N.S. THE MAN, HIS VALUES AND HIS PERSONALITY
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In the last five chapters of this thesis, N.S' academic and associate achievements and to some extent his personal life were recounted and examined. Since luckily the professor is still with us, no final verdict on him is possible or permissible. But since most of his work has been done and he is in his late eighties and nearing the distant end of the academic tether one feels entitled to examine him and his work: such a life of ups and downs and such work of quality and so much quantity. This has been said before and is the justification for this thesis. Since in the earlier chapters his personal life and academic and other achievements have been examined, what remains is to assess the personality of N.S. himself; and personality in this context is taken to mean the values he holds and the extent to which he has stuck to them.

He was brought up in a school of thought, the foundation of which was Prof. R. Bhaskaran, the great political scientist and N.S' guru, supplemented by the thoughts of rational thinkers like Bertrand Russell and full of admiration for Aristotle to Darwin and J.S. Mill and Locke, Bentham and Burke, he is an amalgam in which the personality leans rather towards reason than to faith; logic and argument rather than dogma and violence. He fully believes that the 'Tower is the worst argument in the world.' He is so thoroughly a rationalist that after following his ‘message to his fellow human beings’ another person arrives at a conclusion, which is repugnant to N.S., still the latter will permit it to stand and like Voltaire grant his opponent his or her right to hold his view. This is the general theoretical rationalism of N.S.

1. This statement is attributed to William Penn.
2. Vide Appendix 1.
But it is two faceted. While his mentor R.B. was interested more in ideas and their logicality and multiple capacity for interpretation and took delight in such examination, N.S. was (and is) given to sentimentalism and emotionalism and some of his principles are based on these. The heart plays as great a part in his spiritual make up as his mind. That is why he goes beyond classical psychology and clings to psychoanalysis and so far as art is concerned he returns to Aristotle to approve of his idea of catharsis.

We shall first think of his public or theoretical ideals; and then consider his life's principles and the actual way of his life. About the economic theory the country has followed during the past half a century and more he has strong reservations. "The Western economic theory, be it free market or socialist, has been based on the historical experience and social structure of the West. In India India's own social structure have been overlooked in blindly following Western economic doctrines. That poverty abolition in India, the main problem, can be resolved only by radically reforming the society and making it modern is not perceived by policy makers who leave things essentially to learned economists and expert statisticians and forget gloomy sociologists who insist that the cart has been put before the horse which moves in an unintended third direction like Winkle's horse, is the summation of his criticism of Indian economic management. Politically he is strongly of the view that secularism and socialism have been terminologically 'abused' in India; and that Bagehot's advice and J.S. Mills' observations on representative Government have been ignored in operating what Karan Singh once called 'namke vaste democracy'. He is in complete agreement with Sir J.N. Sankar's wise observation that, 'If India is ever to be a house of a

3. The mind he knows is equally the source of sentiments as of thoughts. It is the mind that both thinks and feels and N.S. knows it but often yields to feeling.
4. Vide Aristotle's Poetics.
5. Vide N.S. H.T. and the other Essays' P.167.
nation able to keep peace within guard the frontiers, develop the economic resources of the country and promote science, then both Hinduism and Islam must die and be born again. Each of these creeds must be purified and rejuvenated under the sway of reason and science, and he often quotes this passage orally and in writing.

Some friends of his, professional teachers of philosophy in colleges wished to know to which brand of philosophical thought he subscribed; and wrote to him wanting to know. Though he did not immediately make his view available, he later made it clear that he was a 'radical humanist' who believed in total reform of Hindu society and complete avoidance of violence in speech and action. Both could and should be born of conviction, be firm and unflinching but extreme politeness must mark both. He is not dogmatic on that account, but his convictions are the product of deep meditation.

He has written a number of articles relating to Hindu religion; and since he evidently lacks visible piety he is mistaken for an atheist, which he is not. He once wrote a paper 'Do not call me atheist' – and then tore it off; in a fit of ill humour to which he is occasionally subject. He has made a God of his own – rather a Goddess – and her he calls the Dharmadevata, the Goddess of Righteousness. He objects to all despotisms including the 'divine' and wants 'man' to be left alone to make what he can of life as it comes. He believes in Fate – its supremacy.

What cannot be proved is not true; 'What cannot be disproved is not science' as K.R. Popper said. So he is more an agnostic than a believer in any nominal brand of philosophical thought; and his doubts are eternal. He does

6. *Vide Quest* 98 (Nov-Dec 1975) P.52 – Separate note printed beneath N.S' paper on 'Gandhi: an intellectual assessment'. In his copy filed in the file of 'Gandhi Papers' N.S. has written 'to be printed in letters of gold'.
not believe in anything contrary to logic and to personal experience. Scepticism runs through the web of his thought; it is possible that superficial readers may mistake him for a cynic, which he is not. He thinks most religions have failed to convert man to virtue, because man is essentially violent and selfish and given a chance he always reverts to his wild ways. Even his occasional concessions to virtue are intended only to serve ulterior selfish purpose. 'The noble savage' type of assumption\textsuperscript{7} is clearly disapproved of by him. Men quote scripture to justify their evil and occasionally create some scripture for that purpose.

