

Youthful days in Mysore city 1940s-1950s



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Grandstand view

It seems so long ago, nearly 70 years ago (in the 1940s and the 1950s) when life in Mysore city was so simple and uncomplicated.

It was the time when children like me spent more time playing various games in the field, and were not burdened, like children now, with homework and tuition classes. We had a healthy respect for our teachers, mixed with fear, that shaped our values to succeed in life.

I was living in house No. 1498/2 on the road called Weavers Lane, presently known as Ram Iyer's street, running behind Sharada Vilas High School in Krishna Murthy Puram. On the eastern side, there was a wide expanse of open field in front of our row of houses, which, during the evenings, it was teeming with children playing cricket, football, basketball, Kho-Kho and [Chinni Dandu](#).

There was a road going round it, where one could see long distance runners practicing.

During kite flying season, the area was teeming with kids flying kites. In the majority of cases, the kites were home-made, using coloured paper bought from the shops, with bamboo splits to stiffen the paper.

In the far eastern end stood Ganesh Talkies, which was known for screening English films. Invariably, we used to go for night show. I can recall with relish those Tarzan films, which were my favourite, and other films like *Saratoga Trunk* with Gary Cooper, a silent film called *Death of a Salesman*, etc. Later on there was a litigation about the building, and it had gone to seed for many years. Now a new building is coming in its place.

Prior to Ganesh Talkies, there used to be what we called a *Dera* cinema hall, which was a huge tent pitched and held in place with ropes tied to stakes driven into the ground. It had three categories of seats. The front portion was the bare rudimentarily levelled earthen surface with grass still in places. We would take with us rolled up mats to spread and sit on. I remember it used to cost two annas or 1/8 of a rupee. The second portion had chairs, and was the most expensive. In the back was a gallery with platform with several tiers. I used to go with my aunt to sit on the floor. I still remember the film [Hunterwali](#) – it featured 'fearless Nadia' sporting a whip in her hand, which she used to swish like a black coiled serpent, making a sharp clap of a noise that excited me.

Our house, with a series of steps below the front open veranda, overlooked the vast field in front. The field was a grand sight, with a lot of sporting activities. Elders used to sit and watch. On some occasions, our house served as a pavilion for cricket matches. I remember when my father's cousin Rangaswamy – he was a chain smoker, and I still recall his lips were black – came with his team from Fort High school, Bangalore to play cricket. Youngsters all clad in white was a sight to watch.

When we played cricket, and six balls were bowled (and the over was complete), the batsmen would cross over to the other side, as there was no system of playing from both sides. After play was over, we would troop proudly with a swagger, carrying cricket bats and guards still in place, to a hotel situated on Prince of Wales Road, which later became Ambedkar Road. I still recall the name of the hotel, Rajalakshmi Bhavan; the hotel now has a different name. It was presided over by a well-built man, sporting a huge

moustache, with flowing hair falling on his nape. Alternatively, the cricketers used to go to Ballal Hotel, which was very popular in those days. It no longer exists but it has become a landmark to give directions even now.

We had a name – *Koltemama* –for somebody in the team who was known to swing his bat wildly. He would either hit a boundary or a six, or get bowled out. He would be sent when the team was in desperate straits with a low score. I recall how excited we would feel when one of our batsmen scored 25 runs. We would chant in unison “Quarter century up,” and similarly, when a batsman got fifty runs, we would shout “Half a century up.”

The opposing team backers, not to be outdone, would encourage shouting “Bowl a catch ball” or *Pinda uruliso* (*Pinda* in Kannada actually stands for the rice ball made during *Shraad* ceremony), meaning bowl so that the ball moves all along the ground without rising from the ground.

The umpire’s decision was final.

Now cricket has become an esoteric science. At that time, it seemed so full of life, and for those sitting and chatting in front of their veranda, it was a good way to spend their time.

