

A Great Father

...by Mr. V Pradeep Kumar

The earliest memory of my father dates back probably to the year 1962. I was just around three or four years old then, but I can still remember the election he was fighting with the 'cycle' symbol. A cycle was mounted on an Autorikshaw or a car (I don't distinctly remember) and was used for campaigning for the elections to the Bangalore City Corporation.

We were living in a tiny one room house-the seven of my parents, sisters, brother, my first maternal uncle and us. Though there is nothing much I can remember of those days, a small incident is clearly etched in my memory. With no one around and a small gate fixed to the front door to confine me, I had crawled into the kitchen and dipped my hands into the boiling beans sambhar – a favourite till this day. Though my mother did everything she could to ensure immediate medical attention, she could not escape appas' ire.

Appa had won the election despite obstacles of all kinds. It was getting difficult staying in the tiny house with increased flow of visitors. Soon after, we had moved to the other side of Magadi Road to a slightly larger two-room house. That's around the time I started going to school. Life was very tough with my appa's meager income barely managing two square meals a day for all of us and never ending stream of friends and relatives. Most of appa's time was devoted to the cause of the workers and the downtrodden. He was also one of the important leaders of the Samyukta Socialist Party. How he managed his time between the trade union activities, the party and the family is a great mystery. He never made us feel his absence and managed to spend adequate time despite his busy schedule. His love, affection and above all sense of humour made us forget all the day to day problems.

A few years later, we moved again to a slightly larger, two room independent rented house in Hosahalli Extension now called Vijayanagar. But life continued to be tough. Though we all went only to either Government or Corporation schools, the burden of maintaining a family of growing children was heavy. At times it used to be extremely difficult and embarrassing for our parents. Though by and large my mother understood Appa's political convictions and stood by him like a rock in the most difficult circumstances through out his life, I cannot help but recall a small incident which is strongly etched in my memory.

It was the time of Diwali and being a major festival there was celebration all around. But not for us as Appa had no money. I was still young at seven and was insisting on crackers. Amma was visibly upset with our misery and picked up a verbal duel with Appa. Year later, when I probably understood life, I regretted for having been the cause of this incident and embarrassment to Appa. I could never reconcile to this fact of life and unknowingly and within myself developed a hatred towards crackers. Even today, I hate that sight of crackers and reluctantly allowing my wife to buy them for our son.

Being the youngest in the house, I was always pampered by everyone especially by Appa and Geetha - my elder sister. Appa insisted that I sleep in his room and this practice continued even when I was coming home for vacations during my MBA course. He used to call me by several pet or nick names so much so even many of his friends were calling me by these names. As he used to travel frequently, he took me along to many of his trips. One such trip was to Madras, when I was around 7 years. I still remember the journey from the Madras central Station to the Hotel by Cycle Rickshaw. One day he left me in the morning to attend to his work promising to come back around lunch time. I was all alone in the hotel and waited impatiently till evening. He made up for the delay by taking me around the town and then to Moor Market. I had chosen to buy a round, olive green hat with an elastic band similar to the ones used by the police.

Yet another trip was to Mysore where he was attending the party conference. In the midst of the conference came the news of the death of Dr. Rammanohar Lohia – the most respected Socialist Leader who had influenced Appa greatly. A car was arranged to rush us to Bangalore from where Appa was to leave immediately for Delhi. The car unfortunately had a breakdown on the way. Appa left by an alternate transport leaving me behind to the care of his friends.

Appa was greatly influenced by several philosophers of the time such as Karl Marx and Trotsky as a result of which developed a strong commitment to Socialism and remained a true Socialist for his entire life. More importantly, he had dedicated his life to the cause of the workers and the downtrodden.

