
C. D. Narasimhaiah's *N for Nobody*

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ABSTRACT

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This essay is an overview of CDN's autobiography. Not everyone should write an autobiography but CDN was justified in doing so because in a way he represented English Studies as it developed in India in the 20th Century and that story had to be told. The essay follows the logic of the book, touching on CDN's humble beginnings, his move to Cambridge where he met F.R. Leavis, the impact Leavis had on his personality and criticism. Leavis facilitated his visit to America and there CDN came under the spell of the Transcendentalists whose influence on him was not unconnected with their overt Indianness. CDN went on to insist that criticism in India must have an Indian voice and with this as his standpoint he proceeded to win attention for Indian writers in English, introduce modern literature and American literature in India. His pioneering criticism of Australian literature and love of Indian aesthetics is noted. He rose to the top of the profession becoming one of the most influential Professors in the country. He made a number of innovations in the exam system and in teaching and revolutionized the study of Literature in India. In the process he was not afraid to speak his mind. His criticism of B. Rajan and his disdain for mere language studies at the expense of literature are discussed. The essay touches on all this in detail and closes with some observations on his love of domesticity and his family and his loyalty to Mysore, a town not even Indira Gandhi, could persuade him to leave. N is not Nobody. N is for Narasimhaiah.

Every now and then a scholar emerges, who in many ways, speaks for a generation and encompasses the major developments in a specific area of knowledge. In the field of English Studies in India, such a figure was C D Narasimhaiah. Not everyone should write an autobiography because it might become an exercise in vanity and self-promotion and in any case there might not be much pith and substance in a work written by a person of indifferent achievement. But CDN is not of that kind. He truly embodied English Studies in our times and *N for Nobody* is a work which had to be written because of its importance for our subject of English Studies in India. CDN can be combative, argumentative and over-whelming but he is not egoistic or vain and it is a pleasure to recall his career in this year of his centenary. By so doing we celebrate ourselves.

CDN was born into a Backward Caste, Balija family in 1921. He asserts that his father, who wanted him to have an English education, struggled hard, as did his mother, to make this happen, and the family supported him. He is grateful for the English he learnt from the village Shanbog, Srikantiah, and the BC scholarship which saw him through school and college. His BC status also got him what he calls a wholly undeserved Assistant Professorship, and he acknowledges candidly that while he was a proud Hindu, and his caste gave him some assistance, he himself never discriminated against anyone on grounds of caste, merit being his main criterion. CDN himself had merit. *N for Nobody* demonstrates CDN's respect for excellence and is an account of his constant efforts to recognize this wherever he found it. CDN's father used to walk long distances to participate in what was then a barter economy, reciting long passages from the Ramayana, as he went along. CDN's mother sang devotional

songs. All in all his experience of growing up in Closepet, later called Ramanagaram with its associations with Ramagiri, the hill on which, according to local legend, Lord Rama rested on His travels, gave CDN a respect for the idea of the traditional society which is organic because of its inter-dependent economy. This, his association with F.R. Leavis, would only deepen. Leavis profoundly English, and the New Critics, representing the Deep American South, wrote a criticism which emphasized the organic unity of a work of art which could be realized through close reading. This, in turn, reflected the organic unity of the society from which the work originated. CDN transplanting these practices to India added an Indian sensibility to his emphasis on specificity and particularity in reading a literary work. CDN with his rootedness in Indian sensibility, aesthetics and tradition upheld the imagined organic community which gave us a great Indian culture.

Such a stance puts the literary scholar in opposition to those who want to see art in activist terms and who are historically minded and do not believe that there was anything organic about the past. Leavis, further, connected this with the critical activity which necessarily required training in reading literature in special ways. He formulated this in terms of minority culture and mass civilization. CDN implicitly accepted this. It also naturally meant preferring minority excellence to mediocrity of the mass. This critical stance brought CDN into conflict with vested interests, particularly University academicians and politicians who worked in opposition to him. He had been made Professor early and then Principal of the iconic Maharaja's College, Mysore. Because of their intrigues he, a self-respecting Professor, resigned his Principalship. That also deprived him of a possible Vice-Chancellorship of Mysore University. CDN wryly comments: "It was all for the good, I now like to think, because it would have been disastrous to be Vice-Chancellor at 40: it was bad enough to be Professor at 29, and Principal at 35" (p207).

