APPA – A MYSTICAL MAGICIAN

Mr. Sameer Deshpande
(Son of Late Prof K S Deshpande)
Account Manager,
IBM India Limited, Bengaluru
sameerde33@gmail.com

On that evening, the 'Nadumane' (Central Hall) of our ancestral house in Dharwad, was bustling with guests. There were many uncles around – Kumbhar Kaka, Hungund Kaka, Atgur Kaka and others. A huge garland of silk cocoons was put on my Father. Everyone clapped. But I started crying. The next moment, the garland was transferred to me. Claps went again and a photo was clicked. I became happy and smiled. Appa became happier to see my smile.

That is first faint memory of my Father (Appa), that I can recollect. I later learnt, after I grew up, that Appa's 50thYear Birthday was being celebrated that day. Appa got married late, (at around 45 years of age) due to the then prevailing family conditions. Hence, we, his children, entered Appa's life quite late and got to see only the second half of the 'Enchanting Film' of his life.

THE INITIAL HARDSHIP

Appa's father – Late Shri Shripad Deshpande, though well qualified during his times, with a graduate degree (Bachelor of Science), forewent a potentially promising job at Karnataka College Dharwad, in preference to continuing the book shop he had opened, by name ' Shankara Karnataka Pustaka Bhandar' (in fond memory of his dear departed brother), with a view to further the cause of Kannada in this region. However, in commercial terms, it did not make a profitable business. Hence our grand father had to struggle to make both ends meet.

Appa lost his mother at young age, after she gave birth to her last child (who is now our affectionate, Shashi Kaka). In all, they were eight siblings left without a mother. In next few years, three of the eight siblings succumbed to diseases that could not be diagnosed at that time. With a meagre monthly income, Appa and his sister Ambika (who was Later married to Dr. Prof Shrinivas Ritti) took charge and the ship could be steered

out of troubled waters only after Appa got an employment in the Karnataka University as an Assistant Librarian. During this long phase of hardship, a tough steel of determination tempered in Appa.

That difficult past was behind us, and we never got to see those bad days. We were born much later.

A DAY IN HIS LIFE

Appa used to be an early bird. I have seen him being joined by Hungund Kaka (Late Prof. B.B. Hungund, Professor of Library Sciences, KUD) as early as 6.00 am, and the duo would work on finishing up an article or go through the letters, over a couple of half cups of hot tea. He would then move around briskly with a broomstick,clearing the cobwebs that others' eyes could not catch till then; do some gardening, which he loved the most.

He would then get ready in a hurry to catch the bus to Office. In the night, Appa would come back home by walk;on the way, Appa would stop by the residence of one of family friends, such as – Prof.S.HRitti, Prof. K. Raghavendra Rao, Shri Venakanna Nadiger, Smt. Kadadi Shantakka, Shri Ram Sidenur…etc., – for whom all, he was like a Friend, Guide, Philosopher and would share with them, an advise or leave a word of wisdom. We, the kids at home would eagerly wait for the double ding-dong sound at the front door by around 8.00 pm. The magician would enter the house oozing a fountain of energy. After spending few minutes in playing with us, Appa would freshen up and sit with us for a recitation of '*Ramaraksha Stotra*' in Chorus. He would listen to the All India Radio News at Nine. After dinner, he would tell us delightful stories.

Appa had mastered the art of story telling. He had a large repertoire of stories to choose from. In addition to the snippets from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, Aesop's fables…etc,.Appa would particularly pick from a collection of stories written by the Kannada author - Shri Panje Mangesh Rao. These stories were a big hit among the Kids. To name a few - '*Gudu Gudu Gummata Devaru*', '*Aragane Mudde Yarige Beku*…and the list goes on. In this series, the story of '*Tatapata Haniyappa*' (MrPitter Patter Raindrop) has now become our 'Family bedtime Story' and is being passed on to the next generation, as if it is a tradition. Appa would adapt the story to make it personal for each listener, sometimes elevate the listener to the role of the hero of the story. He would sometimes, even enact some

important scenes.

I used go with Appa to a school on the campus of the Karnataka University, during the initial years of my primary education. He would lure me with stories, injecting in them, a liberal dose of fantasy, even during the bus commute to the school. The co-passengers in the bus, most of them – the Professors and staff of the University, also became fans of Appa's stories, upon repeatedly overhearing them. They would not mind, occasionally, missing their regular deboarding bus stop but were keen not to miss the climax of these stories.

As we grew up, Appa turned away from fictions to real-life stories. His lofty narrations of tours to different places, views on politics and society, biographical sketches of eminent personalities - would all include an element of surprise and a tinge of humor.

He had many interesting anecdotes to tell, to name a few - During his childhood, pinning a rose, on to the coat of Dr. Babu Rajendra Prasad in Athani (when Dr. Rajendra Prasad was still a freedom fighter); the episode of the attempt to put Gandhi Cap on Mr. A.C. Farron, an influential Anglo Principal of Karnataka College; Being part of a student group to receive Subhaschandra Bose at the railway station of Dharwad; Sticking a Rose,; interaction with Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (The President of India) ; discussions with Dr C.D.Deshmukh the then Minister of Finance, Govt of India.

