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Founder of The Indian Geographical Society

Prof. N. Subrahmanyam, M.A., L.T., F.R.G.S.,

(14.01.1885 - 29.01.1943)

I. Birth and Formative Years

The late N. Subrahmanyam was born in the town of Polur, (Polur Taluk, North Arcot District), his mother's maternal uncle's place on 14th January 1885. He came of Appayya Dikshita family which has produced in these four centuries a long line of celebrated Sanskrit scholars.

His father Arunachala Dikshitar (d. 1918) was an Additional Translator to the High Court, Madras, for thirty years. His services were engaged where high accuracy was required as in Privy Council Cases, thanks to his mastery of Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit and Law English.

Mrs. Balakucham, his mother, died when he was scarcely five years old; but her mother, Mrs. Lakshmi, a sweet flower of ancient Hindu womanhood, lived long enough to shed upon him her benignant influence.

Many a trait of his, observed in later life - his successful leadership of excursion parties and his drive, his wander-lust and impulse to travel far and wide to geographise his knowledge and concretise his Geography with tours all over India, Great Britain and the Continent, at his own cost - all these were derived from his maternal grandfather, C. Sivarama Aiyar (d. 1905), a man of strong will and decision of character, great drive and physical endurance, who did the pilgrimage from near Arcot to Benares on foot twice and would lead pilgrims of undisciplined relations without a mishap on the way in the eighties and nineties of last century when railway communications and means of transport were still primitive and circuitous.

Apropos, it may be mentioned that N. Subrahmanyam planned to write an Historical Geography of South India and for that purpose gathered materials and made tours to most places to trace on the ground the several routes and the scenes of battle and realise the geographical factors behind. But he sacrificed his own research opportunities, precarious as they were, in order to create full and substantial research opportunities for others at large.

From those grand-parents, five generations have come up, many of whom have made their mark in public life and service; by this widening circle of relations he was received with esteem; and he kept up affectionate contacts with them.

When it came to choice of profession, he chose Education under the shining example of his maternal uncle (and my father) C. Chandrasekhara Sastri, B. A., a profound Sanskrit and English Scholar; who dedicated himself to Education and who, in his brief years (d. 1887, 32 years old) - 'one crowded hour of glorious life' -under the patronage of the Maharajahs, Vizaya Rama Gajapathi Ras and Ananda Gajapathi Ras raised the High school at Vizia-nagaram to a Graduate College and became its first Principal and also the first Indian Principal of any College in South India up to that time.

No sketch of the late N. Subrahmanyam's character can omit the personality of his virtual Guru who moulded it and who was far and away the greatest factor in his mental and moral make-up. He was the late C. Chandrasekhara Iyer (d. 1915) of Royapuram, Madras; son to the erudite C. Krishnaswami Iyer, (d. 1883) cousin to that illustrious namesake Sastri, just mentioned, cousin to Sir C.V.Kumaraswami Sastri (d 1934) and grandson to the celebrated C. Ranganatha Sastri (d 1881) who was the first to receive education of the modern type. He was thus suckled in a great tradition of scholars and gentlemen. Prof. K. B. Ramanathan once described them as the Tondiarpet and Royapuram Circles with high cultural traditions making a happy blend of the East and the West; and of the Old and the New. He had a brilliant intellect, keen wit and playful humour; was simple as a child and sincere; was easily the master of two literatures, Sanskrit and English; and abreast of modern thought. He set us, boys, at ease in his company, encouraged us to be free in mind, to assess values; to speak with open heart; served us with the cream of Literature and Scientific Thought and with a store of instructive anecdotes. To talk with him was liberal education and to be with him was to be, as it were, in a true residential university. From him N. Subrahmanyam derived his social ease, catholicity, resilient and open mind and his capacity to meet situations and mix in societies.

He learnt Rapid Reading and Fluency in English, of his cousin H. H. The Puri Sankaracharya, and had his schooling up to V Form in Muthialpet High School, Madras. He passed his Matriculation and F. A. (corresponding to the modern Inter.) examinations in first class and graduated from Pachaiappa's College, Madras (taking a high second class) with History and Economics. His undergraduate studies included the Elements of Physics, Chemistry, Physiology, Elementary and Advanced Mathematics of Inter. Standard. This grounding helped him vastly in his self study of Modern Geography. He carried all the Sanskrit prizes and scholarships and got, the English Essay Prize open to all the classes of the College.

