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PROFILE OF MY FATHER

*Within the surface of Times fleeting river
Its wrinkled image lies, as then it lay
Immovably unquiet, and for ever
It trembles, but it cannot pass away!*

P.B. Shelley, 'Ode to Liberty'

Introduction

J.I. Blackburn, the Sessions Judge at Darbhanga, set aside the conviction of my father by his judgment on August 4, 1943. My father had been undergoing rigorous imprisonment for two years; and he bore a fine of Rs. 250, if not paid then six more months in jail. But he was released from jail after 9 months of his rigorous imprisonment. The story that led to his arrest, trial, and conviction would be described, in brief, in Part I of this Chapter; and the story pertaining his performance in other spheres would be touched in Part II of this Chapter.

Father had made history himself. He participated in our country's Struggle for Independence, when it was in its most crucial phase. After release from jail, he found that he had lost his job at the Rosera High School where he had functioned as the Headmaster for about two decades. Our family resources had already run out. But his spirit was unbroken. He found out some persons with patriotic bent of mind, and established the Mukundi Choudhary High School, for the benefit of the poor and backward students, in the most backward area at Darbhanga. Somehow he spent a few years rowing his boat in the tumultuous and tempestuous ocean of life. It was 1947, when the Indian Independence Act was passed, and our country became independent. He went to Barari (in Bhagalpur) to meet Keshava Mohan Thakur of Sri Bhawan. He was a close relation of my father, and also a good friend. Keshava Babu was one of the big landlords of Bihar, and had good contacts with persons in power both at Patna and in Delhi. Keshava Babu told my father to meet some of his old acquaintances who had become politically important, a few amongst them even held powerful posts. He advised my father to meet them to find some better vocation for his livelihood. But my father disliked the idea to get favour merely to live better. In 1976, I was posted as the Appellate Assistant Commissioner at Bhagalpur. I called on Keshava Babu at his residence. He had lost his Zamindari by that time, and his palace 'Sri Bhawan' had already been sold. His house had lost its glamour which I had seen once upon a time. He had lost his eyesight too, that eyesight which could so impeccably



My Father: Gopi Kant Jha



My Mother: Draupadi Devi



Tamrapatra presented by Smt. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, to Gopi Kant Jha, my father, in recognition of his memorable contribution to India's Struggle for Freedom.

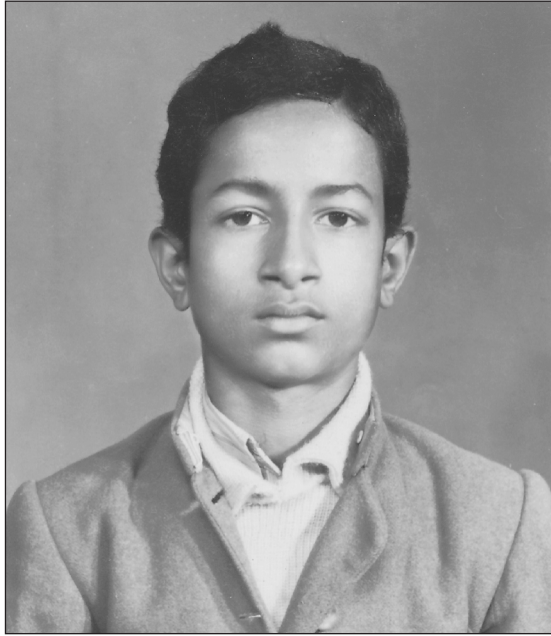


Veenapani Jha and Shiva Kant Jha visit the cell in the Cellular Jail, at Andaman, where V. D. Savarkar had undergone imprisonment.



Politics without principles
 Wealth without work
 Commerce without morality
 Education without character
 Pleasure without conscience
 Science without humanity
 Worship without sacrifice.

The Gandhian Edict at the Wardha Ashram,
 near Nagpur, mentioning the Seven Social Sins.



Shiva Kant Jha, a student at
M. L. Academy, Laheriasarai



Shiva Kant Jha, a student at
C. M. College, Darbhanga

judge even an uncut diamond. But he maintained serenity in his face, and cordiality in his manners. He told me the story how he had tried to persuade my father in 1947 to do what he had advised him to do, and also how softly he had declined his request. He told me that his friend, my father, had quoted Bhartrihari, the great ancient Sanskrit poet from a royal family:

“Who are we to go to see a king —not dancers, court-jesters, or singers, nor experts in (learned) disputes with others in a court, nor youthful court mistresses!”¹

My father believed that none who had fought for the nation’s independence should ever accept someone’s patronage, or seek any favour in return for the services rendered to the nation in the struggle for freedom. Service to the nation was a sacrifice. He did not appreciate even the idea of joining politics. He chose to spend his years as a contented teacher. He was surprised when Shrimati Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of our country, offered him a *tamrapatra* (a copper plate) on August 15, 1972, with an inscription appreciating his service to the nation in her Struggle for Freedom. She presented this *tamrapatra* on behalf of our nation on the occasion of the Twenty-fifth year of India’s Independence. For me it is the most valuable heirloom. Our nation granted him a pension of Rupees 200/- a month from August 15, 1972. He never needed anybody’s financial help till his death in 1982.