N.S. believes, as noted above, in the inflexibility of Fate and reads Hardy’s *Dynasts* with great admiration and interest; he does his ‘duty’ but does not allow others to determine his duties. To him his good conscience is supreme. That is the only way, N.S. says, of avoiding both tyranny and its complement slavery.

Thus arises the essence of his humanism and his frequent reference to Abu ben Adhem. He is greatly concerned about the defenseless condition of the poor, the utterly deprived (monetarily, educationally and even character wise) and holds the non-poor who care little for the former responsible for this condition. Among the defenseless, women, children and victims of all kinds of vice figure most.

Regarding human relations, the secret of his having few friends is his strict views about sincerity. Marriage, therefore, is no ritualistic sacrament but a contract which Ibsen and Hardy suggested subsist only while the minds

\textsuperscript{7} It was made by Rousseau, the French thinker. Here it is worth noting ‘what’ Bertrand Russell has to say about the two distinct things the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ in the human psyche; writing on Henri Bergson, the French Philosopher, Russell says: “The division between intellect and instinct is fundamental to his philosophy, much of which is a kind of *Sandford and Merton*, with instinct as the good boy and intellect as the bad boy’ –*A History of Western Philosophy*, P-793.
sympathetically and voluntarily agrees. This applies to friendship, insincerity and hypocrisy and ingratitude are in his view the worst aspects of fully evolved selfishness. That is the reason for his insistence on punctuality and keeping one's word.

There are two matters which relate to N.S.' psychology of right and wrong and rights and their rejection or neglect. The first is the sense of gratitude which he considers the highest of virtues and ingratitude the most disgusting and horrible of human weaknesses. He feels that Shakespeare himself must have been a victim of some sort of insufferable ingratitude. Otherwise that could not have been the central idea in four of his major tragedies and a tragic poem. If Shakespeare's personal life had been better known, it is almost certain, N.S. feels that he was subject to some cruel ingratitude or other. This is relevant here because N.S. has a 'feeling' (which he vaguely expresses) that everyone whom he had helped had turned bitterly against him; and some have done harm too. He says that he prays for Christ's pardon for them.

Another intriguing thing about him is he wishes his achievements in the field of letters to be recognized even by the pedestrian weekend journal reader whose main intellectual diet is the daily newspaper. The uncharitable will call this vanity; the charitable may say it is but legitimate ambition of an achiever. But he always seems to forget how limited is the readership that can read, properly understand and interpret without prejudice his writings. He often writes tough; and most readers are superficial readers who may not be aware of the peculiar technique required to understand, appreciate and enjoy his writings. Whatever be the arguments on either side, the fact remains that

8. *Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear* and *Julius Caesar* are the plays and the *Rape of Lucrece* the poem referred to. One could add how in *As you like it* the Duke Senior says 'Blow blow Thou winter wind, Thou art not so unkind, as man's ingratitude'.
he is unhappy about the fact of non-recognition of his original thoughts. Readers dismiss him, by calling him 'controversial', 'eccentric' etc.

Sticking fast and uncompromisingly to principles which are the product of conviction born of life long meditation is often mistaken, at times inadvertently and at times intentionally for obstinacy and diehardism. He is proud in the midst of poverty. For a long period in his official career he had been caught between poverty in a largely populated home, and jealousy and oppression in the work place. He fought the situation bravely enough without a complaint either in mind or word.

Poverty is subject to ridicule by the wellfed: that is the worst they can do to the deprived. N.S. for quite some time while servicing an educational institution had but one coat to his back and when it rained hard he went without even that. The sympathetic principals of the institutions knew his condition and therefore did not mind much. But some one lower below but in a position to speak with some authority once remarked that the institution might start a charity fund for buying a new coat for N.S. N.S. turned round and said in a sincere tone – these were the very words used by him, according to him – ‘Sir, poverty shall not be mocked at or insulted. It could be dangerous’. He never felt the insult; he carried on as usual and even now does so and cares little for convention, taboo custom. Poverty has a kind of pride, which the snob rarely understands.

His unfortunate reaction to non-recognition by the semi-literate public is almost pathetic. But there was once a dismal face to it. In fact the situation was double faced. He was an all India figure, and well known to all senior historians in the country and many overseas. In India the problem was two fold. In Madras he was misunderstood or purposely misrepresented as a communalist interested in promoting the ‘imagined historical achievements’
of his own community. This was strictly untrue and is belied openly and straightaway by his *Brahmin in the Tamil country* and *Meaning of Indian History*. In the North where the Marxist ideologues were in the ascendant largely due to state support, he was duly side stepped. Personal friendship persisted; but the gulf of ideology could not be bridged for N.S. has been a hard-boiled liberal and is even proud of it.