On the south eastern part of the field, where a hospital has come up, there was a big mango grove. When I was in middle school, my friend Seshagiri Rao and I were caught stealing mango fruits from this grove. The *maali* (grove caretaker) who caught us in the act was well built. When he asked us to get down from the tree, we meekly submitted to his command. He held us in his hands with vice like grip that hurt, and marched us to our house at the edge of the field. All the urchins came behind in a procession. We were scared of the punishment we may receive. Fortunately, my grandfather called Meese (moustache in English) Ranganna, who sported a thick moustache, interceded to get us released with an assurance that we would not indulge in such an act in future. Seshagiri Rao joined Railway service, and rose to occupy a very high position.

One feels wistful and derives great pleasure to recall those years of carefree life and the mischief we indulged in.

Middle school incidents

I recall a few incidents from days as a student at Hardwick High School, which was a Christian school. In those days we were given small booklets about Bible lessons written by Mark, John, etc. The text was in Kannada and we were expected to commit it to our memory.

To the left of the school was the house of the Bishop. Behind his house, close to the compound, adjacent to Vanivilasa Road (renamed as Mahatma Gandhi Road), there was a tamarind tree. The tree was special because it had bright red tamarind fruit – very tempting for children! When nobody was around, a few of us would scale the wall, climb the tree, and pluck the fruit. It was lot of fun.

I remember we use to tease our unsuspecting friends asking them to translate in Kannada the words ‘Lotus, Pearl, Umbrella’ together. When they uttered it would send us into peals of laughter. In Kannada, it means “Kamala, give a kiss.”

Life in House No 1498/11

We sold our house in Weavers Lane, and shifted to a house in the lane next to Dr Kamala Raman’s house. It was directly behind Sharada Vilas High school. The house still exists in the same fashion with little change. We do visit once in a while taking our children and grandchildren. They wonder, even feel shocked, that we were living in such a dungeon-like, dark, musty house, with walls which have not seen any colour wash for ages and practically no ventilation.

And yet when we were living it in the 1940s, it was a well-ordered house, vibrant and full of life. We have only happy memories of our life for the 28 years we lived there. All of us in the family prospered, and I completed my engineering course living in that house.

The only problem with the house was that it was swarming with mosquitoes. This I solved by wrapping myself with mosquito curtains while studying even in engineering!

I remember that friends and relatives would drop in during all the times of the day, unannounced, and my mother would be a gracious host, bringing delectable coffee. In those days we used to keep roasted coffee beans in the house. When any guest came, the beans would be ground in a hand machine, and fresh coffee would be ready in no time. We strained the coffee through drill cloth, which was washed in running water and wrung dried it. Over time, it acquired coffee colour, and disposed off only when it got torn, My mother was known for preparing excellent coffee.

My mother's preparation of *Menthyada* (fenugreek) *Dose* with ghee was a connoisseur's delight. In fact, my college teachers would, without any reservations, ask me when could we come and have *Menthyada Dose* in our house. That's how widespread my mother's reputation was.

Probably our house was one of the proud possessors of a Murphy (a brand name) radio, which sported a cherubic little girl much like the Amul baby of these days. Many would drop in to crowd around it to hear the cricket commentary.

My sister Smt. H.R. Leelavathi had already made a mark in singing light music, and many would drop in to hear her sing. My mother was adept in playing the harmonium, while my father was proficient in reciting *Bharata Vachana* in his stentorian voice, which reverberated in the hall. Thus literally music flowed in our house, and somebody in bold chalk had written 'Melody House' on our wall.

Many famous personalities used visit our house, including famous Sarod Player Pandit Rajeev Taranath of international fame, who was a disciple of Ali Akbar Khan. In fact, a few days ago (in January 2013), Pandit Taranath, who is now 81 years old and lives nearby, honoured my sister for her services in the field of Sugama Sangeeth, and also for her insightful writings on music of all genre, children stories and dramas. Pandit Taranath fondly reminisced those golden days. My sister, who used to be called as Lata Mangeshkar of Mysore in those days, has sung nearly 700 songs in various Indian languages, and her music has been broadcast in Russia.

