

Professor Narayan Misra

Narayan Misra was born in 1889 on baisakh shukla chaturdasi (nrushingha chaturdasi) in a conservative Brahmin family in village Jagannathpur of Puri district in Orissa. His father was Jaydev Misra, and mother was Subhadra Devi. Jaydev Misra was a Sanskrit pundit with his profession being to act as a priest in his village and in the neighbouring areas.

Narayan Misra had his early schooling in and near his village. There is an amusing incident when he appeared in the minor examination, at that time held for Bihar and Orissa. He was a very bright student in his school, and was a favourite of his teachers, who expected him to do very well in the examination securing a good rank. But when his teacher was looking at the newspaper (with him), he did not find his name among the rank holders, and slapped him. Then they found that his name was in fact at the top of the rank holders! His teacher was looking at the list of rank holders omitting the first two/three names! My father, when he narrated this incident, told me that that was the best compliment he could expect, as he had done better than what his teacher was expecting.

His elder brother was Baikunthha Nath Misra, who was a school teacher at Baripada, in Mayurbhanj district of Orissa. During Narayan Misra's early school days, once he required a book and for this purpose was given one rupee by his elder brother to purchase the same. The book was available at Cuttack, which was twenty-two kilometers from the village. But, when he got the money, he made up his mind to walk to Cuttack and get the book, and then return, reaching back in the village next morning, spending the night at his maternal uncle's place during night. This reflects his desire to get the book immediately once he had the money, and reflected in his results in the examination. My father used to say that this was a timely help by his elder brother which he would always remember.

Narayan Misra did his matriculation from Ravenshaw Collegiate School at Cuttack. The family was extremely poor to support him. So he used to do cooking for some families to gather together means for his own wherewithal and the expenses in the school. During this period he went through a lot of hardship, some times being forced to use the street light for his studies!

After his matriculation examination, he studied Intermediate in Science in Ravenshaw College, situated at that time in the same campus as the School. I believe during this time he started getting some assistance from Mr. Madhusudan Das, a well-known leader of Orissa during those times. He got a high first division, and continued to get partial support from Mr. Das for his studies at Presidency College at Calcutta.

He did his Honours and M.Sc. in Physics from Calcutta University. He got a first class in honours, but got a second class in his M.Sc. The reason he gave for this was that he neglected his studies to devote too much time to games and sports during that time. In fact, he once mentioned that his being there in the hockey field during that time was being regarded as a curiosity by his class fellows, as to 'what is this supposed book worm doing in the hockey field'? I may also mention by the way that he taught me hockey (with a small hockey stick) before alphabets when I was about four years old!

After his M.Sc. he came back to Cuttack looking for a job. In fact, he was the first M.Sc. from Orissa. When he went and met the then DPI of Bihar and Orissa, who was a Britisher, for a job in Physics, he was told by the DPI that they had already made up their mind to give the job to Narayan Misra who had passed that year! He of course congratulated him when he learnt that it was Narayan Misra who had come to see him. Prof P K Parija did his M.Sc. next year. He was initially in the Mathematics stream, but changed to Botany for further studies, and in fact, was a world figure for his researches in that field. Arta Ballav Mohanty, the well-known Professor and scholar of Oriya literature, was the first post-graduate from Orissa.

At that time the first appointment for teachers in Science stream was designated as 'Demonstrator in Physics'. I believe this was as per the procedures in England; the Demonstrator however was in no way different from the lecturer of today both regarding duties and remuneration. The scale in which the appointments were made consisted of a time scale, where with seniority the incumbents were called Readers or Professors. In fact, Narayan Misra was Professor of Physics for the last ten years of his career in that scale, becoming the head of the department for the last eight years. By the way, the most inspiring teacher I had when I joined Ravensaw College as a student in 1947 was Professor Sriram Murthy, Demonstrator in Physics (at that time) whose lectures were like a stream of music to any one interested in Physics, always exciting students to look further than the limitations of the syllabus. In contrast my father's teaching had the complete focus of understanding of the subject by every one of the students!

As young teachers, Narayan Misra and P K Parija were offered scholarships to go to England for further studies. However, Narayan Misra's father objected to his going abroad and 'lose his caste'. He listened to him and refused to avail of the scholarship. This was then offered to S C Tripathy, who availed of the same and went abroad with P K Parija. It may be mentioned that Narayan Misra had no fear of losing his religion personally, but, it was his filial loyalty which made him do it. In fact, on many occasions he had expressed for example his appreciation of inter-caste marriage, and usually he was more liberal in his attitudes than most of the younger generations.

In 1943, Government of Orissa decided to have three more Colleges in Orissa, at Sambalpur, Puri and Balasore. Narayan Misra was appointed as special officer for Sambalpur College. He then became the first Principal of that College, known as Gangadhar Meher College.