Some teachers left a deep impression upon him. The erudite Prof. Ramanathan infected him with zeal for Co-operation and the Teachers' Guild. There was the shrewd and sagacious Professor K. Ramanujachari who commanded respect and compelled the attention of every single member of the class, whatever the subject he taught. He was master of clear exposition and incisive analysis. Better teacher there was none to be

mindful of the weak and put them into the fold. His methods of teaching were not lost upon N. Subrahmanyam or other fellow-pupils who like him took to Education - C. S. Srinivasachari, T. K. Duraiswamy Iyer, A.Venkatraman etc. He was stirred by the boundless enthusiasm of Prof. Drew lecturing on Tennyson or Greek History, which in his day he emulated and followed. The greatest influence at College however flowed from Mr. Yates, the Principal, who taught his pupils not to cram but to think, to look beyond the Lecture Room and Examination Hall to Cultural Aspects. In his frequent 'At Homes' to which we were invitees he made us feel at ease and taught us to admire Art and Music and gave us glimpses of English life. The friendship struck up then grew with years and has been sundered now only, with the death of the pupil.

II. Government Service

Immediately after graduation, Mr. Yates appointed N. Subrahrnanyam, teacher in the High School, had him undergo training at Teachers College, Rajahmundry, and drafted him into Subordinate Educational Service, when he himself became an Inspector of Schools. He took his M. A. Degree in History some fifteen years after, while he was teacher, to qualify for College lecturership.

A man entering Government service at the lower rungs of the official ladder gets the chance, if he is diligent, of disciplining himself for all drudgery; and has the opportunity, if he has a waking eye, of looking abroad and gaining experience in many posts and at many places. The Government has created a certain number of posts and selects a certain personnel to fill them, who are expected to fit themselves into several of them; and the exigencies of service require a man to be rolled from one to another, irrespective of other considerations. That is in the order of things here. But a rolling lecturer can at least gather much knowledge and N.Subrahmanyam turned them all to advantage. He was ever a thorough and indefatigable worker and he was all the better, for serving at Rajahmundry; Mangalore; Villupuram; Madrasa-I-Azam; Presidency College and Saidapet. He had to lecture on History of several countries and on different periods of History; on Theory and Practice and History of Education; and on Geography both in substance and methods of teaching. As early as 1906, he learnt through Mr. Yates of the leaven of Modern Geography fermenting then in Britain; even while he was only History lecturer, his interest in Geography was keen; he cultivated it albeit under adverse conditions; got the modern outlook from the start and became geographer of first rank by dint of self-study. Off and on he was acting Lecturer in Geography and was appointed to the Chair at Saidapet permanently in 1926, which he filled with distinction till he retired from Government service in 1940.

III. Geographical Association

By this time a very potent influence began to exert its full force upon him and shape him for his life-work of Modem Geography, inspiring him with high standards and ideals, helping him break through his shyness and diffidence, and setting him on the ways and means. It came from another fellow-disciple of the late C. C. Iyer of Royapuram, the versatile Mr. M. Subramaniam, B.A., B.L., (his mother's cousin) a man of deep and wide

scholarship and of varied experience in affairs and organizations and modem movements here. Their talents were complementary, both idealists, the one a hard original thinker, the other a splendid Organizer and a notable man of action.

Both were now in Madras. Long before, he had persuaded N.Subrahmanyam when he was still hesitant (1916) to choose Modern Geography for his province in preference to History in which he was long a Lecturer, or Sanskrit in which he was a College Prizeman. The former now awakened the latter to the importance of Modern Geography in Modern life and Modern Education; pointed out how it lay a virgin field here in South India where the labourers were few, where to labour was worth a man's ambition, and how a geographical movement generated here would travel far afield and shed its beneficent influence everywhere. Their combination was very fruitful and happy in results. Together they evolved the idea of a Geographical Association on a working plan which found ready support and response among a few kindred minds like Miss J. M. Gerrard (1926). The story of the Madras Geographical Association (now the Indian Geographical Society) has been told by Mr. M. Subramaniam, one of the founders, in his Presidential Address at Rishi Valley (Journal of Madras Geographical Association, Vol. XVI. P. 220; Para. 7 to 24).

Regarding N. Subrahmanyam's camel-load of burdens and activities, one may quote from it: "By his devoted work, by his obstinate refusal to be side-tracked under personal bickerings, by his perseverant energy and persistence in season and out of season, by his indefatigable lecturing tours, besides the normal duties of his office (the chair at Saidapet College) the Secretary, Mr. N.Subrahmanyam, has kept the objects (of the Association) steadily in view and has been fortunate in his colleagues who have accorded him their hearty co-operation."