PART I

(i) As a Freedom Fighter

My father, Gopikant Jha (March 1, 1898 to June 21, 1982), had patriotic fervour from his early years. In his life-time, the Non-Co-operation Movement (1917-1934) was a great political event. It was commenced on the adoption of the resolution by the Congress at its special session in Calcutta 1920 recommending “the renunciation of Government titles and the boycotting of the Legislatures, law-courts and Government educational institutions leading up at a later date to the non-payment of taxes.”² In his *Diary*, my father wrote the following about his participation in that agitation:

“After passing the Matric Examination in 1920 I went to Bhagalpur for admission in T.N. Jubilee College. In 1920 Mahatma Gandhi started the Non-Co-operation Movement and I went on strike at his advice, but again after a few days went back to the college.”

Father was arrested under the Defence of India Rules on September 5, 1942 and was produced before the Sub-Divisional Officer, Samastipur “to take his trials”. He was admitted to the Central Jail, Patna on 13 Oct. 1942. In the chronological Register of Convicts he was allotted number 2086. Father was tried under Rule 56(1) of the Defence of India Rules. The study of the court papers has convinced me that the trials, to which the freedom fighters were subjected in 1942, were not fair. Such trials resembled the trial in *Alice in Wonderland* about which Lewis Carroll writes:

“No, no!” said the Queen. “Sentence first - verdict afterwards.”

“Stuff and nonsense!” said Alice loudly. “The idea of having the sentence first!”

“Hold your tongue!” said the Queen, turning purple.

Charges were framed that my father had contravened the order of the District Magistrate under rule 56(1) of the Defence of India Rules by holding meetings, and by taking part in processions: thus he committed an offence punishable under rule 56(4) of the Defence of India Rules. The judgment of the Special Magistrate of Samastipur, in *King Emperor v. Gopikant Jha*, dated 7 Oct. 1942, deserves to be quoted *in extenso* as this shows the nature of the charges framed against my father, and the quality of judicial administration then. The judgment of the Special Magistrate at Samastipur states the material facts thus:

“The prosecution story is that the accused who was the Head Master of Rosera H.E. School convened Congress meetings in his school on 13th, 14th and 15th of August 1942 in contravention of the District Magistrate’s order under rule 56(1) of the Defence of India Rules. He also took active part in Congress processions in Rosera and used and shouted “Enquilab Zindabad” “Sarkari Raj Nash Ho” Hindustan Azad” etc. The order of the District Magistrate prohibiting all processions and meetings under rule 56(1) of the Defence of India Rules was duly promulgated in Rosera previously. The accused version is that he has been all along peaceful citizen and has been discharging the duties of Head Master to the entire satisfaction of immediate authorities and that he could not assign any reason as to why he has been prosecuted. In support of this version, the accused has examined Babu Harbans Narain Sinha a Zamindar of Thathia P.S Rosera and Vice President of Rosera H.E. School. Babu Harban Narain Sinha says “To my knowledge the accused did not take part in any meeting or procession in the school premises”. The school was closed on 17-8-42 for indefinite period under the advice of the Local members of the Managing Committee”. This is the statement in his evidence in-chief. In cross examination, he says, “My house is about two miles from Rosera. I always remained at my house during the movement. I did not even come to Rosera”. From his statement this witness does not appear to be quite competent to say whether the accused took part in meetings or processions in Rosera or not, since he never went to Rosera during this movement.”

No appeal was provided against the summary conviction under the Defence of India Rules. Everything was tilted against the liberty of people. During World War II the British Empire was passing through hard days. Those were the locust-eaten years. Even the House of Lords, Great Britain’s Supreme Tribunal, had become, in *Liversidge vs. Anderson* (1942) A.C. 206, more executive minded than the Executive. But the Calcutta High Court declared that the rule not granting the right to appeal, was *ultra vires* the powers of Governor General. Because of this decision of the Calcutta High Court, father got a right to appeal. Father exercised his right to appeal. The appeal was heard by J.I. Blackburn ICS, who was the Sessions Judge at Darbhanga. As a number of appeals were preferred by so many convicts, this Judge distributed the appeal cases to different subordinate appellate courts for speedy adjudication. When he saw my father’s Memorandum of Appeal, he marked it out for hearing before himself. Father’s advocate Babu Chaturvuja N Chaudhary was worried as he expected something

sinister to come. He felt, the British judge would even enhance the punishment already given. He wished the appeal to come up in the court of some Indian judge. But his apprehension was not well founded. The Indian Magistrates were often more loyal to the British Raj than some of the British judges who had in their consciousness the great tradition of the British judicial administration. Shri Chaudhary was a distant relation of my father, and a resident of the same village to which my father belonged. His apprehension that my father's sentence could even be enhanced, reached our village with frills and fringes of distortions. Everyone in the village felt that my father's sentence would be enhanced, and he ran the risk of being sent to the gallows. My mother heard this bad news with stoic indifference. What else could be done?

