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Visvesvaraya, an engineer of modernity

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His deeds became parables. Sir MV (third from left) and Jawaharlal Nehru. Photo: The Hindu Photo Library

On the occasion of his 150th birth anniversary today, Sir M. Visvesvaraya's legacy is best commemorated by bringing to it all the ethical questions that modern Indians have offered on the issue of development.

Sir M. Visvesvaraya, the oldest surviving icon from 20th Century Karnataka, occasions various sentiments. Enthusiasts of Bangalore's image as a high-tech city see in him an early champion of modern industry. Whereas those sick of the corruption in public life cherish him as a symbol of probity. Whatever the ends of invocation, Sir M. Visvesvaraya's charisma has proved durable.

Born to a poor Brahmin family in Muddenahalli in 1860, Sir M. Visvesvaraya (Sir MV) completed school in Chikballapura and Bangalore. (Folklore recalls he studied under a street lamp). After completing his B.A. at Central College in Bangalore in 1881, he studied engineering at the College of Science in Pune. Upon graduation in 1883, he started his career as an Assistant Engineer in the Public Works Department, Government of Bombay, where he put in 25 years of distinguished service. After a short stint of work for the Nizam of Hyderabad, when he helped control the Musi river floods, he became the Chief Engineer of Mysore in 1909. Three years later, he became Dewan of Mysore and stayed in office until 1918.

No well-researched biography

Few details about Sir MV's personal life have survived. Sir MV's 1951 autobiography, "Memoirs of my Working Life" takes its title in dead earnest, suggesting that he either fiercely guarded his privacy or felt it unimportant to share his experiences outside office. Pop hagiographies only echo familiar facts and fables about his achievements in office. A well-researched biography of Sir MV's life doesn't exist.

Sir MV became Dewan of Mysore at a time of controversy. The Brahmins of Mysore, especially the Hebbar Iyengars, had protested that all the Dewans of Mysore had been "outsiders" and not "Mysoreans." After the British ended their 50 years of direct rule over Mysore and restored conditional power to the Maharaja in 1881, they recruited Dewans from the Madras Presidency. This had invited resentment from the local officialdom in Mysore. Sir MV, who had earned a good reputation as the state's Chief Engineer, appeared the right candidate at this time. His ready identification as a Mysorean is a pointer to the complexities of cultural identities since he spoke Telugu at home and a grandparent on his father's side spoke Tamil.

Since 1881, the Mysore dewans had affirmed, with varying zeal, their desire to build an industrial economy in the state. Their views drew from the powerful 19th Century European ideas of social evolutionism that argued that *all societies moved from agriculture to modern industry*. The romantic longing for modern industry took on a feverish pitch with Sir MV. His famous slogan — *Industrialise or Perish!* — is testimony to his theoretical convictions and the intellectual politics in colonial India.

The colonial intellectual game is now familiar: the West had Reason, discipline, science, capitalism, in short, modernity; and, India was home to ignorance, fatalism, low technology, feudalism. The power of these illicit claims is evident in Sir MV's vision of progress, which sought *total* reform of local institutions. For him, most features of local society appeared a deviation from his imagined modern social order. He frequently regretted the lack of discipline, efficiency, and hygiene among Indians. His speeches usually included statistical comparisons to show the advanced state of the West and India's own backwardness. Japan was an inspiration since it had proved for him that an Asian country could also progress through a proper borrowing of Western methods.

Sir MV noticed "waste" in different spheres of social life. Interpreting society through the lens of productivity, he made an unusual observation: "Mental energy is wasted in caste disputes and village factions." For him, caste inequality was wrong as it did not allow for the optimal use of individual energies toward building a society. A popular anecdote has it that he exclaimed, "What a waste!" when he beheld the Jog Falls in Shimoga district. Hydro-electric power could be harnessed at the site of the water falls. Aesthetics had to be subordinated to considerations of utility.

His writings

Friendships in Pune with G.K. Gokhale, the political leader and M.G. Ranade, the nationalist economist, had had a formative impact on Sir MV's ideas of economic development. Besides "Reconstructing India" (1920) and a pioneer text on state planning, "Planned Economy of India" (1934), Sir MV published numerous short books on issues like village industrialisation, nation building, and unemployment. His writings are silent on India's historical experience or

culture. Culture usually surfaces in his writings as a technical problem in his scheme of achieving progress. In 1915, he observed that “supplanting the spiritual ideals of the country” was of paramount importance. Two years earlier, he had nodded at Montesquieu's spurious ideas about climatic effects on human nature: “In our warm climate, we have not got the same incentive to exertion and we may never be able to attain the same level of prosperity as Western people.”

Achievements

Sir MV resigned in 1918 in protest over the Maharaja's decision to set aside state jobs for “non-Brahmins.” By this time, he had helped establish the University of Mysore, the State Bank of Mysore, Mysore Chamber of Commerce, among others. Popular memory in Karnataka views the Bhadravati Iron Works and the Krishnarajasagar Dam (KRS) across the Cauvery river as two of Sir MV's major achievements. Both these projects stood as marvels of state planning. Despite incurring losses for the first 15 years, the iron plant was sustained by the state. Completed between 1911 and 1931, the KRS was likened to the Aswan dam. State guests (including Mahatma Gandhi, in 1927) were taken to visit these places. Generations of school children have visited here and partaken in Sir MV's romance with modern technology.

Sir MV did not denounce colonial rule publicly. Mysore's precarious position as an indirectly ruled state of the British did not allow him, or the Maharaja, or any of the other state functionaries, to be openly critical of the British. But he doubtless resented the colonial restrictions which impeded his plans. And never more intensely, perhaps, than when the British disallowed car manufacture in Bangalore in the early 1940s. Sir MV had tried hard, along with Sir Mirza Ismail, a successor Dewan of Mysore, to realise his dream project of establishing a car manufacturing plant in Bangalore.

After stepping down as Dewan, Sir MV took up intermittent government projects in Karachi, Bombay, Orissa, and Hyderabad as adviser and consultant. He travelled in Europe and the United States a few times as part of delegations of industrialists. He was awarded the Bharata Ratna in 1955.

Sir MV was of frail physique from a young age. His Sanskrit teacher in school had apparently remarked he wouldn't live past 30 years. He lived to see his birth centenary celebrations.

Many early 20th Century Kannada literary figures have written eulogistic poems about Sir MV. Their admiration for him, however, seems to rest less on an engagement with his thought than on trust in the purity of his intentions. He acquired popular fame as a person who strove selflessly to develop the country and make it modern. The excerpt below from a hit song from the 1972 blockbuster, “Bangarada Manushya (Man of Gold)”, the longest running movie in Kannada film history, is illustrative:

If Visvesvaraya had not toiled

And allowed Cauvery to flow

And not built Kannambadi?

Would this precious land have harvested gold?

Prosperous Kannada land, our prosperous Kannada land?

In the heady post-Independence days of nation-building, the imagined and actual deeds of Sir MV became parables for a society trying to find direction. He never used his office for personal favours. He never went late anywhere. He never spoke without prior preparation. He took dress formalities seriously. He worked hard. He was efficient. Delightful anecdotes around such claims surround the mythic figure of Sir MV.

Sir MV's enchantment with modern industrial civilisation is sure-footed. Not a trace of self-doubt exists. His legacy is best commemorated by bringing to it all the ethical questions that modern Indians have offered on the issue of development.

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