His political and trade union life started in Bangalore sometime in the late 40's. The political party to which he belonged, the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP) was one of the small parties, but with a very strong conviction to the ideals of socialism much unlike the Congress which while speaking the language of socialism did practically little to its cause. Managing and building a political party whose only resource was its people was never easy. Financial strength and other infrastructure was always a constraint. A strong conviction and

uncompromising principles made the task of building the party extremely difficult. Despite the party gaining in popularity particularly in various pockets in the state as well as in many other states as reflected in the elections to the local assembly and the Lok Sabha, the problems of running the party continued. The trend continued for the next two decades with several election successes and reverses. But the party stood firm on its commitment to the ideals.

In early 1969, Appa had to shift to Delhi consequent to his becoming the All India Joint Secretary of the party. Even as parents were preparing to shift, it was most certain that I would be also staying back at Bangalore. Just around the time, I had an attack of severe jaundice and it was therefore decided that I would also shift to Delhi.

Life in Delhi was much more hectic for Appa who was now traveling throughout the country mobilizing support and organizing various movements. A little earlier, the Congress had been quite weakened and in many states lost power where for the first time, a coalition of parties (with SSP as one of the constituents) had come to power.

The opposition governments did not last for long. Around the same time, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister had split the Congress and in a short span of about two years, had become very powerful through various measures like the Nationalisation of Banks, the victory in the Indo-Pak war etc. There was virtually a Indira wave in the country and the Congress came back to power in several states and the center in the 1971 general elections. All opposition parties had lost heavily in the elections and probably quite demoralized.

The opposition parties took some time to regain the lost momentum. Slowly but surely a new movement began to take shape under the leadership of the late Mr. Jayaprakash Narayan. What essentially began as a student movement in Bihar gained momentum and turned into a mass movement across the nation. The Congress had failed to live up to the expectations of people who were now looking at JP and his movement to dislodge the Congress. Meanwhile, in early 1975, Mrs. Gandhi lost an election case in the Allahabad High court which led to quick and unprecedented developments in the Country. On June 25, 1975, Mrs. Gandhi imposed an internal emergency in the country, press censorship, and imprisoned all political leaders.

The SSP was one of the few political parties which tried to fight the Government and its oppressive and draconian measures. Though many political parties were together on the issue of fighting Mrs. Gandhi, most political leaders were arrested under MISA and imprisoned. Appa and a few of his associates however evaded arrest and went underground to mobilize public opinion.

Those days we hardly met Appa. Our residence telephone was tapped to get clues of father's whereabouts. Police were patrolling constantly near the residence. It must have been hell for Appa and his associates to remain underground and carry on their political activities against a hostile government. Despite the best efforts of the police, Appa managed to remain underground for nearly six months. Finally, one day, while he was traveling in a bus along with two other senior leaders, police stopped their bus, and arrested them. After a few days they were brought to the Central Jail, Bangalore. We came to know of his arrest only after a few days. Those were really traumatic days for there was already news that even senior leaders were subjected to physical tortures of the worst kinds in the jails. Naturally we were worried about his safety till we could meet him. Not that meeting him was any easy. All kinds of delays and restrictions were imposed in the initial days. Only Amma was first allowed to meet him and only then, we heaved a sigh of relief that he was safe. We had to wait for another week to meet him. By the time we met him, things had already settled down in the jail. There were hundreds of people, from different parties at different levels arrested and kept together in the jail.

Appa was really a versatile man with, he was busy not only in the political and trade union movement, but also very active in the literary field. He used to write on various topics ranging from workers causes, socialism, review of books, and our education system and so on. He was a voracious reader and a prolific writer.

He regularly wrote to various newspapers and magazines. He was a very good speaker and known for forcefully putting across his view with facts and figures analysed carefully with the skills of an economist. His later day speeches in the legislative council particularly regarding budgets was well appreciated and it was suggested that we print his speeches in the form of a book.

