

PERSONAL REMINISCENCES of Prof. D. D. Kosambi

By **Sri R. P. Nene** as told to **Arvind Gupta**

(Sri R. P. Nene - left leaning intellectual was DDK's friend and assistant)

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Nene got first attracted to Kosambi on reading; the latter's review of Dange's book 'Primitive Communism'. This review was published in the BOM Journal in 1949. Prior to reading this review, Nene was quite impressed by Dange. In his review of Dange's book Kosambi with his vast knowledge of Indology blew the book to smithereens. Nene sensed profoundness in Kosambi's critique, but Nene's own understanding of Indology at that time being so insufficient so he went to Com D. K. Bedekar for discussions and advice. Com. D. K. Bedekar (Sudhir Bedekar's father) went to BHU to do his engineering. He got involved in political activities there and was also associated with a terrorist group. Finally did his B.A. (Philosophy). Bedekar was an original thinker. He joined in the communist party in the 1930's. Though he also partially suffered from the rigidities of the party leadership, but he had an enquiring mind and always harboured doubts about the line being towed by the communist leadership. Ultimately, because of differences with B. T. Randive he broke away from the party in 1948. In 1948, six communists including Bedekar, after leaving the party wrote the book 'The Left Legacy'. Bedekar also wrote a critique of Lalji Pendse's portrayal of Shivaji as a peasant leader. Bedekar rightly said that Shivaji was by no stretch of the imagination a peasant leader - despite his valour and organisational capacities. Bedekar was also associated with the working class movement in U.P for a while. Bedekar recalls the story of a strike period. There were two reservoirs - one for the caste Hindus and the other for the Harijans. The Harijans demanded that there be only one reservoir both for the caste Hindus and the Harijans. But at that time under the pretext of trying to maintain an overall working class unity the communist party did not pay attention to this demand of the Harijans. Later, Bedekar would point out this example as an error in the communist line. According to him the Harijans demand being anti-imperialist and anti-feudal should have been upheld. Bedekar told Nene that Kosambi's criticism of Dange's book was justified, though Kosambi could have used a less acerbic language. Kosambi was to say about Dange's book, "The book should not have been written in the first place. It is not even worth a review, but for the fact that it has been written by a founder of the Communist Party of India."

During the 50's the government was constantly arresting the communist leaders and their contact, with a view to crushing the movement. Nene at the request of Bedekar started helping Mrs. Bhagwat in the PPH/Poona (People's Publishing House) from 1954 onwards. The PPH/Poona at that time was running at a loss and the Bombay/PPH wanted to close down the Poona branch. Nene systemised the PPH/Poona, However, in 1961 the PPH/Poona was totally washed away in the Panshet Dam floods, Rs, 50,000/- worth of books were destroyed.

By this time Kosambi had become known for his participation in the World Peace Movement. Without an appointment, Nene and a student leader went to Kosambi, to discuss the Peace movement. Kosambi was mellow and before showing them the door

Kosambi said, "Look, I stand for peace but my dog does not stand for peace. So next time take an appointment (His dog's name was Rocker).

After taking an appointment the student leader and Nene went again to Kosambi. This time for an hour and a half Kosambi told them about the World Peace Movement. In the end the student leader asked him, "But, how do we get this message across to the students?"

To this Kosambi retorted, "Young man if after talking to you for one and a half hour if you have still not understood the world peace movement, I have no more time for you. Your exams are fast coming near, so you better go back and study your books."

After Nene had started working in the PPH he wrote a letter to Kosambi that they would like to supply him with the latest books - that the PPH would deliver the books at Kosambi's house so that he didn't waste time in coming to the shop. All Kosambi had to do was to tick mark the book lists. However, Kosambi himself came to the PPH (which was then on the Laxmi Road side) and said that he would come every Sunday and buy the new periodicals.