J.I. Blackburn had known my father when he was the Sub-Divisional Officer at Samastipur. He had granted a Certificate of Appreciation to him on December 19, 1937 for rendering "valuable assistance in making the coronation celebration of Their Majesties a success ..."³ While working as the S.D.O. at Samastipur, he inspected the Rosera School when my Father was the headmaster. He had also issued a letter of appreciation which was wholly endorsed on April 4, 1939 by his successor-in-office, M.Z. Khan ICS. He appreciated Father's patriotic sentiments in the open court. He asked, in the court, for production of the certificate that he had given to my father. He rejected the objection that Baroda Charan, the Public Prosecutor, raised against the admissibility of the said Certificate at the appellate stage. J.I. Blackburn was pleased to set aside the conviction and sentence imposed by the Lower Court by his judgment of August 4, 1943. This was done on the ground that the order of the Sub-Divisional Magistrate suffered from a patent error going to his jurisdiction itself. As this appeal was decided on a threshold point, the material facts recorded by the S.D.O. remained undisturbed. J.I. Blackburn, allowing the appeal, said in the penultimate paragraph of his judgment :

"It appears unnecessary to enter into the merits of the case as there is a legal defect in the trial, in as much as the general order of the District Magistrate constituting Courts of Special Magistrate for the trial of particular offences was not issued until 4.10.42, whereas the learned Magistrate in this case took up the hearing on 28.9.42 and tried the case as a Special Magistrate and passed his orders in that capacity. The conviction and sentence are therefore liable to be set aside. The only question however is as to whether the case should be remanded for retrial. The accused has already suffered R.I. for about 9 months, and in my opinion this sentence is in any case sufficient to meet the ends of justice, especially in consideration of the previous good character held by him."

This episode reminds me of the famous *Alipore Bomb Case* in which Sri Aurobindo was one of the accused persons. Aurobindo was represented in the court by the famous C.R. Das. The judge was C.B. Beechcroft who had been a student at Cambridge when Aurobindo was a student there. He knew the accused well. He must have enjoyed when C.R. Das told the court about Aurobindo's great patriotic fervour and literary attainments. Das concluded his submission telling the court: "Therefore, I say that the man in his position is not only standing before

the bar of this Court, but before the bar of the High Court of History." Aurobindo was acquitted. My father's conviction was set aside because he had already suffered rigorous imprisonment for nine months.

Father held the Calcutta High Court in his highest esteem as the High Court had quashed the rule framed by the Governor General denying the right to appeal to the convicts under the Defence of India Rules. It was a great act by the High Court that it kept the balance of justice even when the British Empire was passing through grave crisis both in India, and at the international plane. He was thrilled with joy when I was enrolled as an Advocate by the West Bengal Bar Council in 1977. He visited the High Court of Calcutta, and met the Chief Justice of the High Court. He was well received by the Chief who asked someone to help us see the Court Building, and witness the judicial proceedings going on. Dame Justice, the goddess holding balance of scales, and a sword, must have been overjoyed on receiving an ordinary Indian's extraordinary appreciation for that great seat of justice. I still believe that Goddess Justice must have smiled with joy on witnessing how grateful an unknown freedom-fighter of this Republic was to the Court: She must have counted that a great moment.

(ii) The Trial

From the tenor and reasoning in the judgment of the Special Magistrate of Samastipur, one N. Hoda, convicting my father to jail, it is clear that the trial was not fair. He disbelieved the statement of the defence witness Harbans Narain Singh of Tathia on the ground that he found some contradictions which he conveniently invented. Harbans Narain resided so close to the theatre of operation at Rosera that he was obviously a competent witness. He was at that time the Chairman of the Rosera Municipality, and Vice-President of the Rosera High School of which my father was the Headmaster. The Magistrate disbelieved another defence witness Jatashanker Choudhary of the Pokhrauni who resided near the Rosera School. The Magistrate accepted wholly the case presented by the Officer-in-charge of the Police Station, one Najmul Hoda. It seems that the Special Magistrate, perhaps, felt annoyed as he had not been consulted by the Headmaster of the School before closing it on account of the political movements turning serious. He wrote in his judgment: "I happen to be the President and Secretary of the School and I am sure that I was not consulted even regarding the closing of School for any period (definite or indefinite) in consequence of the student's movement". The trial conducted by a judge, with no judicial sensibility, resembled, on all material points, the trial that Franz Kafka portrays in his famous novel, *The Trial*.

(iii) The period of imprisonment

I felt that all our great revolutionaries looked at life and cosmos in similar ways. Whilst in the jail they had time to evolve spiritually. Father studied Tilak's *Gita Rahashya* over all the years. Like Aurobindo, Tilak, Khudiram Bose and Gandhi, he drew light and inspiration from the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Aurobindo evolved in spirituality, even whilst in his confinement, seeing all around him the presence of Lord Krishna in His various manifestations. He could see Him in trees, and leaves, and all the creatures around. Tilak enjoyed, while in jail, reflecting over the *Bhagavad-Gita*. His commentary on this text, called the *Gita-*

Rahashya, is a work of greatest importance. My father appreciated Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's famous book *The Indian War of Independence*. I would tell you later how I drew on Savarkar's views in writing my paper to commemorate the '1857 Event' which we considered the 'First War of Independence'. For his revolutionary activities, Savarkar was arrested in 1910, and sent to jail for 50 years, but was released earlier, in 1921. I visited his cell in the Cellular Jail at Andman, where he had spent years whilst in jail. I felt he must have sustained himself seeing Shri Krishna manifest in the big peepal and banyan trees luxuriating in the full view from the cell. In the *Bhagavad-Gita* Krishna tells Arjuna: "of trees I am the Ashwattha tree" (*The Gita* X.26). But a man, like Tilak, Savarkar or my father, could never get crushed under loneliness. The great Ghalib had said:

न था कुछ तो खुदा था, कुछ न होता तो खुदा होता
डुबोया मुझको होने ने, न होता मैं तो क्या होता

My father never felt depressed in the jail. It would not have mattered if the sentence had been for a decade, or for 50 years. He was sustained by his study of Tilak's *Gita-Rahashya*. He kept that copy of the book till he lived. I often felt he lived in the world, but the chariot of his life, like Yudhisthir's in the *Mahabharata*, moved above the earth. It was the consciousness of the *Bhagavad-Gita* that saved him from claustrophobic depression on account of the experience of 'No Exit'. I felt that these lines from Richard Lovelace's *To Althea, From Prison* might have sustained our freedom-fighters:

Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for an hermitage

Lovelace (1618-1658) composed these lines while undergoing a sentence in the Gatehouse Prison in London for promoting a patriotic cause.

