walked to Bangalore in 1935 to join the National High School in Basavangudi. A year later, Mahatma Gandhi on a visit to Bangalore spoke to the young Narasimhaiah; a meeting that was to transform the boy into a life-long follower of Gandhi's ideals. He obtained his B Sc and M Sc degrees at Central College, Bangalore and joined the National College, Basavangudi in 1946. His career was interrupted by stints in prison at Bangalore, Mysore and Yerawada jails, during the Quit India movement. Later, he was to obtain a Ph D in physics from the Ohio State University. He served for several years as Principal of the National College and was later Vice-Chancellor of the Bangalore University (1972–1977). During his long career as an educationist, HN remained completely committed to Gandhian ideals and the cause of promoting science and spreading a scientific temper among the people at large. He lived a life of extraordinary simplicity. A bachelor, he spent over half a cen-

tury in a small room in the National College hostel. Always dressed in white khadi with a 'Gandhi cap', he seemed at times a figure from a chapter of Indian history, that appears to be fast fading from public memory. His contributions to the National Education Society and its institutions were undoubtedly immense, but I believe it is his indefatigable championship of the cause of promoting science that really extended his influence well beyond the National College.

I first met HN in the mid-1970s when I was invited to speak at the *Science Forum*, probably as a substitute for a truant speaker. Young, brash and undoubtedly arrogant, I encountered an entirely new world at National College. Simplicity and humility seemed to be prized virtues. Over the last three decades, I have gone back repeatedly, never refusing an invitation to speak. HN and his dedicated colleagues conducted summer schools for 10th standard and Pre-University students and in my younger years I was a regular teacher. On my long rides in an autorickshaw from Malleswaram to Basavangudi, I could not but help think of the gulf that separated my own concerns at the Indian Institute of Science from those of HN and his colleagues at National College. I seemed more worried about personal advancement and success; HN and his more dedicated followers appeared to be driven by a nobler purpose. The *Science Forum*, for the past quarter of a century, has also conducted an 'Annual Science Festival', where lectures and film shows on science are held every day in the month of July. Year after year, some of Bangalore's most senior and influential scientists speak at this festival, drawn undoubtedly by HN's personal charm and charisma. It was almost impossible to say no to him; although it was sometimes possible to negotiate on the date of a lecture. Some years ago the *Forum* marked the centenary of Schrödinger's birth. Bangalore has a galaxy of physicists and HN had little difficulty in rounding-up speakers. But, with characteristic thoroughness he wanted to cover Schrödinger's views on biology. Having failed to persuade either physicists or biologists of standing to speak on the topic, he turned to me. My protestation that I was ignorant did not make him relent; he simply told me to study and prepare to speak. It was only then that I really read Schrödinger's book *What is Life?*, which greatly influenced the physicists who turned to biology in the 1950s. Until HN instructed me to

read about Schrödinger, I had only glanced through the book, untouched by the context of the times in which the author had worried about genes and the transfer of hereditary information. But, after all these years what has remained with me is the quote that Schrödinger uses in his preface: *There is nothing over which a free man ponders less than death. His wisdom is to meditate not on death but on life* (Spinoza). This is a sentiment that HN would have heartily endorsed. The last time I saw him was in July 2004 at the Science Festival. He had telephoned me in early June and announced simply: 'July is coming'. He noted that it was the 50th anniversary of G. N. Ramachandran's famous paper on the structure of collagen and suggested I should talk about Ramachandran and his contributions. I readily agreed, since the topic was close to my heart. He was present, as always, at the *Science Forum*, frail and weakening but still determined to introduce the speaker. Before the talk, he offered me the *Forum's* famed coffee, lukewarm and in a small cup, which had seen better days, in surroundings simple enough to shame even the most insensitive. It was always a privilege to meet him. Talking to him was both humbling and ennobling. But, on this occasion it was clear that he was fading. My one regret is my crippling inability to converse in Kannada, a language that HN loved and used so effectively. Separated by barriers of age, lifestyle and language, I could only admire him from a distance, coming away enriched and inspired by every visit to the *Science Forum*.

Narasimhaiah's drive to spread the message of science was fuelled by a desire to eliminate the crippling superstitions that abound in our society. He was tireless in his campaigns, taking on politicians and those who profess to perform miracles. Ironically, even as he entered the final phases of his struggle against the illness that was to claim him, Bangalore was engulfed in a controversy over the mammoth meetings held by the American faith healer, Benny Hinn. While searching the Internet, I came across an interesting website of an international organization, *The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal*. Here the list of 'fellows' includes some of the most easily recognizable names in science: Richard Dawkins, Martin Gardner, Murray Gell-Mann, Douglas Hofstadter, Leon Lederman, John Maddox, Marvin Minsky and Steven Weinberg. The list also includes Narasimhaiah, who I suspect more than anyone else, worked tirelessly, but unsuccessfully, to test the claims of paranormal phenomena that crop up in our midst.

In thinking about Narasimhaiah and his lifelong quest to spread the message of science, in his surroundings, we may do well to recall that Jawaharlal Nehru's unstinting

support of science in newly independent India was also motivated by his perception, that a rapid spread of a scientific temper would speed the process of development. The document on the government's Science and Technology Policy-2003 begins with a quote that bears reproducing: *'...we must take science to the people. All of us are fond of quoting Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's famous words paying a tribute to your community – namely, that "Scientists are a minority in league with the future". This is true. But let us also remember that a bright future can be realized only when science is in league with the majority of our society'* (Atal Bihari Vajpayee). The S&T Policy-2003 specifically promises support for 'programmes that seek to popularize and promote science and technology in all parts of the country'. HN's *Bangalore Science Forum* was far ahead of all government initiatives and was spearheaded by an intensely dedicated group of people. In its early years the lectures were held in an unprepossessing room of the National College. Later, a larger lecture room with modest furniture became available – the 'HN Hall', which I suspect will become a symbol of the science popularization movement in India. In recent years, the audience at the weekly evening lectures has been dominated by elderly citizens, with an interest in science. HN was often concerned with the declining interest of college students (even those studying science) in general topics of scientific interest. He was, of course, pragmatic enough to recognize that the pace of modern life left little time for academic interests; Bangalore of the 1960s had retreated to a past that seemed as fictional as Narayan's Malgudi.

Narasimhaiah died almost exactly 57 years after his idol, Mahatma Gandhi. Throughout his life, HN pursued the apparently contradictory visions of a Gandhian ideal and the task of promoting the public understanding of modern science. The words used by an American admirer to describe Gandhi seem particularly appropriate for HN: *'... he was a man in whom opposing virtues and interests were held in living tension and reconciliation... You cannot think of him without an inner sense of pleasure and gratitude. The incense that arises from the memory of his life is a "sweet savour". But while the savour is sweet, the preponderant impression he leaves is not sweetness but strength'* [E. Stanley Jones in *Profiles of Gandhi* (ed. Cousins, N.), Indian Book Co, Delhi, 1969, p. 137]. H. Narasimhaiah's formidable discipline, commitment and asceticism set him apart from the rest of us. Like his idol Gandhi, he was an easy man to admire, but a hard man to follow.

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