On the PPH policy of just stocking soviet books Kosambi commented, "Why confine yourself with only communist literature, instead stock progressive books by Sartre etc. Unless there is a very strong communist movement for the very viability and survival of the bookshop you'll have to stock progressive literature (which is more than just soviet books)." But the PPH policy was very rigid at that time. Kosambi went to the extent of saying that if the PPH/Poona wanted a change the overall PPH policy he (Kosambi) would go and talk it with Dange. But knowing Dange, and Kosambi's critique of his book, Nene suggested that Kosambi needn't trouble himself.

Later on the PPH/Poona also thought of branching into publishing. Nene approached Kosambi and told him that the PPH/Poona would like to collate some of Kosambi's articles into a booklet, as their first publishing venture. Kosambi quipped, "Will my articles sell?" But later he agreed.

Kosambi gave Nene a set of his articles and told him, "Why don't you include my review of Dange's book too." Kosambi had not known that Nene had earlier read his critique of Dange's book.

Nene said, "I'd rather not include the review of Dange's book. This is because I sincerely want the party comrades to read your works. If I include the review of Dange's book than it might deflect some party people and probably might dissuade them into not buying the book." To this Kosambi's retort was, "That's a nice salesman. We'll exclude that article."

Thus came out 'Exasperating Essays' in 1956. Out of 3,000 copies 2,500 copies were in paperback and were priced at Rs.2/- each. The rest 500 copies were library editions priced at Rs. 3.75 each. Kosambi was given a 15% royalty on the sale of these books. Kosambi first refused the royalty but in the end said, "Well if you have money give it to me. I'll just buy some more books from you."

Patwardhan's Press - the best press in Poona at that time was chosen to print 'Exasperating Essays'. Nene did all the initial proof reading. But for the final proof reading he wanted Kosambi to spare some time. Kosambi said that he had only one hour

free in the morning from 5 A.M. to 6 A.M. before he took the Deccan Queen. So Nene would ring the bell at 5 A. M. sharp. Punctuality was a craze with Kosambi. He was more a German in punctuality than an American. On every Sunday Kosambi came to the PPH. When Kosambi saw that Nene was not interested in making money in the PPH he invited Nene to accompany him on field trips. Kosambi would show you see a microlith or a megalith and you'd understand it better, (there is some controversy over some of the megaliths identified by Kosambi. Some of them according to archaeologists do not confirm to the international codes. Kosambi thought H.D. Sankalia to be "Very superficial."

As Nene came closer to Kosambi, the latter would often advance money for the PPH bookshop. Kosambi was capable of extra ordinary affection, but there was to be no let up in the standards prescribed by Kosambi. If an appointment had been made, it had to be kept up religiously. If a word had been given for doing something it had to be done or else a proper explanation to be given. There was to be no laxity in punctuality or payments etc.

Kosambi would tell Nene, "I'm glad that you are not carried away by the party line."

About Dange Kosambi said, "Here's a man who has a, capacity for some scholarship, but this man just refuses to see things." As the PPH/Poona was washed off in 1961 because of the Panshet floods, and again restarted only five years later, so Nene, in the meanwhile collaborated on some projects with Kosambi.

One project which Kosambi had in mind was the SHIRAL SETH — a huge clay image made following **Nag Panchmi**. People set up these images in different street corners for worshipping. They last for 2-3 days. The biggest and the oldest image is installed near the Ganpati Temple in Kasba Peth. In Puranic literature this deity is referred to as 'Aughat che raja' - a king who lived for a very short time. He was very generous and distributed all his property amongst his subjects.

But in Gujarat the same deity is known as Shiral-Seth (genesis in some merchant). A cheroot is placed between the lips of the deity. It probably represents some reincarnation of Shankar.

Kosambi wanted Nene to get some photographs of the Shiral Seth deities in Poona, and also to collect some preliminary first hand data. Are the children encouraged to celebrate this deity? Is this cult popular only in the Brahmin bastis?