CDN went on a Damodardas scholarship to Cambridge. He worked hard, reading extensively, benefiting from the close scrutiny of tutors and his supervisor Leavis. Anyone who has seen CDN at work in a seminar or at a lecture can detect the overwhelming influence of Leavis on his personality and his literary criticism. Like Leavis, CDN, had strong views, which he did not hesitate to spell out. He had a healthy aversion for Romantic claptrap, focussed on the act of close reading, and attended to the specific and particular. By doing this and avoiding large generalizations he won attention (a phrase he loved) for Indian Writers in English, the Commonwealth writers, American Literature, and increasingly falling back on his roots (a trait, Leavis would appreciate) applied Indian aesthetic ideas to the reading of literature, so that a genuinely Indian voice in criticism would emerge. That he was an excellent example of that voice speaking goes without saying. He put into practice the Leavisian belief that the true business of criticism is to perceive for oneself, make fine discriminations, and state one's findings in the sharpest, clear and forcible terms. When we see what he had to say about Nehru's style, RK Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, to mention only a few Indian writers, we see an Indian Leavis in fine flow. That is also the hallmark of his discriminations about American writers, in particular his favourites, Emerson and Thoreau, and Australian writers like A. G. Hope and Patrick White. Among Cambridge Dons at the time there were Basil Willey, F L Lucas, M. C. Bradbrook, I A Richards and Potts—all scholars who wrote learned books, but they were not teachers who made a difference to students. "They didn't ignite the minds or touch the hearts," says CDN (p56). But Leavis did.

From Cambridge, due to the good offices of Leavis, CDN went to Princeton. He was

enabled by the terms of the Fellowship he received, to read widely in American literature and he also made enduring friendships. The McCalpins, for example, were generous in their hospitality to CDN and his wife, and later helped his Institution, Dhvanyaloka, in immeasurable ways. In America he also studied with Willard Thorp, co-editor of the monumental *Literary History of the United States*, along with Carlos Baker and G. E. Bentley. Their encouragement went a long way in CDN forming an attachment for American literature and scholarship. But by far the most important voice he got to know in America was R P Blackmur's. Blackmur's essay "Between the Numen and the Moha: Notes toward a Theory of Literature" impressed CDN so much that he believed that the essay's incisive formulation using an Indian concept like Moha "can supercede in its brevity and amazing clarity, the endless succession of theories in the critical jungle of our times" (p94).

CDN worshipped Emerson and Thoreau because of their 'Indianness' and their inspiring thoughts on Nature, Man and the Over Soul, not to speak of their social thought. If, says CDN, he had a choice of a month's holiday he would choose to spend it in New England of the Nineteenth century, looking at Emerson day after day and hearing him speak, and visiting Thoreau, his "soul – brother as he walked along the shores of the Pond like the Brahman on the banks of the Ganga" (p101). Thoreau reminded him of Gandhi whose debt to Thoreau everyone recognizes. The very word Transcendentalism had a magic for CDN and this is mainly because of its Indian resonances. CDN was putting into practice his idea of a cross cultural criticism. His dictum that Indian scholarship must have a distinctness about it informed his response to American literature and to the Transcendentalists. Thoreau and Emerson in many ways deepened his understanding of this kind of cross culturality by their expression of Indian ideas. CDN says that there is no writing of Emerson which does not in one way or the other relate to the Indian concept of Illusion and reality (p105). The study of Americans like Emerson, Thoreau, and then T. S. Eliot can give Indian students of English an opportunity to forge contacts with their own heritage.

When CDN returned to India and had the opportunity to decide curriculum, he introduced American literature in Mysore. He was also part of the group of Professors who under the aegis of Olive Reddick, the redoubtable head of the USEFI, gathered to give shape to the popularization of American Studies. An offshoot of this Initiative was the founding of the American Studies Research Centre in Hyderabad, an Institution which is revered by Indian scholars who have been shaped by it. The Advanced Institute in Princeton inspired CDN in 1979 to found Dhvanyaloka, an Institution equally revered by scholars, who under CDN's benign but watchful presence began reading and writing about Literature from an Indian perspective and with an Indian sensibility. After all Dhvanyaloka is the title of Anandavardhana's seminal contribution to Indian aesthetics, a context never forgotten by the seminarians at Mysore and the contributors to *The Literary Criterion*, CDN's Journal (inspired by Leavis' *Scrutiny*). Founded in 1952 it is still going strong.