High school days (1948-50)

I joined Sharda Vilas High School in the fourth form, roughly equivalent to Standard 9 today. Sri Ramaswamy was the Head Master, and later on he became a principal in the Sharda Vilas College. He was very strict in enforcing discipline.

I recall with fond memory the teachers who taught us. Sri K.V. Narayan used to teach us chemistry. He would always come to the class with his famous Mysore turban with *Kacche Panche*, a flowing attire with sparkling white cloth (This was the customary attire of C. Rajagopalachari.). A coat over a white shirt completed the attire. He was of medium height and with aquiline nose and sported a stern look. None dared do any mischief in the class. Since he would get angry quickly, he used to be called *Doorvasa*. He died at a ripe old age crossing 100.

The physics classes were handled by B. Ramanna, who was fair complexioned, lean, gangly, more than 6 foot tall, with sparse hair. He used to be clad all in white with regulation *Kacche Panche*. In contrast to K. V. Narayan, he was pleasant, with a twinkle in his eye, and full of fun. What stands out in my memory is his definition of materials and their properties of elasticity, ductility, malleability etc. He would use the word 'by virtue of which' in describing these properties, For example, he would say 'elasticity is the property by virtue of which a material can be stretched', or 'ductility is the property by virtue of which a

material can be drawn into wires, and similarly, ‘malleability is the property by virtue of which a material can be beaten into plates.’ These expressions have stayed with me.

Our Kannada teacher was Chennakeshaviaha, a famous musician, who was a disciple of renowned musician and composer, Aasthana Vidwan Vasudevacharya. *Aasthana Vidwan* was a title bestowed by the Maharaja of Mysore as Royal patronage in recognition of eminence; during the Maharaja’s Annual Darbar, such persons in various fields bestowed with honour would be present in special Darbar dress.

As is common, we used to have Morning Prayer in my high school. We began with a mellifluous song *Kaayav Sree Gowri*, which is an appeal to Goddess Parvathi to bless and protect the Maharaja. When Rabindranath Tagore came to Mysore and heard the tune, he was captivated and has composed a song with the tune in Bengali. The song was followed by a recital from Quran, and we used to end in [Sarswathi Vandana](#).

The high school is more than hundred years old and is in a bad shape. Some of the old students are trying to restore it to its original glory.

To recall such halcyon days in the present age when caste and religion have vitiated the atmosphere creating suspicion and hatred, it appears surreal. Did we really live through such wonderful times?

Intermediate college days (1948-50)

During my intermediate college days in Sharda Vila College, I used to take part in many activities like drama, debates etc. I had taken part in a Kannada play, *Kurukshethra War*, in which I acted as a lady, Lakshmi, who comes to the battle field, sees everybody dead, and bemoans the tragedy. In taking on this role, I had to shave my moustache, which so shocked my physics teacher that he said, “You look like a *Chiguru boli* (a young widow with a shaven head).” My friends had a hearty laugh at my expense!

I also participated in college union activities. In an election for membership in the union, I used to go from class to class, canvassing for votes, and assuring the students that I would work for their interests. I had got a pamphlet printed at the press of one of my friends, in which I requested students to vote for me. At the bottom, I had written ‘Don’t blink after you ink’. I got elected.

Our principal was Sri Ramaswamy who was earlier the headmaster of high school. He was very strict and protective of girls. The school had two flights of steps at each end to reach class room in first floor. The girls were to use one set of stairs while the boys the other.

Engineering college days (1950-54)

After getting my Intermediate degree in 1950, I joined the BMS College of Engineering in Bangalore, as the National Institute of Engineering (NIE) in Mysore was in the process of being recognised for starting a degree course. Two years later, I shifted to NIE.

One incident from that time still amuses me. During the college’s annual function in BMS College, there were a lot of activities and competitions. A friend of mine, M.R.S Raghavan, came to me and said that he was competing in the recitation of the famous passage from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* “Friends, Romans and Countrymen.” He recited the passage to me. Then, I also entered the competition and won the first prize! It rankled in his mind so much that long after, during his professional career, whenever we met along with a mutual friend, he would good humouredly say how I stole the prize from him.