(iv) How the Movement Began at Rosera

At the Rosera High School, my father taught mainly English, Mathematics, and Geography. On August 8, 1942, the All India Congress Committee, in its Bombay session, gave a clarion call for a mass movement against the British Raj. Father's exposition, in the Matriculation class, of a poem by Sir Walter Scott's 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel' had an electrifying effect on the young mind of the students who were already surcharged with patriotic fervour. The lines, which he turned into metaphors of intense patriotism, were these:

Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,
Who never to himself hath said?
This is my own, my native land.

His exposition inspired his students. They could discover with extraordinary verve their patriotic duties. They lived in great creative moments of our history. Our struggle for freedom was fast reaching a decisive moment. Gandhi's ideas had struck a chord with the common Indian masses. The lines of action and thought in our national life had come to meet at a high point creating conditions

for a great revolution. What Macaulay had said in the course of his speech in the House of Commons on July 10, 1833, was coming true : he said -

“The destinies of our Indian Empire are covered with thick darkness....It may be that the public mind of India may expand under our system till it has outgrown that system; that by good government we may educate our subjects into a capacity for better government; that having become instructed in European knowledge they may, in some future age, demand European institutions. Whether such a day will ever come. I know not. But never will I attempt to avert or retard it. Whenever it comes, it will be the proudest day in English history”.

The students resorted to direct actions. They left their classes, and assembled in the campus of the school. They sang in chorus, *Bharatmata ki jai* and *Vande Matarama*. As each was acting under an inner urge, it was impossible to say who led the inspired crowd. They showed unity and empathy seldom seen in the era after Independence. India, for them, was Bharatmata. Bankimchandra had written an immortal novel *Anandmath* in which Bharatmata was portrayed as Mother (Goddess Durga). He had composed a poem ‘Vande Mataram’ (‘Hail to the Mother’), which resounded everywhere as if Lord Krishna blew it from His *Panchjanya* conch! The students had an inner urge, and an indomitable will to do all that could be done to free their land from foreign servitude. How could they forget that their teachers had often quoted from classical poetry that one’s ‘motherland is greater than heaven’? That day they assembled in the vast campus of the School, sang ‘Vande Mataram’ in chorus, and then spread out in different directions to work against the British Empire. Their teachers, who had seen them with thrill from the precincts of the School, must have felt that their efforts in training them had not gone in vain. In the morning of August 9, the main leaders of the Congress were arrested. The Congress organization was declared illegal. Never in the history of any nation had an Idea itself taken over leadership of a national struggle for liberation. The great ideas, developed and popularized by Swami Vivekanand, Lokmanya Tilak, Maharshi Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, Muhammad Iqbal, Kazi Nazrul Islam.....came flowering in their patriotic feats of action. The patriotic Indians felt that the British Empire in India was now indulging in its swansong.

Some of them, by their spontaneous actions, sent tremors disturbing the *Pax Britannica*. Their sporadic acts of disorder included damaging the railway-tracks and stations, and cutting of the telegraph and telephone lines. But father felt that what shocked the British Government most was the aggressive mood of the young India. ‘Vande Matarama’ had acquired the status of the *Veda mantra*. For certain days, it appeared that even the birds and the beasts, trees and flowers were humming this song in the *Bhairavi raag*. Everyone displayed sturdiness of purpose, and the dedication to the cause of the nation. They, of course, were not oblivious to the possibilities of horrendous brutal retaliation by the savage imperial power. Yet they embarked on their venture believing that life had been given on the condition that the *kartavya karma* (Duties) must be done, whatever be the cost.

Father recorded a graphic account of his involvement in the Quit India Movement, and all that followed as its sequel. He had scribbled it in his Diary,

perhaps, to write someday his memoir, but that day never came. As this account comes from this Freedom Fighter's own pen, it has a special sanctity: hence I quote just a fragment from his diary that I still preserve:

"August 9, 1942 was a great day. The news that the leaders of the Congress Party were arrested by the then British Government en bloc alarmed the Indians. On the proclamation of "Quit India Movement" there was a massive agitation throughout the country. My students at Rosera H.E. School, whom I had ever taught the lesson of patriotism while teaching patriotic songs in Matriculation Classes, could not check their patriotic impulse. They went on strike and marched in a procession shouting "Inqulab Jindabad" and "Angrejon Bharat Chhoro." They were joined by the Bazar and village people. They all marched to the Government offices to paralyse Government work. They held meetings where slogans were shouted and speeches were made. The school had to be closed. Government work everywhere got paralysed. There was wide-spread repression. Many persons were arrested and some even shot at. Houses were burnt; properties were confiscated; and many kinds of unheard-of tortures were inflicted on people. Such repressive measures had never been imagined in civilised countries. Four teachers - namely Ramakant Jha, Kuldeep Mishra, Janardhan Jha and Ramaeshwar Prasad - were arrested on 2nd September, 1942 and were sent to the Police Station and thence to Samastipur Jail. Nazamul Hoda was the S.I. of Police Rosera. He arrested many innocent persons and made huge amount of money as illegal gratification. It was not the time of thinking how to save oneself from the police clutches. I was also arrested on 5th September, 1942 at the Rosera Station by the Inspector and the S.I. of Police. I could not be freed even for a moment. Fortunately my wife and my son, who was a child then, were at Kurson, my village. On arrest I was sent to the Samastipur lock-up in Jail to stand a trial in future on the submission of the police report"

(v) The Agitation at Rosera

The British Government inflicted a most morbid repression on our patriotic society. Nothing is disliked by the imperialists more than the sense of patriotism on the part of those under servitude. Patriotism is an impregnable rampart of liberty. It is a most potent creative force in an independent society. The Government registered its presence everywhere by putting the police patrolling squad at work, with bayonets directed towards everyone in sight. Thousands were arrested without any cause. Lakhs of people suffered tribulations, but now no longer with tongue-tied at work, patience. They were not unaware of the fact that the cruel government could enact again the Jalianwalla Bagh massacre where the troops had fired 1,600 rounds of ammunition into the unarmed crowd of our people at an enclosed place where they had assembled to voice their feelings against the Rowlatt Acts of 1919. But even such apprehensions could not dim their ardour, or diminish their resolve.

The revolutionaries had succeeded in disturbing the *Pax Britannica*. The Sub-Divisional Officer of Samastipur was R. N. Lines ICS. He was tough and had planned to strike a terror into the heart of the people. The school was closed “for indefinite period” from Monday the August 17, 1942. Father came to know that the authorities had decided to inflict a cruel tyranny on our people even in the remote villages to unnerve the common folk to drive into their mind the dread of the British power. Father left for our village, Kurson. We travelled about 50 kilometres in a bullock-cart. While travelling to our village we ran an obvious risk of being arrested, even frayed with bullets, by the government forces.

It was too much for the British Administration that in the mighty British Raj an academic institution stood closed on account of the activities of the young nationalists. The District Magistrate ordered the school to reopen with effect from August 19. Shri Ramaeshwar Prasad, an assistant teacher of the School, sent a messenger to my village with a letter informing father that the School had been reopened on the 19th in obedience to District Magistrate’s peremptory order. Father received this letter at 9.30 a.m on August 29. He immediately started for Rosera. What worried him most was the news that the authorities had decided to get the ring leaders amongst the students identified so that they could be shot dead to teach the natives lessons never to be forgotten by them. On reaching Rosera, he found the tyranny of the British Raj at its worst. On September 5, 1942 he was summoned at the Rosera Railway station by Najmul Huda who had been the Sub-Inspector of Police. After droning on sundries in abominable voice, the Police Officer shouted in his discourteous voice:

“Specify the ring leaders amongst the students”.

Father told him: “Everyone was leading himself. It is impossible to specify anybody by name.”

Father had no temptation for a reward. He could have suggested some names to please the British Administration in order to curry favour with the British government. He could have easily obtained the title of Rai Saheb or Rai Bahadur. But at that time the cause of the nation was supreme. Father stood firm. No persuasion or allurements could break him, or persuade him to say what the Sub-Inspector wanted him to say. The Police Officer croaked:

“So Sir, you won’t come out with their names. The Gandhians come out only under the lash of distress”

My Father asked him; “Am I under arrest?”

The Sub-Inspector shouted, “Yes, you are. You have earned it”.

Listening to this, Father shouted ‘*Vande Matarama*’. And the Sub-Inspector handcuffed him. The crowd that had gathered at the Rosera railway station shouted in vibrant and uproarious chorus ‘*Vande Matarama*’. It seemed Krishna was playing *Bhairavi* raag on his flute.

(vi) What sustained my Father in the period of crisis

I often wondered how father could sustain himself through his trials and tribulations which could have wrenched the heart even of the bravest amongst the humans. He must have experienced the agony that he had left his wife, and his infant ailing son at God’s mercy. But he was always unruffled. He, like other revolutionaries, never calculated gains and losses. Like them, he lived in mo-

ments, and devoted himself to achieve his mission, his duty, his *kartavy-karma*. The *Gita* was his guide. What he and other freedom-fighters felt about the *Gita*, was aptly stated by Vinobaji in course of his exposition of the *Gita* in the Dhulia jail in 1932:

“...My relationship with *Shrimadbhagavad Gita* is beyond logic. Its milk has enriched my heart and mind far more than what mother’s milk had done to my body. Reason has no play where the relationship is from the heart. The *Gita* is the fundamental element of my life.”⁴

Father felt that in our society, some carried in mind the erroneous notion that the *Gita* taught *Sanyasa*, and whosoever read it, would become good for nothing in this world. Only great faith in himself, and in Lord Krishna’s dictum - *Na me bhaktah pranasyati my devotee never perishes*— had saved the freedom-fighters from withering away in darkness. Father told me that the right perspective on the *Gita* could be had from what Tilak himself wrote in the preface to his *Gita-Rahasya*:

“Without acting nothing happens. You have just to go on doing your duties with detachment and without desires. The *Gita* had not been said for those fatigued by running their affairs with crash selfishness. The *Gita* was not said for those preparing to retire from the World.”