It so happened that in that particular year it rained very heavily on **Nag Panchmi**. Photographs could be taken only at heavy cost - flash, umbrella protection etc. So, Nene let it go that year.

But next year Nene took the photographs of Shiral Seths and took them to Kosambi. On seeing the photographs the joy which Kosambi expressed cannot be put down in words, Kosambi told Nene ecstatically, "That's a real scholar, who doesn't forget things but pursues them doggedly." The next thing which Kosambi did was to buy a box of Cadbury's chocolates for Nene and for himself.

On his field trips Kosambi would ask the villagers to recount whatever they knew about a-village deity or funerary. Often he would receive very disjointed answers. On returning back to Poona, Kosambi would dispatch a sheaf of paper plus postage to the

village priest, teacher or some other literate person requesting them to jot down whatever they knew about that particular deity/funerary. This he did with the intention of not burdening the villagers with their own stationary etc. However, this method of eliciting information seldom met with any success. Nene remembers of only one instance when the people replied back. Nene feels that it would have been better if Kosambi had delegated this responsibility to him and others who could have pursued these matters on a regular basis and collated more information. When his strategy did not yield the expected results, Kosambi would lament, “What kind of people do we have. They don’t even write back, even when I send them the stationary. This way how can we preserve our culture and develop scientific temper.”

Comrade Nene recalls a very interesting incident. On his frequent field trips, Kosambi came across a village with the unusual name of **GOMASHI** - which when translated literally would mean ‘GADFLY’. The name *Gomashi* intrigued Kosambi. He enquired from the villagers the genesis of the name of this village, but got no worthwhile stories. What should gadflies be doing here? Could be it because of the presence of too many milk cattle or else fruit trees in the old past. But there was no evidence to support this. Even Kosambi’s friends in BORI drew a blank and had no clue to the answer. So, Kosambi decided to have a better look at the village. He discovered a dilapidated cave there (called ‘Leni’ in Marathi). On entering the cave with his torch he found some engravings in the Brahmi inscript. From this Kosambi concluded that it must be a very ancient village belonging to the Buddhist period. From here Kosambi arrived ingeniously at the root of the word *Gomashi*. Buddha was also called *Gautam Rishi*, which got corrupted to *Gotmarshi*, and which in turn got corrupted to *Gomashi*. The village *Gomashi* lay on an ancient trade route.

Kosambi also discovered that Karla and Junnar also lay on ancient trade routes which led to Kalyan. Kosambi relied much more heavily on field evidence and placed very little faith on the written records.

In Karla, on *Dhenu ka katta* he discovered the SPHINX from which he concluded the Greek influence.

Collecting local accounts, legends, and anecdotes, particularly from old women was the only way to reconstruct a true history.

Com Nene would assist Kosambi in various ways. He would post his letters, Kosambi used to say, “If you post the letters they seem to reach fast.”

John Irwin - curator of the British Museum and a great personal friend of Kosambi used to say that Kosambi used to fear death. Kosambi had a premonition that he would not live long. While walking on the Sambhaji Bridge, Kosambi would often point towards Onkareshwar and say, “Remember there is only a lone way passage that way, and I’m going to buy a ticket soon.” This was a standard joke with him.

Kosambi heavily relied on medicines/drugs. This probably was due to the American influence on him. He used to take heavy doses of aspirin for his arthritis. But as was characteristic of him he weighed the aspirin with the same precision as he weighed his punch mark coins. Kosambi would also complain of the lack of good specialist doctors in India, Often Nene would take him for a heart check up with Dr. Sardesai whom Nene knew well.

A day before his death Kosambi had come to the PPH/Poona shop in the LIC building. He talked with Com. Nene about three projects on which he seriously wanted to work.

1. To find the reasons for the failures (or partial success) of three important peasant movements in India.

- a) Nana Patil's movement in Satara
- b) Tebhaga movement
- c) Telengana movement

2. SHIRAL SETH deities.

3. To conclusively demonstrate the weakness of the written material for studies in Indology - Mahabhartar, Ramayana etc.

Why was Homi Bhabha mad at Kosambi?