I was fortunate that I studied at NIE under three founder members, D.V. Narasimha Rao, S. Ramaswamy and T. Rama Rao, who, after retirement, devoted their time, energy and by sheer persistence raised money from the public to build the college, which has now carved out a name for itself nationally and

internationally. It has produced a galaxy of eminent engineers who have not only brought name and fame for the college but also distinguished themselves both academically and in the field of sports.

To record how it struggled and achieved now pinnacle of success in the field of engineering would fill many pages. Let me just tell you about them as my teachers. D.V. Narasimha Rao, who retired as a Chief Engineer in the Railways used to teach us the subject of Railways. S. Ramaswamy, who retired as a Superintending Engineer, handled Survey classes, while T. Rama Rao, who retired as an Executive Engineer, taught us Irrigation. He was called ‘Hulikere Tunnel’ Rama Rao, as it was a famous achievement when a long tunnel built near Hulikere bored from the two ends met in the middle without any shift. Considering the rudimentary surveying techniques in those days, it was a remarkable achievement.

In turn, these three served as Principals of the college.

I recall with fond memory and pride the gathering at the end of the course in which I was asked to speak to express our gratitude to our Alma Mater. I had written my piece, and was about to read it, when D.V. Narasimha Rao paid me a handsome compliment, saying, “Here comes our Bernard Shaw.”

We have very fond memories of our teachers. They used to be dressed in the traditional *Kacche Panche*, over which they wore a shirt, and covered it with a coat, which I recall did not see any ironing. They wore chappals on their feet, and the ubiquitous Mysore *peta* (turban) on their heads. They used to come to the college in a horse drawn Tonga. Their life was an exemplary of simplicity. Those were the magnificent days of our student life!

There are several people of great eminence who passed through portals of NIE. For example, N.R. Narayana Murthy, one of the founders of Infosys, is a product of NIE. EAS Prasanna distinguished himself as an ace spin bowler for Indian cricket team.

While I was in NIE, I represented my college in cricket, Hockey and Kho-Kho.

Even as I write this it feels so wonderful to live those days in my mind.

Other memories

We had to buy our necessities from a ration shop for the first time during World War II in the 1940s. I remember we used to get coarse rice imported from Burma – good quality rice was rare. Sugar was a luxury item.

Since it was war time, trenches were dug at many places so that in case the siren sounded to warn us about impending air raid attacks, we should dive to escape the effect of bombing. There were dry runs to test the system’s efficacy and make the people familiar with the drill.

Unlike now, the quickest mode of transport was a bicycle, and all the members of the family shared it. It served multiple purposes, including transporting ration, charcoal in gunny bags, etc.

During early mornings we would go marching (*Prabhat pheri*) wearing fresh white dress through the streets, chanting patriotic songs such as *Jhanda Uncha Rahe Hamara, Hai Mathru Bhoomi There Charonome, Sheer Namavu, Door hato duniawale Hindustan hamara hai* (Ed. Note: This song is from the movie Kismet; you can see at [minute 09.03](#)) Wearing khadi was popular.

Most of us would go to Junior B.A hall in Maharaja’s College, as it was the centre of cultural activities. The hall was built with a sloping floor. Dramas of popular dramatists like Parvathavani, T.P Kailasam, Dr A.N. Murthy Rao, etc. would be frequently staged with famous actors like C.B Jaya Rao to full house filled with intellectuals of Mysore.

It was also a place where debates and lectures by famous personalities would be arranged. I remember attending an address by Noble Laureate Dr S. Chandrasekhar.

I was once asked to participate by Principal D'Souza in a debate on the subject of 'Communist ideology', in which two Black students from some American university had come to take part. I still feel embarrassed when I recall that instead of saying 'quotation,' I said 'quotings.' D'Souza, known for his wit, made a joke of it saying 'quotings and shirtings.'

There was a magazine started by V. Raghavan of Mithramela of University of Mysore called University Times. I was the political correspondent! I am still searching for a copy of the magazine. ❖

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