Father remained Gandhian throughout his life, in his ideas and work. But I seldom saw him announcing his intellectual and emotional commitments to any ism. But all through he believed in certain principles which were precisely the same as those written on the board in the campus of Gandhi’s Wardha Aashram, that I had read when I visited that Aashram several times during 1986-1992. I was then the Commissioner of Income-tax for the Vidarbha region. A photograph of the text of the Gandhian edict at Wardha goes with this book, Our politicians must reflect on the text of the edict.

(vii) *En passant*: When I see the present in the light of the past

When father narrated what had happened on that fateful day, August, 9, 1942, he exuded cheerful serenity. But while writing something about what happened then, I feel anguished on seeing things as they are happening these days. Now money alone matters. Higher values are at their vanishing point. Consumerism has already taken its toll. Our cultural tradition, and the achievements, which distinguished our land from others, are being forgotten. Now everything has a price tag. Even values have become mere trading wares. There is a trend towards a repulsive commoditization of human beings. It is shocking to see the ‘slave’s syndrome’ manifesting itself so grossly in most spheres. A slave, even on acquiring freedom, loves putting fetters on himself because he has forgotten to live in freedom, and has not learnt how to live the life as a free citizen. I write with an iron in my soul that this overweening lust for material comforts at the cost of all other values has made the rich of our society a spiritual wasteland. Swami Vivekanand was right in saying that India could expect only from the common people.

When I compare and contrast the trends of the times during our Freedom Struggle with those we see around us everywhere, I get dismayed. Right now we have no cause which deserves to be pursued with steadfast resolution; we have no leader who can be trusted, and who can lead our nation with utmost good

faith. There is none to set standards of conduct for our people to emulate; there is none who can inspire us to tread on the right path responding to the challenges of our times. Corruption and degradation are fast turning our Republic into Milo's Rome when greed was the only guiding force, deception the only strategy, and the 'moral deficit' was evident in socio-political spheres. Where greed prevails, morality decays; the *entente cordiale* between fraud and deception grows, democracy suffers from a terminal illness; Constitution gets etherized and anesthetized except the power structure that it presents for some to ascend to power to promote the agenda of economically dominant people.

I was amazed the other day when a young man going to the U.S.A. to study Business Management told me with nauseating bravado: "Our Struggle for Freedom was unnecessary. Direct transition from the British imperialism to the corporate imperialism under the American domination would have been better. We even love fetters if they are made of gold. What matters is money for us, and the GDP for the nation." I was struck dumb. But I need not reflect on this seamy side of our GDP-measured society. I do so in deference to the instruction given to us by Tulsidas: 'अनिमल आखर अरथ न जापू' (it is no good to reflect on what is morbid and mean). But I would touch these points in the Book III of my Memoir.

PART II

(a) As an Educationist

Father was essentially an educationist. He began his career as a substitute teacher in December 1924 at C.M.S. High School, Bhagalpur. Immediately thereafter he went to Rosera to establish a High School at the request of the people of that place. But after a short period there, he shifted to Barh to become an Assistant Teacher at Bailey School, and later its Assistant Headmaster till 1929. He again went back to Rosera where he worked as Headmaster of the High English School from 1929 to his arrest in 1942. After his release from jail on June 22, 1943, he joined the post of the Headmaster of M.C.H.School, Kadirabad at Darbhanga where he worked till May 31, 1965 when he retired. In the post-retirement phase he remained associated with the Darbhanga Public School till my mother's death on December 9, 1973 on which date he entered the phase of *Sannyasa*.

As he was essentially an academician, it is worthwhile to focus on his ideas which conditioned his teaching over more than fifty years. He had a coherent and integrated philosophy of education. The scope of this chapter does not permit its discussion in detail. But I would highlight some of his ideas. He often quoted Lin Yutang who said in *The Importance of Living*:

'To know what to love and what to hate is to have taste in knowledge. Nothing is more exasperating than to meet a person at a party whose mind is crammed full with historical dates and figures and who is extremely well posted in current affairs in Russia or *Czechoslovakia*, but whose attitude to point of view is all wrong.'

He was worried by the growing indifference of the students towards the finer creations of mind. Education is meant to develop the students' courage, and their faculty of imagination as without these, good character cannot evolve. The worst problem which humanity is facing now is what is known as 'the Wallace paradox'

(stressed by the great Alfred Russel Warren) which refers to our present plight : the exponential growth of technology going with stagnant morality. There are good reasons to believe that 'without moral imagination man and his civilization, with all its science, arts and commerce are bound to perish'. He would often refer to what Herbert Spencer said about education; 'Education has for its objects the formation of character'. Someone has rightly said: History shows itself more and more a race between education and catastrophe. This is what Gandhiji meant when he insisted on character-building in his essay 'What the Students can do' which was a prescribed piece for us when we studied in Class IX. The consequences of ignoring the Gandhian message are manifest in the limitless egocentricity and rabid corruption about which, as Alan Beattie says: "everbody talks but nobody does anything about it."⁵

He derived his technique of imparting education from the *Bhagavad-Gita* itself. He suggested to the students that a difficult subject is studied best when it is studied with concentration, again and again. This is the *abhyasayoga* of the *Gita*. His technique was participative; the students felt at home to put questions to grasp the issues better. He could distil out what was the best in his students. Didn't Shakespeare say: 'There is some soul of goodness in things evil, Would men ever succeed in distilling it out'. He was wholly at peace with himself by imparting education to the young children of the poor. Michelangelo sculpted the *Pieta* for St Peter's from marble: he drew out from the stone the sublime beauty which lay in the stone. A teacher's job resembles the sculptor's craft as he too discovers things of value in his students, and helps them to manifest their inner worth. For a good teacher his students form his *vidyavamsa* (the members of the teacher's family).