As I write this, 'story-telling' has now become one of the newest darlings of the corporate world, in order to effectively deliver the message to the audience. It has become an accepted tool of knowledge management.

LITERARY EMBELLISHMENT

Appa had traversed deep and far, most of the literary works in English, Kannada and Sanskrit. Separating literature from the shackles of academics, he used it as ornament in everyday life. Appa had a deep melodious voice. He would chant numerous mantras, sing a variety of Sanskrit *Shlokas, Subhashitas, Bhagvadgita*, as also the *SomeshwaraShataka, Pampa Mahabharata* and *Vachanas* in Kannada.
He could recite *Meghadoota* of Kalidasa while doing the house hold chores. If we ever did harm to any plant in our garden, Appa would narrate the

scene from the Act 4 of the '*AbhignyanaShakuntala*' play of Kalidasa, where Shakuntala seeks blessings from plants and animals, as she prepares to leave her Hermit. She would also wonder who would take care of them, after her departure.

He had personal interaction with many contemporary poets. Dr. Da Ra Bendre, who used to visit us often, was one of his favorite poets. It is told that Appa used to sing *'Sakhi Geeta'* of Dr Da. Ra. Bendre to bring comfort to his ailing brother – Ram whom he had lost later. Appa would literally dance with kids, at the tune of 'Kuniyonu Baara (Come on, Let us Dance), yet another song, written by the same poet.

Though most of these songs are available in public domain now, I can't resist my temptation to quote a few of them, as Appa's silvery voice still resonates in my ears.

Whenever he went on a long tour, he would sing a sentimental American song:

"When it's spring time in the Rockies,
I'm coming back to you
Little sweetheart of the mountains
With your Bonnie eyes of blue…"

If Appa had to spend a few days away from Amma, he would cite from the Hamlet Play by William Shakespeare:
"Absent thee from felicity awhile and draw thy breath in pain."

He used to cherish the works of William Wordsworth. If we ever accompanied him on one of his long trail of walks, we would hear him humming a piece from Daffodils,"I wandered lonely as a cloud; That floats on high o'er vales and hills…" Or, from the Solitary Reaper, "Behold her, single in the field, Yon solitary Highland Lass!"

Appa was a magnanimous man. He would not approve of revenge. The following passage from *Prometheus Unbound* by Percy Bysshe Shelley was another of his favorite she would refer to:

"To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;

To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates...."

Then there were some inspiring speeches at the tip of Appa's tongue, which he would recite in his majestic radio voice. To name a few, – "Tryst with Destiny" (Late. Jawaharlal Nehru's address to the constituent Assembly of India as first Prime Minister of India); "The light has gone out of our lives and there is darkness everywhere" (Nehru's extempore after Gandhi's assassination; "I have a dream."(An Address from Martin Luther King, Jr).

A PEOPLE PERSON

Besides being a Scholar Librarian, a popular professor, an able administrator, an efficient event organizer, a practicing Gandhian, a dedicated social worker, Appa was also a family man to the core, inheriting and continuing the legacy of Indian joint family system. A number of uncles and elder cousins, from smaller towns, stayed with us, to pursue their higher studies. The formal boundaries between extended families were kept porous and diffused. Appa's friends, colleagues and office staff were also a part of this 'Family Conglomerate'. While Appa supported a large family, he also drew immense support from the same. He was a hard task master, both at office and at home. He would not like people to fritter away time.

Appa's magnetic personality, attracted lot of guests and visitors from various walks of life. Many a times, discussions and meetings, informal and sometimes formal, of the various associations that Appa was associated with, would be conducted in the 'Nadumane' of our house. Luminaries like Shri Adya Rangacharya (Kannada Playwright and Appa's teacher), Padmashri B.S. Kesavan (The first National Librarian of India), Dr. K. T. Pandurangi (Renowned Sanskrit Scholar and Professor), stayed with us for few days as guests. Many other prominent people visited our home. Some of them included –

Dr. K Shivarama Karanth(A distinguished Litterateur and Jnanapeetha awardee), Dr Raja Ramanna (Indian Physicist and PadmaVibhushana awardee), Prof Ku Shi Haridas Bhat (Distinguished Professor),
Dr. GirishKarnad (Renowned Playwright and Jnanapeetha awardee).
My Uncle and Aunt (Shashi Kaka and Leela Kaku) played host to such guests;

they would make arrangements for meetings and sometimes travel for guests. For youngsters like us, Shashi Kaka was the Boss of our gang. He cajoled and guided us, in organizing events, carrying out maintenance activities of our big old house and the premises surrounding it. It was an immense pleasure to work for this gang.

