

## **PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AND REMNISCENCES: D.N. Prabhakar Murthy**

(Prof. Dr. N. Prabhakar is one of the sons of my father's very close friend whom he considered his elder brother. In January 2009, we met after a gap of almost 47 years. On a visit to India, he took pain to trace me out and came to see me. In a personal letter, he shared his impression of my father and the book I wrote about him.

Prabhakar Bhai Saheb obtained B.E. and M.E. degrees from Jabalpur University and the Indian Institute of Science from Bangalore and M.S. and Ph.D. degrees from Harvard University. He is a Research Professor in the Division of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Queensland, Australia).

I finished reading the biography of your father written by you. I found it interesting as well as informative. My comments on the biography and some additional observations are given below. Please do not treat this as a book review - rather, it is to share a few of my views.

### **1. Rev Y.D. Tiwari as a person**

He was a very complex person. One of his friends used the term "weird" which I think is not appropriate. I would call him more as a "Don Quixote" – a person who created a view of world different from others with all its contradictions and peculiarities.

I suspect he must have gone through some unpleasant experience or encountered a traumatic event which must have brought about a change. This is part of the growing up process which most people experience (the remaining few are the ones that can't or don't want to think and question). A psycho-analytical approach might have shed some light on the earlier experience or event. Your father found solace and comfort in his Christian friends. It is sad that his family treated him so badly.

In my early teens I was influenced by the modern scientific approach. I viewed religion as a part of the evolution of human societies and could not understand how people stopped this questioning process and became dogmatic. I read the scriptures (of all the major religions) and, at the ripe old age of 15, renounced the God described in these scriptures. I still hold this view in spite of reading a lot more in later years. I quite enjoyed my discussions with your father. I tried to argue the scientific approach. He listened to it very patiently and indulged me by not criticising my thinking. We did discuss some broader issues and I always found his company pleasant and enjoyable. The other person with whom I used to have similar discussions was Mr M.S. Murthy (no relative of mine). He had done his engineering studies in UK and worked in Germany for 4 years before returning back to India and was employed by MPEB (the same organisation that my father and Mr Annathayya worked for). He later renounced the materialistic world and became a Sanyasi. My last contact with him was around 1980 and I suspect he must have passed away later on. Your father and Mr Murthy were similar in some ways and totally different in other ways. (Incidentally, in my teens I enjoyed the company of elders – including my father's boss with whom I disagreed on several technical issues such as the linking of Narmada and Ganges - as it was more stimulating and found my peers to be boring and uninteresting.)

From the age of 27 till 40 I read religion from different perspectives – historical, social, archaeological, cultural, etc. I used to have long discussions with members of the Department of Comparative Religions at the University of Queensland. It only highlighted the weaknesses in human character and the institutional form (in all religions) which exploited fear as a tool to

control their followers. Two things that I found common was (i) the emphasis on the glorification of God and (ii) fear element (hell or rebirth to a lower level or suffer).

My mother tried to force me (in her gentle way) to do some rituals and believe in God. It took her over 20 years to recognise that this was a futile task and to accept me for what I believed in. I never had much discussion on this or any other issue with my father.

I used the term “Don Quixote” to describe your father. When we were neighbours I thought he was westernised (as he wore western clothes) and followed a religion which was the dominant religion of most Western societies. He talked with pride his days at Oxford and lived in his little world and I found him to be a person looking at the real world through a tinted glass. In your book you mention many instances which support this description of him.

## **2. Some Events that I Remember from Jabalpur**

- (i) Your father was very uncomfortable with people of the opposite gender. I would visit your house once or twice each week. One day Padmini visited him to get some money from him for some charitable cause that she was involved with. Your father became very agitated with this and came and complained to my father. Padmini was very upset at the event.
- (ii) He was very indulgent with me and treated me as an adult. I felt that he was very harsh on his children. You allude to this in your book.
- (iii) Gyaneshwar took me a restaurant in Cantonment every time he came home on leave from Navy. Most of the discussion was about his life and experiences in the Navy and we never talked anything else. He was not the intellectual type like you and your father. He sent me a New Year card from Goa after Indian Navy captured it. The Indian Postal Office was still to get established. As a result, the cover had an Indian stamp (8 naya paisa) and a Portuguese cancellation. This is a rare cover for people interested in military philately. I went your house and got the other cover (which he had sent to your father) from his waste paper basket. I am really glad that he helped your father and it is indeed tragic that he died so young.
- (iv) Your father would talk about the Americans at the Leonard Theological College—especially, one person (I don’t remember the name) for his simple life style and humility. I did visit the college few times (the son of the Deputy Principal was a classmate of mine during my first year at university) and found most Indian leading a pseudo-American life style with fancy homes and big cars. Your father ignored this and I might have raised this issue with your father.

## **3. Social Structure and Customs of UP Brahmins**

I found your book interesting in terms of your description of the social structure and customs of UP Brahmins. Like other parts of India, the Brahmins were always “inward looking” and not willing to accept new ideas. May be, it is an indicator of their (and other high caste people) insecurity. This obviously has an unpleasant aspect – the way the group treats people who dare to challenge the traditional norms. Gandhiji failed in his attempts to bring some reform and I doubt if India will change on this front.

## **4. Father-son Relationship**

In your book you briefly discuss this in terms of your father’s relationship with your grandfather and with you and your siblings. The relationship is a complex one in all

societies. The famous French philosopher Satre in one of his books mentions that fathers as invisible riders riding on the backs of their sons. Your father revolted against his father and I get a feeling that he was not very happy with his sons revolting against him. Am I right on this?

My father and I had a very big fight just before I left for the USA. It was over my thread ceremony which he and my mother were keen to perform before I left. Although we disagreed vehemently (I ended up going through the ritual and handing back the thread to him after the ceremony) he was not vindictive. He could have refused to pay for my air ticket but he did not.

Fathers in India rarely express their feelings towards their sons. After my father passed away, several people in Bangalore told me how he was very proud of his sons and their achievements. I never got any recognition in person from my father.

You and I don't have problems with the next generation as I have no children and you decided not to get married.

## **5. Theology Departments and Institutions**

From your book it seems that theology departments and institutions have more politics than most other departments and institutions. Your own experiences and those of your father (that you briefly mention this in your book) seem to indicate that the educators of new priests seem to have some serious shortcomings. I know that religious institutions (of all faiths) suffer from politics.... Any reason why this is so?

## **6. General Comments on the Book**

- There are a few inaccuracies. As you know I went to Harvard and not MIT.
- There are several typographical errors. I suspect Indian publishers are not very professional regarding this.
- The book is well structured and written. You have done a good job in describing your father – highlighting his strengths and weaknesses and not being judgemental. Have you had any feedback from Akilesh or Sandhya on the book?

Finally, thank you for giving me your two books. I enjoyed reading the biography of your father. I look forward to reading the other some time in the future. I don't want to send you any of my ten books as they are too technical. I am currently writing my last technical book. Once it is finished (by the end of 2009 or middle of 2010), I will retire from technical work and spend a significant part of the first 5 years of my retired life working on two books – (i) Engineering Education and Research and (ii) The Science of Food and the Art of Cooking. I will send you a copy once they get published.