He was a perfectionist. He would never condone linguistic lapses. Like H.W. Fowler, whose *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* he frequently consulted, he was an instinctive grammatical moralizer. He had purchased a battery set of Phillips radio in 1954 so that I could regularly hear the BBC broadcast for acquiring a better sense of English language. He had a special liking for the *Times Literary Supplement* which he was getting direct from the United Kingdom. The editorial note of August 2, 1957 issue of the magazine had commented on Fowler: "A moralizer no doubt he was; but he has no categorical imperatives. His morality is purely teleological, and the end to which it is directed can be reduced to a single idea : lucidity." The same could be said of my father's approach.

His educational philosophy was wholly Gandhian. He emphasised on moral instruction, and stressed on the vocational training as the essential ingredients of education. Once he had explained the symbolic relevance of the Spinning Wheel on which we worked every day. Gandhi felt that the Spinning Wheel would create centres of creativity in every household. This would enable our society to develop creativity and discipline in every household. A Spinning Wheel would have become a symbol of creative growth. By working on the spinning wheel, people could develop power of concentration, and get moments to tranquillise their mind so that nobler values could be fostered, and pursued. If the model of Gandhian education would have been implemented, every household would have become a centre of creativity. Of course, if this would have happened, our degenerate politicians wouldn't have obtained the herds of the slogan shouting hoodlums to promote their unworthy interests. Father shared the concern which

had been voiced by the great scientist Alfred Russel Wallace in *Bad Times* published as far back as 1885:

“Whenever we depart from the great principles of truth and honesty, of equal freedom and justice to all men whether in our relations with other states, or in our dealings with our fellow-men, the evil that we do surely comes back to us, and the suffering and poverty and crime of which we are the direct or indirect causes, help to impoverish ourselves. It is, then, by applying the teachings of a higher morality to our commerce and manufactures, to our laws and customs, and to our dealings with all other nationalities, that we shall find the only effective and permanent remedy for Depression of Trade.”

He believed that the greatest hazard to our technology-led society is its stagnant morality and overweening hubris. Father shared Russell's worry on account of this syndrome. I would revisit this point in the Chapter on ‘My Reflections on Krishna & the Galaxy of the Great’ in the Book III of this Memoir.

He always believed that the culture of *Guru Shishaya paramapara* should be cultivated in our educational system. As a teacher he maintained very close contact with students. He took a lot of interest in the welfare of his students. His students could come to him for learning, and for receiving good counselling whenever they needed that. He was a loving teacher. No barrier of formality separated him from his students. His approaches in educational matters would clearly come out from the following two extracts from his Diary:

The sanctity and fairness of the examination

“I recall sanctity and fairness of the examination and the personality and character of the teachers of those days, I cannot but express my indignation and contempt at the deterioration in every sphere of educational activities of the present days..”

Reformation vs. Punishment

“I remember an event which I think worth mentioning. It was 1932. I had gone to attend the Divisional Headmasters' Conference at the Bettiah Raj School. At the conference one headmaster proposed that a provision be inserted in the Bihar Education Code conferring full power to the headmaster to remove from the Roll of the School register any student whose character appeared suspicious to him. I was the youngest Headmaster present there. I could not appreciate the proposal. I rose from my seat and said “Sir, credit lies in the reformation and not in deformation. A boy turned out of the school is ruined as prospect of reformation is lost. If he is retained and efforts are made to reform him, he may have the chance to be reformed.” Rai Bahadur Tulsi Prasad, the President of the conference, thumped the table and said “Here is our youngest Headmaster!” The suggestion was greeted well, and the proposal was quashed. Since then, I had the pleasure to find Rai Bahadur Tulsi Prasad always well disposed towards me. His ‘appreciation remark’ in the Inspection Note, drawn up during his visit to the School, made this quite evident. In those days, the Inspecting Officers were very capable workers with very good educational background. They paid surprise visits to see how the institutions

worked. Such visits were sufficient check on the activities of persons idling away their time. I had to be very alert in the discharge of my duties. And I tried to win the confidence of all.”

(b) He was an *astik*

Like most of the Indians my father was *astik* (a believer in God and values). He believed in the *Vedas*, and reposed faith in God. One who believes in positive values of existence is an *astik*. The etymology of the word (from *Asti*) is suggestive: it refers to ‘existence’ itself. He did not consider Bertrand Russell an atheist as Lord Russell had made an indomitable quest for knowledge, and had profound interest in improving the conditions of human beings. Russell rightly assessed himself when he said:

“Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind.”⁶

One who is governed by such three passions must be a believer in values. So Father considered Russell an *astik*.