N for Nobody goes on to discuss his tenure as a Principal and Professor to which we have briefly alluded. We get an insider's view of the reforms he pushed through, the opposition, often on non academic grounds, he faced, and the manner he was vindicated. Notable are his efforts to include in the syllabus Modern poetry, especially Eliot, and update the curriculum to go beyond the Victorians where it stopped. He revolutionized the setting of question papers departing from the old tired ways. His questions demanded a sharp critical sensibility, not answers by rote learnt from Guides. Naturally vested interests became active and many of

CDN's questions were dropped with older soft options retained. CDN refused to examine answer papers which had nothing to do with the questions he had set. Implicitly rejecting, as Leavis had done, C.P. Snow's 'Two Cultures', CDN introduced the 12 book scheme for Under Graduate General English. Authors included Russell, Toynbee, Spengler, Radhakrishnan among others. The criteria was good readable English and the subjects varied from science to civilization. In other words he was anticipating what we now fetishize as inter-disciplinarity. The vested interests who had for years taught Austen, Dickens and Hardy and had made a killing through private tuitions found their avenues shut. Kannada zealots said that CDN was thrusting English down their throats and a state wide campaign started against him and then the inevitable happened. The scheme was dropped. CDN's campaign for the introduction of American literature succeeded only after a decade after he began it. Indian Professors of his time were asking Sidney Smith's notorious question "Who in the four corners of the globe reads an American book?" But CDN and other Professors who were progressive enabled Indians to read American literature and the subject was introduced eventually. Innovation is always resisted but CDN's efforts in Mysore, and that of others in other parts of the country, have resulted today in a more expanded English Programme. Today we are familiar with American Literature, Commonwealth Literature, the employment of Indian aesthetic theory to study various literatures from a specifically Indian perspective – much of this the result of CDN's efforts. Of course, he would not have countenanced some of the developments in English Studies today, which sometimes lead one to wonder whether we are studying English literature at all! Though *N for Nobody* does not discuss these, one may safely conclude that CDN would dismiss some of this as pretentious and certainly leading us away from the business of criticism. As CDN, quoting Leavis says, and this is apropos to the move away from literature to cultural theory and everything else we are witnessing in English Departments today – "Literary history' could be successfully attempted only by a critic and would then be essential [ly]literary criticism'insists Leavis" (p68). Though CDN does not say this in his Autobiography, to the point is CDN's later characterization of ASRC as American Studies Xerox Centre. This was his scathing indictment of the degradation of scholarship, which continued to be second hand and dependent on made to order articles, which were then doled out in repetitious doses, inducing a soporific effect on audiences. By contrast, when CDN rose to speak, one noticed the difference immediately because here was the sparkle and zeal of one who understood the true pursuit of criticism.

Naturally for a critic of his caliber and convictions, the British Council and CIEFL(Now EFL-U) induced move towards skills -based English at the expense of Literary study was most unacceptable. CDN is at his polemical best in chapter 8 of *N for Nobody* which is a reprint of his Address to the Summer School of English at Mysore delivered in 1966. This is an example of how his Autobiography has such a unified character that a Lecture delivered in some other context becomes a chapter so seamlessly in this book. For CDN literature teaching is the job of the English teacher. It is here that a teacher is in his element. CDN declares: "I am not a specialist in Methodology of English Teaching though I have pretensions to some knowledge of literature in the English Language, that is of the behaviour of words, the romance of words, the organization of words as a mode of concretization on the printed page of a corresponding organization of experiences, evoking certain responses in individuals and groups—which I take to be an essential equipment of a teacher of English" (p150). He invokes India's ancient story telling tradition, our mythopoeic imagination and demonstrates how poetry was its very breath. Even science was presented in verse in ancient India. Today English