Kosambi used to often decry the massive wastage in the heavy water plant of the Atomic Energy establishment. Once Kosambi met R. K. Khadilkar in the PPH/Poona. Khadilkar was an MP then. He also had a reputation of being friendly with all the top-notch people in the country - be it Bhabha or Nehru. R. K. Khadilkar told Kosambi, "You intellectuals don't help us otherwise we can raise the question of the massive wastage in the heavy water plant in the parliament."

Kosambi said, "Sometimes it is better not to identify the source. If you give me your word of not divulging the name then I'll give you the information."

But instead of raising the question in the parliament, Khadilkar, talked it personally to Bhabha after disclosing Kosambi's name. Bhabha told Khadilkar, "Yes, Kosambi is a very eminent man. But why should an eminent man know about atomic energy."

When Khadilkar told Kosambi about his talks with Bhabha, Kosambi got wild at Khadilkar. Bhabha wrote to Kosambi, "As you have so many interests to pursue you should retire. However, you can discuss the problem in my cabin."

Kosambi wrote back that he would like to retire 6 month's earlier.

Kosambi used to always walk the distance from his house to the Poona Station to catch the Deccan Queen to Bombay. He used to say that walking was a good exercise for his arthritis. He used to leave his house at 6.40 A. M. and reach the station at 7.18 A. M. Kosambi never considered himself to be primarily a mathematician. He had a kind of renaissance versatility - for which he acquainted himself with different sciences and languages. Because he wanted to read Dante in the original he learnt Italian.

His family life was sad. Except for the first 3-4 years his wife Nalini was the sufferer of Kosambi's toughness and rudeness. It was not economically very tough - though even economically Nalini couldn't fulfil the dreams of a Deccan Gymkhana housewife (the fridge etc came much later). From 1962 onwards the relationship had improved a little - Kosambi would be more tolerant, more talkative. His younger daughter always lived in fear of the father. Elder daughter Maya - married to Joy Sarkar (architect) passed away in

Sweden of cancer. Both Maya and Joy were fond of badminton and that is where they had met.

Kosambi is much better known abroad for his work than he is known in India. There were three reasons for this a) He was far ahead of his times; b) Personally, he could never bear fools; c) His exacting standards.

Yardi (later became an ICS) was a former student of Kosambi. Yardi went and asked Kosambi whether he should do his PhD in mathematics. Kosambi told him point blank that it would be better for him to look around for other career opportunities. Kosambi's students hardly understood him. Shahani - owner of Modern Book Depot is one example of it. Even in the TIFR, Kosambi never groomed students. No one talks approvingly of Kosambi in the TIFR. Wrangler Paranjpe of Poona was the first Indian to become a wrangler at Oxford. Tilak went to receive him at the port when Paranjpe returned to India as the principal of the Fergusson College. Later Paranjpe turned a political liberal and started attacking Tilak, and Tilak hit back.

Kosambi used to say of Paranjpe, "Apart from growing long moustaches this man has done nothing after getting his wrangler's degree. Why do people worship him so much in Maharashtra?"

Once Paranjpe fixed an appointment with Kosambi at 5 P.M. to discuss the opening of the department of mathematics. Paranjpe reached at 5 minutes past 5 P.M. at Kosambi's house. Kosambi opened the door himself and told Paranjpe that Kosambi was not available and shut the door.

Kosambi's microliths are now housed in the British Museum. His collection of books was sold by his family after his death to the JNU at the cost of Rs. 75, 000/-

Kosambi had two sisters. One passed away. The other Mrs. Sathye stays on Prabhat Road.

Kosambi was great praise for the painstaking and thorough work of Gode, Vellankar and Sukhthankar – all three at BORI / Poona.

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