Father was syncretic in his religious ideas. He bore on his forehead a bright vermilion mark. Over it three flourishing lines of the holy paste of ash were drawn. These subdued grey coloured lines, so exquisitely drawn with the finger-waves, indicated faith in Shiva. The vermilion mark expressed faith in Shakti. The lines flanking closely the red mark and moving upwards vertically on the forehead expressed his faith in Vishnu. Father strictly followed the norms of the *ashramas*. His infinite trust in God helped him to get over life’s ennui; and enabled him to receive death as his final prostration on Lord Krishna’s lotus-feet. Life, he believed, is just a sparrow’s flight from the unknown to the unknown with a temporary perching on the wooden beam of a room with windows open, and the doors ajar.

Those days most students had *adharmic* (religious) bent of mind. This helped them improve their power of concentration, and made them more focused. It was customary to register a reverential bow to the book or the pen when picked up from the ground if it ever fell down. When our feet unwittingly touched a book we considered it a sacrilege. Every year, Saraswati was worshipped at most schools. She is the goddess of learning. The worship of Saraswati is celebrated even now, perhaps more, but the bent of mind in doing so is no longer so serene and sublime as it was then. It has become more of a fun, an enjoyment of some sort of carnival.

(c) Simple living and high thinking

Father practised the precept of ‘simple living and high thinking’ all through his life. He was all against the consumerist culture under which the vested interests generate even non-essential needs. If one wants to maintain dignity, the best way is to control one’s needs. He provided us a *talisman* which could stand in good stead when we pass through the markets. This *talisman* is most essential in our present-day consumerist society. Whenever a desire springs up for things, it is prudent to ask oneself: ‘Are these essential for me? Can’t I do without them?’ He believed that our resources are limited, and, hence, they must be used without

profligacy. He always stressed on the quality of life. When I think about this talisman, I recall that precious talisman that Gandhi had given to our decision-makers (See Chapter 19, 'Notes & References' 16). Joys didn't elate him. He bore sufferings with tongue-tied patience. He was always happy with whatever his life brought to him as his share in this existence. He never fretted about unborn to-morrow or the dead yesterday. He followed Gandhiji's instructions in the matter of food habits. When I visited Gandhi's Wardha Ashrama, I found them written on the board on display in the campus. I would render into English the Gandhian instructions on the art of eating in Chapter 4 ('Portrait of my Mother').

(d) The Declaration of Emergency: my father's response

Father had very high opinion about Mrs. Indira Gandhi. He considered her a great patriot who had brought laurels to our country. But he was disturbed by the 'Declaration of Emergency' made by her on June 26, 1975. He was shocked to find that the Emergency was declared on flimsy grounds; and the Constitution, which our people had given to themselves, was subverted purely for personal reasons. He agreed with many who considered the ignominious Emergency the darkest chapter in the democratic history of India. He expressed himself against the Emergency though his failing health did not permit him to take up an active role in opposing it. He was certain that her dictatorship was bound to end as the grain of our society did not permit any tyranny. The greatest assurance against a tyranny is our worldview itself. He was amazed that she missed the wisdom born of history. Her father had done so much to tell her about history, both of India and the World, but, perhaps, it went all in vain. My father was glad when the phase of the Emergency came to an end. He was an optimist; he felt that every dark hour was destined to go. But he always felt that the Emergency was a noxious product of the circumstances which prevailed on account of unfortunate causes. To a large extent, Mrs. Gandhi had herself created the circumstances that had led to the Emergency. But she did not cease to be great even when storms overtook her, and she fell from power. Father appreciated the way she conducted herself when she was under brutal retaliations by her political adversaries. She was great, and like many great persons, she committed great mistakes. Her history deserves to be read by each generation to learn lessons how to act, and how not to act. Like every great tragic hero, her tragic trait was great.

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Reflections on an ideal teacher by one of his students: "Remembering Gopi Babu" by Prof. (Dr) Bishwanath Prasad, M.A., M.D.P.A., Ph. D, M.P.A. (USA), etc, the former Vice-Chancellor of Magadh University

"Late Sri Gopi Kant Jha embodied the qualities of an ideal teacher and of a successful administrator of a higher secondary school in a backward district of North Bihar in the forties of the twentieth century. He ranked high amongst good teachers of English literature. He was endowed with competence of elevating the level of discourse from one of information to that of knowledge, to that of wisdom as and when occasion so demanded. Equipped with soft power of his noble ideas and values, he could forge a lasting relationship with some of his acquaintances through working for a shared purpose and goal. In exercising self-discipline of

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an authentic and compassionate guide, he made values become consistent actions. Excellence in education was not an act for him but a habit. He succeeded in galvanizing a generation of youth during the freedom movement period enjoying the reward of satisfaction of a job well done striking a balance between the demands of career development and character building. His discernible contributions to the consolidation of secondary educational system will surely endure, and so also his memory.”

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Translated by Swami Madhavananda, *The Varagya-Satkam shloka* 56
- 2 Dr. R.C. Majumdar in Majumdar, Raychouduri and Datta, *Advanced History of India* p. 971
- 3 D.O. No 7928 of June 1937 from the District Magistrate, Darbhanga.
- 4 Vinoba, *The Gita-Pravachan*, First Lecture on Feb. 11, 1932
- 5 Alan Beattie, *False Economy* p.227
- 6 Bertrand Russell, *Autobiography* p. 9