has to perform the task once performed by Sanskrit, of conveying our deepest cultural experiences. An elegant user of English prose like Nehru does not oblige us by using “graded vocabulary” or “graded structures”. Should we omit him from our English syllabus because he does not meet the standards of the powers that be in CIEFL? CDN is emphatic that we should prefer Nehru's human document, his *Glimpses of World History*, to any of these language text books based on a pragmatic and utilitarian view of English teaching. I shall not go into all of CDN's close arguments but shall quote a passage, which in its eloquence embodies in itself the qualities good English must possess. CDN's trumpet call for the teaching of Literature rather than what is called Language teaching as the best methodology for English is the burden of this passage: “I would rather campaign for scrapping English from our schools and colleges than let my children spend 10 years of their most formative years to be able to repeat like parrots in their 17th year --'The cat sits on the mat', 'he comes home', 'this pencil is shorter than that', 'he eats his dinner, does he?'”(p175).

Freed from administrative responsibilities, CDN was able to focus exclusively on scholarship and the critical pursuit. He promoted Indian Writing in English and then American literature. His visit to Australia to lecture on Indian Literature in English afforded him an opportunity to familiarize himself with Australian literature which he then promoted in India apart from the larger literature of the Commonwealth. His readings of Judith Wright, A. D. Hope's “Salabhanjika”, and Patrick White, among other Australians are widely influential. He went on to create a vogue in India for the application of Indian ideas to criticism of foreign literatures.

N for Nobody is nothing if not impassioned and CDN's prose soars when he is celebrating or excoriating someone. The book has personal elements, particularly in his chapter where CDN discusses the shaping of Dhvanyaloka. References to his family, on which CDN doted abound—Srinath who had to wait for academic recognition and who parted with a site in Bangalore for the sake of Dhvanyaloka, Ragini who co-edited Nehru with her father and turned over all the royalty she got to Dhvanyaloka, Mrs CDN whom he married while very young, attracting an amused quip from a Vice-Chancellor about this being a case of child marriage, his grandchildren. Apart from his family CDN refers to many friends and students, testifying to his loyalty to them. Here is a passage of great poignance about his son, Sanjay's passing: “On the day he was shifted to the 'Intensive Care Unit'—how little we knew of it?—he warmed to the beating blue in clear space from the open verandah of his room and muttered how few people watched the lovely sky and the sailing clouds. And there in ICU at the end of his ten days of tortured existence he tried to listen to music but soon looked tired. I pleaded with the doctors to release him from that glass cage and send him back to his room so we could sit and talk with him hoping psychologically, it could make a difference to his state of mind. He developed alarming signs of sinking towards the evening. I tried to adjust his pillows when he said, 'Jayashree' [Sanjay's wife] meaning she knew how to do it. With this last utterance on his lips he looked me in the eye and breathed his last” (p317). Can anyone fail to be moved by CDN's touching words? This is in the last chapter where CDN faces tragedy stoically, quotes Bhartruhari, and philosophizes about the meaning of life and concludes that one must go on.

CDN is at his argumentative best when he criticizes B Rajan asking what Rajan has done to improve the critical milieu in India he has been so displeased with: “Has he initiated or quickened a process of dissemination of ideas which have permeated Indian society by their freshness, intelligence and vitality; or set, not by false prestige but by demonstrable means, a

standard in the judgement of works of art beyond pontificating and calling names?" (p187). Implied, of course is that Rajan has done none of these things .

CDN's love for Mysore comes through in several places in the book. But by far his love for the city where the fabled past lives in the present is demonstrated when he declined Indira Gandhi's offer to him to edit Nehru's works; CDN was delighted to be chosen to do this service for his idol, Nehru, but when he was told that he would have to shift to Delhi he demurred. As a teacher his students mattered and not even Nehru could tempt him to leave them. He never missed a class even when he had to go out of town . He would put himself to lots of inconvenience to be back in time for his class.

This is a book every English teacher must read for it sets an example, and a standard ,of how we should live our lives, how we should love our subject and our pupils. It is a book which teaches us values and character. I knew CDN from about the time I began teaching in University and I consider him as my Manasika Guru, though I was not formally taught by him. N is not for Nobody. N is for Narasimhaiah.

Work Cited

Narasimhaiah, C. D. *N for Nobody: Autobiography of an English Teacher*. Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1991. (All citation are from this book)