Being extremely versatile, was an asset to him in the jail. From the busy political life working for almost 16 to 18 hours a day to practically nothing to do between four walls could have been hell of an experience. The problem in fact became an opportunity. Appa used the time to interact with other inmates and over a period of time a lot of young people got attracted to socialism. Till then, each party had its own philosophy and ideals and now being together helped to understand each other. The differences narrowed; common perceptions emerged and the opposition forces were now uniting to fight against a common political rival. It was a matter of great pride to all of us to know that Appa was playing a key role in the unity of all opposition parties.

Another area where not only he had a lot of interest, but also excelled himself was in the kitchen. Not only he had a great taste for good food of various cuisines, but had equally matching culinary skills. We understood that food in the first few days in the jail was so terrible that they were forced to start "Sathyagraha" until the authorities agreed to provide the groceries so that the inmates could cook themselves. Appa took the lead in reorganizing the kitchen, deciding the main course for the day and then supervising the

Preparations. During our visits to the jail, we used to hear appreciations of Appa's culinary skills and how every one was greatly relieved with the new arrangement. This was really nothing new to us as so many times we used to see him in the kitchen trying out something different yet delicious.

Around the time emergency was declared forcing Appa to go underground, I had passed Pre-University and was very keen to join for an engineering course. I had done reasonable well and in the normal course, I should have got into a good college on merit. Unfortunately, merit was just one of the factors and there were more important things like caste, influence and money. Being born in the Brahmin community - considered to be forward community (a misnomer even then), Appa being in the jail, it looked an impossible task. Disgusted and totally demotivated, I watched helplessly most of my friends getting into either engineering or medicine and some of them with lesser merit than mine. With no other option, reluctantly I joined for a B.Sc. in the same college.

Mrs. Gandhi's government had declared the emergency for a year in 1975 which was extended for another year in 1976. Internally pressure was building up on Mrs. Gandhi that emergency could not be sustained for a long time and the democratic process for a fresh election had to be initiated. Around the same time, the intelligence gave a favorable report on Mrs. Gandhi winning the election once again. The assumptions were that the combination of various factors mainly the perceived benefits of emergency and truncated opposition languishing in various jails was more than adequate to ensure Mrs. Gandhi's victory. At last on December 21, 1976 Mrs. Gandhi announced the lifting of internal emergency and fresh elections. Following this, most of the arrested leaders including Appa were released.

The groundwork for the unity of entire opposition was already done. The Janata Party was thus born and Appa became the General Secretary of the Karnataka unit. He was also instrumental in reorganizing the opposition in the centre and preparing for the national elections. The Congress was routed in the elections with all their leading lights including Mrs. Gandhi lost the elections. A new government headed by Mr. Morarji Desai was installed at the centre in March 1977. Many of Appa's associates were either in the cabinet or in some other important assignments. Appa too was extremely busy dividing his time between his political and trade union work. We got to see much less of him and even while he was at home, the stream of visitors never seemed to end. The process for the unification of HMP and HMS was also on. Despite his hectic schedules, he still found time to write various articles, book reviews and continue writing a book on Bhakti Movement.

On the home front, both my sisters got married during August 1977. Being a socialist and atheist, he reluctantly agreed for the marriages to be conducted in Tirupati. I was now seriously pursuing my B.Sc and looking forward to do an MBA course. In the final year B.Sc. I managed to get a fairly high percentage and got admission in various institutes. I decided to take it up in Karnataka University, Dharwar. I left Bangalore during June 1978 and thereafter the course kept me busy throughout the next two years and for an occasional visit and few letters, I lost touch with the home front.

Around the time, Appa was elected as the national President of the unified HMS which was a great honor, being the second largest trade union organization in the country. He was also elected to the Karnataka Legislative Council. Soon came another honor of representing India at the ILO, Geneva in 1979. He had the ability to forcefully put across his point of view without mincing words. In his speech at Geneva, he was quite critical of the inactive role played by ILO when freedom was curtailed and thousands of trade unionists were arrested under a draconian law passed by a shameless dictator. He also widely traveled in the then USSR, Europe and USA. Despite his busy schedule, he still managed to find time for me writing small but affectionate letters.