And he had the satisfaction also of carrying out a cherished object of his-to erect a platform where can meet ladies and gentlemen, European and Indian, irrespective of caste, creed, colour, race, or sex, whoever, in short, takes an interest in Geography.

His work for Modern Geography was, indeed, astonishing in its value and variety, in its volume and range. Not only the normal duties of a Secretary but the organising, maintaining, or running, and providing for the last detail, in all the spheres of that activity-Provincial Geographical Conferences, Summer Schools with intensive courses done in short time, Refresher courses for teachers repeated at different centres, memorials and interviews, for pressing Geography on the highly-placed, finding persons to lecture and arranging for meetings, taking out excursion parties under his ever-watchful leadership, preparing syllabuses and regulations for discussion; besides writing elementary text-books and making geographical tours on his own account. And his zest for work never flagged, nor his zeal.

The success has been great. This other extract from the same may be read with interest:-

Ideals and achievements: -We may now compare the work done by the Association with the objects it set itself at the outset. They are (a) to promote and diffuse geographical knowledge; (b) to secure for Geography its proper place in Schools; Colleges and Universities; (c) to help to improve the methods of teaching Geography; (d) to work for a School of Geography being started; (e) to promote studies about South India from various standpoints.

The Madras Geographical Association can look back with legitimate pride on the work it has accomplished. Sixteen years; and every year crowded with activities and crowned with success!

"It found Modem Geography nowhere in South India (or India for that matter) and has relied it here to its rightful place. It has successfully educated the educators and educated the people at large, It has been endeavouring to make the public cultivate "a geographical mind" as Mr. Sabhesan put it and to "geographise education" as Dr. Cousins suggested. Most gratifying of all; the work done by the Association has been hailed as unique in India and first-rate on its merits by veteran British Geographers. By its exertions it has earned for Madras the fame of being 'the cradle of Modern Geography in India' (Dr. S. P. Chatterji of Calcutta University). And its example is spreading.

IV. The Dedicated Life

Upon the founding of the Association, he consecrated his life to Modern Geography. Even in his last mortal hours while in agonising struggles with death, his thoughts lay with the Indian Geographical Society and for its future. His eager earnest emotional nature found its mission of life and it transfigured him into a Zealot and Enthusiast. He lived, moved and had his being in Geography. He thrust the importance of Geography upon all and sundry, who-ever he came across, unmindful of derision, ridicule or boredom. He lost no opportunity of spreading geography whenever and wherever an occasion was found or made. Accepting invitations, he would travel at his own cost near and far and seize the occasion of any meetings) school or college societies, Teachers' Guild, Primary or Secondary School Teachers' gatherings, Indian Science Congress, All-India Educational Conference. It may be as stop-gap or a specially arranged course; he would accept it all. No call too high, none too low, none for which he would not make time. Geography Subrahmanyam was a sobriquet that clung to him and he received with smiles the epithet of 'Enemy of Geography' conferred by some candid friends of his. It gave him pleasure that his name was associated with geography even in such arresting manner.

A prophet is not honoured in his own country; and it is a tribute to his earnest and hard work that even in Madras also he succeeded in carrying with him a good part of Madras opinion. It took years of spade-work to build up a reputation there second to none and it was too firmly set for his detractors to injure it, so long as he was alive.

Outside the dust and heat of Madras, his work and worth were seen in true light and correct perspective. His influence extended in ever-widening circles; from Travancore to Kashmir, he spread the gospel of Modern Geography with missionary Zeal and found his reward in the quickened life that followed in the places he visited which stand out in bold relief against the life where his influence did not reach. At Lahore, for example, he made a strong plea for the establishment of a Punjab Geographical Society; he was delighted beyond measure when two years later he received a letter from its Secretary that it was his exhortation and the reconciliation he effected there, between rivals that led to the formation of that society with a record of work already (1941) to its credit. In Indore, only three weeks before his death (January, 1943), he capti-vated the men of light and leading and shaped their attitude to Modern Geography, interesting them in the Indian Geographical Society.

Above all his other services, there stands his inauguration of the Modern Geographical Movement in India and his advancement of it by and through his dedicated life as leader, path-finder and road-builder. To have inspired and led a great educative and educational movement, which is also a part of the creative evolution at work in India, is his enduring fame and entitles him to rank with the great educationists of India of our times.