In came, in late 1980s, Dr. Sanjeev Kulkarni, an Obstetrician and Gynaecologist by profession. Sanjeev was later to become the son-in-law of Appa's sister, Ambakka. There was an overlap of independently cultivated views and interests between Appa and Sanjeev, on such topics as – Books, Education, Simplicity of life, Gandhi, Environment, Kannada and Culture. Young Sanjeev ushered in new enthusiasm and assistance to Appa, enabling an even deeper involvement in his social engagements. I remember how the two would go together to collect funds for the construction of an independent building for Gandhi Peace Foundation. Rationalists that they were, they both would discuss about the orthodoxy of Indian Society. They together formed a cultural outfit in memory of 'Ra Ha Deshpande'. Several speeches, plays, performances of Yakshagana and Hindustani Classical music were arranged under this banner. Sanjeev also brought in, the likes of Shri Anna Hazare and Medha Patkar to give a talk and stay with us.

In spite of its challenges and complexities, the Joint family taught us to see positives in others and live in harmony. Appa's dictum was 'Live together'. In this aspect, he led us from the front with an ease and style that I fear is inimitable.

IN THE TWILIGHT OF LIFE

Appa felt very strongly that our Great Grandfather – Ra Ha Deshpande (Rahade) had not received the due recognition for his contributions to the land of Kannada. According to Appa, Rahade was a Forgotten Leader, much like the Forgotten Empire of Vijaynagara. It was his ambition to construct a comprehensive biography on Rahade, by culling information from his own personal diaries written between 1880 and 1930. It was my fortune that I could get involved in this and work closely with him. Appa had an eye for detail and was fastidious about the accuracy of facts.

During this time, alongside, the long hours of work on the table, Appa also did a lot of physical activities. He was finicky about cleanliness. He would

spend lot of time in dusting and keeping the premises clean. He would not accept that his body was aging. In the summer of 2010, Appa underwent anepisode of severe dehydration. It was followed by a paralytic stroke. He was 87 then. Appa could not move the limbs of his right side. His speech had become blurred. An young confident Doctor, Ram Kaulgud, who was attending to him along with Dr. S. R.Hebbal, said “There could be a partial recovery, if it takes place within a month. Thereafter, the chances of recovery would grow slim, unless a great effort on physiotherapy is put, which would be strenuous at his age.”

A month passed, but the recovery was slow and in sufficient. But Appa was determined to get back on his feet. He would loudly and religiously recite the '*Ramaraksha*' and '*Durga Stotras*.' His devotion apart, this regular recitation, provided adequate exercise to his tongue and vocal chords. Quickly, his speech became clear. After about six months of persistent efforts and rigorous practice of Physiotherapy, coupled with determination and positive outlook, Appa regained almost all of his movements.

Dr Ram Kaulgud, who, by then, had become our family friend and a regular visitor, was pleasantly surprised. Dr Prashant, Doctor of Physiotherapy from the SDM College of Medical Sciences, Dharwad, wanted to take Appa to the college and have him address the students on the story of his recovery, even while the age was against him. Appa's Urinary bladder remained affected and he had to live with a catheter for the rest of his life. After this, Appa did not move out of Dharwad. He could attend some public functions too. He would take daily walk within our compound.

Appa followed the gospel of 'Bread Labour' of Mahatma Gandhi, even in this condition. Appa would explain, “Every person must earn his bread by labouring with his own hands.”Appawould not take his breakfast, without sorting some grains or cleaning the vegetables.

The paused project on bringing out a book on Ra. Ha. Deshpande, was later, brought to fruition under the able hands of Dr. Krishna Kolhar-Kulkarni, a scholar-historian from Vijayapura, in the Year 2015.

There is a room in our house upstairs, annexed to the main building, that Appa held in great reverence. This room has its own history. It was here that our ShriRa.Ha.Deshpande penned his magnum opus – *Karnataka*

Samrajya, a book on the history of Karnataka, that made him the First Historian of Karnataka. It was here that a cyclostyling machine was secretly kept during the freedom struggle of India and the pamphlets on patriotism and other activities were printed and distributed. It was here again that in 2013, my brother-in-law Sudheendra Hangal and my sister Jayu, after their return from the USA, decided to open a start-up venture by name 'Amuse Labs'.

From my point of view, this was a wonderful thing to happen for Appa. Appa could spend time with Jayu and her family. The chirping of her children filled the house again.

Appa loved children genuinely. The tantrums, nagging, whining of his grand children would seldom bother him. He held that corporal punishment should never be given to children. He would quote from the 'Ode', a Poem by William Wordsworth on child hood - “Trailing clouds of glory do we come from God, who is our home “.

KEEP SMILING

Appa would often tell 'Keep Smiling' to everyone, while he himself practised the same.

On gloomy day of the 4th August 2018, it was around 10.00 pm in the night, by the time we all reached Dharwad, from Bangalore. Our holy home – '*Ramachandra Kripa*' was completely occupied by friends, relatives, neighbours and many others. It was drizzling outside. Appa was sleeping at the center of the Nadu mane, with flowers all around.

I learnt that Appa had once told Prof Tigadi,Retired Director of Kousali Insitute of Management Studies, Dharwad, “You will see me wearing a smile on my face when I depart.” So true! Appa's mystical and photogenic face was still fresh, even though he had silently slipped in to a sleep that afternoon.

Sudheendra, my brother-in-law remarked, 'It is end of an era.”