He also was on the Karnataka University Senate and this made him visit me twice at Dharwad. I still remember his first visit. It was a late Saturday afternoon and I had no clue to his visit. Law was one of the subjects and I had gone to study in the Law College library. He had gone to my hostel and then had come searching for me. It was such a pleasure to see both my parents come unexpectedly. However I found him not his usual self. Many things kept bothering him. The great Janata experiment had miserably failed and Appa was totally disgusted with opportunistic and selfish interests of most politicians of the day. He was possibly planning to concentrate a little more on trade union front and on writing.

My next meeting with him was in Bangalore by which time I had completed my MBA and was awaiting results. Even though, he was not

his usual self, he had not lost his sense of humour. It was early morning one day when we were still in bed. I was sleeping with him and the telephone rang. Appa said. "Oh not so early." possibly expecting it to be a call for him. It was a close friend of mine from Dharwar who said our MBA results were out in the newspapers and I had passed with Third Rank. When I proudly announced this, Appa said "Oh, how did you manage this?" Though I had really worked hard, none of us had expected that I will get a rank.

I found Appa to be even more disillusioned with politics and had resigned from the Janata Party. He was not only busy in the trade union movement but also writing his first book- a travelogue in kannada. The travelogue "Pradakshine" was greatly appreciated later. We were also now living in a new house constructed after selling the old house. I found him to as usual busy, but quite sad and irritable most of the time. Was it politics or something else? I could never find an answer, then.

Soon, I left to take up an assignment in Bombay. Thereafter, I managed to meet him only twice. He came to Bombay in early January 1981 after addressing a seminar in Khandala. He was quite exhausted and ill and I wondered how he can travel to Japan as scheduled a few days later. I had bought him a new suitcase and had packed the small one he was carrying into the new. As I recollect, he was barely managing to stand in the security check queue in the airport. He had said 'Pradeep, carry on. Don't worry'. I had stood there and watched him move into the security lounge not realizing that it was to be my last meeting with him.

At Bangalore he was diagnosed to have had Jaundice for some time and had been ignored due to his hectic schedule. It aggravated and he was to be hospitalized. Just before that, I had spoken to him and he had said 'yajaman, don't take the trouble [of coming to Bangalore] I will be all right'. I could not resist myself to see him and left the next day morning to reach Bangalore on 18th January 1981. He had been critically ill the previous day and had improved a little. He was still in coma. It never looked like we would lose him. For that matter we never realized that he could be in such a serious problem having never seen him fall sick. His last few days were very traumatic. The doctors were hopeful so were we. All hopes were to be belied. The end came on Tuesday the 20th January 1981.

Everything seemed to have happened so fast and unbelievably true.

It is about 26 years. Even now sometimes it is difficult to believe. What went wrong?How did we manage to lose him?.....

It looked just like yesterday. In the airport 'Pradeep, carry on'

He was an extraordinary person. From a rare breed of politicians; one of the very few political analysts we have probably seen. One of his pet themes was "Federalism". He even wrote an outstanding article arguing and predicting the birth of federalism. His prediction has come true years back. He was most committed to the ideals he had dreamed and most respected even by his political and trade union opponents. He left behind no material assets but plenty in terms of relationships and goodwill he had earned so assiduously over the time from all walks of life.

As I recall my last meeting with him in the airport, his words seems to be still ringing in my ears. He had said very little, but it had some intrinsic meaning. I reproduce a poem, which seems so appropriate. I manage to derive a lot of strength whenever I read it despite tears in my eyes every time I read it.

And if I go, while you are still here
Know that I live on
Vibrating to a different measure
Behind a thin veil you cannot see through
You will not see me. So you must have faith.
I wait for the time, when we can soar together again
Both aware of each other
Until then, live your life to its fullest.
And when you need me,
Just whisper my name
..... I will be there.