Recognition came slowly but surely. At the Silver Jubilee Session of the Indian Science Congress (Calcutta, 1938) Dr. H. J. Fleure F.R.S., the doyen of British Geographers, in proposing his name for Presidentship of the Geography Section at the next session at Lahore (1939) declared that his work was meritorious and, that he had done everything a man could do for Geography in India. Similar tributes of recognition came from other eminent British Geographers such as Professors Fawcett, Ogilvie and Dudley Stamp. Recognition coming from such quarters, from men whose names are so well-known in the world of Geography, gave him the proudest moments of his life.

His Lahore Address (1939) on the Geographical Personality of India also met with appreciation at their hands. Prof. Fawcett, among others, wrote that he read over again that "brilliant" address, which seemed rather like notes of Human Geography and desired its expansion.

V. Last Years

After retirement with pension from Government service on completing 55 years of age (Jan. 1940), his hands were as full of work as ever. He gave to Geography all the hours thus released from official duties.

He had now a more crowded programme of work for the Association than ever before and gave himself no rest. Nor could he spare time for the books be had been contemplating to write and for which he had taken copious notes for long years - Historical Geography of South India, Tour in Europe, Teaching of Geo-graphy, etc. He laid them all aside - absorbed in the greater task of creating full opportunities for the men to come.

In 1941 the old Madras Geographical Journal was renamed the Indian Geographical Journal. From now on, his ambition was to re-create the Madras Geographical Association into an India wide body and to it he gave his time and thoughts. He had the strong support of men like Mr. Rowland Bowen of N.W.F. Province who gave the first stimulus, and from Lahore to Dharwar he received encouraging approval. He was able to carry his colleagues with him and he got transformed the old Association into the Indian Geographical Society with a constitution like that of the Royal Geographical Society of London. He intended it to be much more than a change of name. He travelled at his own cost to Kashmir, Baroda, Bombay and Indore and persuaded several to interest themselves in the Society. The last three years (1940-42) were devoted to this work. It is pathetic reading to note this in a letter addressed to him (dated 7-3-43 and received here on 2-4-43) which Mr. Yates wrote, "I can't tell you how delighted I was to hear from you again with your family news and news of your dream fulfilled - an All India Geographical Society".

It was the last scene of all when in the midst of these labours and activities, on his return from Indore and Trivandrum, the curtain dropped on him with tragical suddenness (Jan. 29, 1943). Dr. Heron said how deeply he felt the loss of a man who was a Geographer every inch of him, who learnt Geography and taught Geography, and in short, was Geography itself. Other feeling tributes are still coming in, from far and wide showing the appreciation as well as the extent of his service to Geography.

VI. General and Personal Traits

Idealist as he was, he would look to the practical side of things. He was always at his best in the many committees and other bodies such as those of the University, Teachers' Guild, Co-operative Societies, etc. He came to them after full preparation, knowing every inch of the ground. Keen on the promotion of business he would reconcile the diametrically opposed, bridge yawning gulfs and seek the via media. He kept an open mind and was ready to change the position he took up, when convinced by the discussion. He stood on no false prestige (all prestige is false, he said with his Guru C. C. Iyer).

As lecturer, he was genial, whether at school or college or elsewhere. He was a good speaker, speaking with steady eloquence, holding the attention of every member of the audience in the manner of his teacher Prof. Ramanujachariar; and would also step beyond the syllabus to inspire them with the great things of the subject. Crammers, too, found it a pleasure to listen to him and follow with the head, as aptly described by one of his pupils.

With his colleagues, he mixed on terms of mutual respect and with his students he was very popular. Long after they passed from under his authority having left school and college, they used to keep up with him and seek counsel on personal matters as well. He helped them with wise and helpful advice - not only students but colleagues, friends and others. He was eager to do his bit and help forward the deserving.

As excursion-leader, he was all eyes and ears, arranging and planning everything in advance, and selecting and explaining the things to observe, with a view to their geographical importance. He would keep careful watch over the flock, rallying them with his whistle, keeping to the time-table and bringing them back home in safety. He was the poor man's friend, cutting costs to the bone. It was a personal triumph to him to have led with great success a geographical party of about thirty persons over a thousand miles doing geography in Mysore for ten days at a cost per head of about Rs. 35 only, all inclusive.

Though after 1926, he lived for an idea, so to say, and was Geography-mad, as it were, his enthusiasm (unlike Prof. Drew's) was tempered with saving common-sense and a shrewd understanding of the situation. The Royapuram training had inured him to humour even at his own expense.