In 1944, when father was in G M College, there was one incident which particularly impressed me. I was in class IX then in Sambalpur zilla school. At that time there used to be football matches amongst many teams of Sambalpur. The matches used to be held at G M College ground, and, at Police ground. On one day, the Principal (Narayan Misra) came to the College ground, and found three police constables looking after 'discipline' in the context of the football match. He asked who had permitted them to enter the College campus. The match stopped, and the constables said that they had been ordered by Superintendent of Police of Sambalpur to do this job. They were told bluntly that the SP did not have this authority. Then the President of Sambalpur Football association and the SP came to the spot. The President said that he had requested the SP to depute the personnel to look after the matches, and he got

the same rebuff that he did not have the authority to do so. The SP said that he would now request him to permit the same. Then Narayan Misra told him the actual reason for his anger. One or two days before that date there had been a match in the Police ground, where after the match many G M College students had entered the field when the match was over. SP himself had approached them to clear the field. Narayan Misra asked him, 'at that time did not you tell the students that 'don't you know that I am a white man?' What did you mean by that?' The SP, who was an Englishman, said that he was sorry that he had said it. Then it was agreed that the constables will stay there, but, shall not misbehave with any of the students.

I have written this in some detail because it reflects a sense of values even present when the Britishers were the masters. (i) The SP, an Englishman, apologized to the Principal, an Indian, for making comments that could be interpreted as 'racist'. (ii) Freedom of academic institutions was fully respected even when the administration had British personnel and academic Institutions had Indians. I wish that this situation be equally appreciated in Independent India!

Narayan Misra retired first in 1944. However, as there was an acute shortage of faculty in Physics, he was reappointed again in 1945-46. I particularly remember 15th August, 1947, when India gained independence. All of us, including Father, assembled in the tennis field of Ravenshaw College for the tryst at midnight. I had at that time just joined in first year class in Ravenshaw College. There was naturally a huge gathering, where we waited for our national flag to be unfurled, and listened to the speech of Jawaharlal Nehru. The speech had a tinge of sadness in it due to communal riots, and, as India had got divided.

There was an amusing incident on that occasion. Father inspired some ladies to recite hulahuli, and he joined them to do the same, as, sound of hulahuli is universally present in any auspicious Oriya function. The enthusiasm present at that time in all sections in India was so much obvious that I feel that this momentum of the masses was not only fully utilized, but generated cynicism after less than four/five years!

Narayan Misra continued to teach in Ravenshaw College until 1952 when he again retired. He would demonstrate most of the theories with experiments. I remember one experiment to illustrate that 'for a fluid at rest, pressure is transmitted undiminished throughout the medium'. In physics lecture theatre he would keep one or two windows near the last bench half closed, closing all other windows, and suddenly open the door at the opposite end. The windows would shut down with a bang, illustrating the above principle.

During my undergraduate days, 1947-51, we used to complete the course for Physics and Mathematics for the ensuing session during summer vacation. He would give a problem and ask me to work it out, thus converting theories to problems, a procedure he often adopted in the class. He very often emphasized that in order to succeed, one must fail – an advice the full relevance of which I recognized while doing research. He had not worked for his Ph.D., but his approach to studies was that of a researcher. One of his favourite statements was, to read physics, you must switch off the light, go to bed and think. This was a joke amongst his students, but then, for total concentration, any researcher adopts this procedure in some form or other. I have myself seen him adopting this procedure now and then.

Narayan Misra had an intrinsic love for his village. He created a village fund by himself donating paddy to this fund. Any one in the village could borrow paddy from this fund with half of the interest for the same as in the market, and return it next year. Gradually this fund increased, so that it was decided that persons from outside the village can also take loan from the same on payment of market rate of interest. The interest from this fund is used for say dola jatra, or later also for payment towards lighting of the streets in the village. After he passed away, his eldest son Padmanabh Misra was looking after it for some years. Ultimately he discontinued, but the fund still continues to be there for general use.

When I was a boy, I remember one incident. There was a big fire in a neighbouring village, and some of the villagers had come to father asking for assistance. His answer was typical – you take from the court yard any thing (like stone pillars or logs of wood) that could be useful to you. Later, in the bauri sahi of our village, some hutments were destroyed by fire. For rebuilding the hutments, here father approached government for some assistance. With half the assistance from the government and the other half contributed by himself, brick and cement houses were started to be built. Father himself, along with the kids of bauri sahi and some adults from there, contributed labour – literally, making the houses come up quickly. These houses were better than some of the houses of so called upper caste people of the village.

After his second retirement, he would be often seen in Physics department where he was respected as a father figure. He preferred to stay alone most of the time even when my elder brother, Padmanabh Misra, was collector, Cuttack. During 1964 there was wide spread student unrest almost in all parts of Orissa, focused mainly around Cuttack. There used to be huge protest rallies. It was believed that father had instructed Bhaina (my elder brother) that there should be no firing anywhere. Although it happened that way, I tend to believe that Padmanabh Misra, a very good administrator, used his own judgment as much as he listened to father. In the protest rallies, led by people like venerable Rama Devi, it was announced that any one indulging in any violence (like stone throwing) will be immediately handed over to the police for necessary action. The rallies were completely peaceful, and there was not even any lathi charge. In fact, during that time of mutual suspicions, the only person who could move freely among politicians, bureaucrats and students, was Padmanabh Misra, the collector, probably thanks to inspiration from father.

I wish our present leaders of Society will take a cue from people like Rama Devi and Padmanabh Misra/Narayan Misra to avoid unnecessary violence, for which all concerned are required not only to have integrity, but their actions show that they have integrity!

Narayan Misra passed away on 28th May, 1967. After that he has finally retired!

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