A remarkable feature of him was his excellent business habits and financial integrity. These were his characteristics even as a boy and they stood him in good stead when in later life; he had much miscellany of work to get through. He lived through life an upright man.

He was a voracious reader and industrious, and ready with tongue and pen. His intellect was served by a strong memory for words and places and things. He could easily pick up old familiar faces after long years of separation. He would gladly learn and gladly teach, take immense pains to master a new situ-ation. For example, he used to conform to the exacting conditions of Mr. M. Subramaniam and take lessons, all the first three years of the Association, until he knew the ropes perfectly at last. He was ever handsome in his acknowledgements, as when at last year's Annual Meeting of the Association he introduced Mr.M.Subramaniam as the brains, himself the hand, in those early years. He gave everyone his due and that generously.

He was simple in life and manners, was plain living, without sides; unostentatious and unpretentious. Genial in company, he was social and sociable, and kindly. He wore his heart on his sleeve, though daws might peek at it. He would share his thoughts and feelings, his hopes and fears with all, making no secret of them. And his emotional nature was sensitive to carping criticism and back-biting. He felt keenly the injustice of aspersions and insinuations, took offence and was prone to sally out and fight, keeping himself, however, ever ready to forget and forgive.

A College-friend, Mr. P.C. Chetty, B.A., dropping in by chance, found him busy at his desk and wrote: 'My friend, whose enthusiasm is of an infectious quality, is the founder of a Geographical Association, the first of its kind in India. Though he has passed the age of superannuation at which men unlearn such subjects, my friend is never tired of increasing his stock of knowledge which has now assumed colossal proportions. He is certainly a credit to his alma mater' (Free-lance Writer, April-July 1942 p. 13).

A normal day before his retirement from his Chair at Saidapet (say October 1938) would find him rise at 3 a.m., take brisk walks in his garden and settle down to work at 4 a.m. First, the college work; next, reading up new books to keep abreast of Geography and Literature. Typing and proofs for the Press, Maps, Correspondence. 9 to 10 a.m. Breakfast and to the College. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at College: usual lectures on Geography-teaching and special ones on Rousseau and Pestalozzi; and attending to administrative matters. Home again by 5 p.m. and 5 to 9 p.m. carrying on with work left unfinished in the morning. 9 to 9-30 p.m. dinner, and so to bed by 9-45 p.m. On Saturdays and Sundays and holidays he overtook arrears whether left over or due to going on tours. An hour's nap after the morning meal was the only luxury he indulged in after retirement (Jan. 1940). This full time-table was diversified by visitors who were welcome at any time without previous appointment, by social functions and by meetings which he seldom missed; by going out and arranging for lectures. The calls of house-keeping would come in now and then; and very often the ruffled children would demand his attention as they cut in with disputes to compose. His amusements were the morning walks; tours and travels; social functions; and motoring for business. He cultivated a taste for music late in life; and he would have it on the radio as an undertone while he was busy at work. All his leisure he gave to work and his work gave him pleasure. The more his work, the greater his pleasure. It used to be a wonder to us how he could manage time for so much out-turn. He got the best out of time by his using it carefully and doing things once-for-all; helped by his business habits, he found time for all things.

He was a warm friend, a good companion and mixer. The picture his last years' students carry of him is of the loving father lecturing with his last child seated by his side. In person, he was of middle height and medium build; fair of complexion; with a big round head and full speaking eyes, the eager face easily expressive of his mind, now lit up by joys and hopes, now darkened by griefs and fears.

He married twice. The first wife was Mrs. Rukmini (daughter to C. Srinivasa Iyer, C. C. Iyer's brother); she was genial and cheery, endowed with robust common-sense. She relieved him of house-keeping, took lessons herself and helped him with typing notes for his lectures. When she died (1924) without surviving issue, he married again; his second wife was Mrs. Annapurni (daughter to M. Swaminathan now in war service in Sudan), who excelled in house-keeping. She died in 1937, leaving two boys and two girls, all of tender years.

It has been a melancholy thing to think of him as dead; I almost feel his warm genial presence even as I write. He was my cousin, my father's sister's son. We have known each other for the last 54 years. We grew for years together and have shared griefs and joys together and he would look up to me for comfort and sympathy, opinion and understanding until death has closed his beaming eyes at last. Such was N. Subrahmanyam as I knew and I pay with tears the tribute to his memory.