He is an independent freethinker and wears no blinkers. A born historian, interrogator, enquirer, explorer in the realm of ideas for new ‘lands’ in the world of thought and perception. He does not believe in the concept of charisma. Charisma is a mark created by public cheats or their agents to beguile ill-informed followers. Behind charisma lurks pretensions, power, money, position, and authority, especially to harm. N.S. emphasised this point in his Presidential address to the Tamilnad History congress which met in Annamalainagar in August 1995 and reiterated it in a similar address at Kaladi where the South Indian History Congress met in February 1998. Where there are fools willing and waiting to be cheated there are villains and knaves equipped to do it. Hence people are to be judged by what they do and not what they say or have written. Based on this, impelled by an urge to preach, he declared his ‘message to his fellow human beings’. To call him an ‘eccentric’ thinker, can be valid only by a norm by which ‘normalcy’ is defined and determined. If the centre is mad, the eccentric is sane. The quality of the centre is to be determined by the sane and not the insane.

He has a surge of moral urges and sentimental inwardness, which makes him an idealist of sorts, and he frequently if not constantly thinks (or

9. “That one may smile and smile and be a villain” Shakespeare: *Hamlet* – I: V – 106 At least that is so in the case of charisma.
10. In the Appendix of this thesis.
11. To the inmates of a mental asylum, all those who are outside are mad.
rather dreams) of an ideal world in which aspirations and achievements would both be ideal. Recently he included a set of 13 ‘Commandments’ and evidently he thinks that the world around him is going to mind them and follow them. For his acquaintance with books and other sources of knowledge his understanding of human nature seems to be completely unworldly and impossibly idealistic. He is full of wise saws and learned clichés but simple things like the faults of human nature escape his notice and he generally lives in a world of unrealisable dreams, of which his vision of an ideally happy and prosperous post – British India was one.

His deep sense of lasting gratitude has manifested itself in many ways. He celebrated the centenary function of his father’s guru V.G.Suryanarayana Sastri (1970), edited the concerned souvenir volume, wrote his biography and delivered an endowment lecture in the Madurai University on ‘Paritimal Kalaiñïar and dramatic literature’. He wrote his father’s biography, published his collected poems and published with his commentary his father’s poetical work *Yavanămbigai Pillai Tamil*, and edited his dramatic works. He presented a portrait of his mentor and teacher R.Bhaskaran to the University of Madras; dedicated four important works of his to the above three and to his mother. His intolerance of ingratitude has already been referred to.

He believes in the idea contained in the lines of a famous German satirical writer K.Tucholsky\(^\text{12}\) (immigrant during the Nazi regime to Sweden):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{“The state of human morality} \\
\text{Can be pressed in the two sentences!} \\
\text{We ought to; but we don’t!...........”}\quad &\quad \text{13}
\end{align*}
\]

\text{12. Dr. Herring (15. 3.1992) informs that the poet committed suicide in 1935.}
\text{13. Dr. Herring’s translation.}
Another poet's lines also translated and introduced by Dr. Herring will be worth quoting here. The poet was Bert Brecht (10-2-1898-14.8.1956), a German. From his poem 'To future generations' he says.

"......... Oh, we
Who wanted to prepare the soil for kindliness
Could not be kindly ourselves.
But you, when it gets to the stage
That man is a helper to man
Think of us
Charitably"

There are two goals in life for N.S. one is personal; the other is public. As for the personal, his whole faith can be summarized in one Aristotelian word, 'moderation', the golden mean' – avoidance of revolution as well as of reaction. The other public relates to his professional historical philosophy-untiring search for the origins of things. In this connection also one has to quote Dr. H. Herring for his kind translation of two lines of poetry, composed by the Polish satirist Stanislav Jerzy Lec:

“When one wants to reach the source of a river,
One must swim against the current”.14

He claims he has in his life time read 6000 books – most of them serious ones- i.e. apart from the school text books; that he is familiar with the meanings and usage of some 20,000 English words; and that 2 million words of his are in print and not even twenty people have cared to have read all of them; for to some of them they are incomprehensible and to others contemptible. This tragic story of a refined scholarship going to waste can be

seen in its place in this thesis. This has happened to greater men and women it is no wonder it is happening to him too.

N.S' major theoretical philosophical convictions can be summarized in a few points: 1. He very definitely prefers classicism to romanticism; 2. internationalism, Cosmopolitanism and a World State to sovereign national patriotism; 3. moderation to extremism; 4. social reform and education leading to wisdom is more important and urgent than the trappings of formal democracy; 5. all violence is to be avoided; 6. pacifism and politeness are necessary even when there is basic difference of opinion; 7. the future is more important than the past; 8. integrity and gratitude are not virtues, which permit of qualifications. He is a public lecturer of extraordinary merit, which consisted not in mere eloquence but in the choice of phrases and content of thought. He is public lecturer of extraordinary oratorical merit, which consisted not in mere eloquence but in the choice of phrases and content of thought.

On three days in August 1975 N.S. delivered seven public lectures in Madurai. Most of the interested intellectuals in the city attended the lectures; and among them Prof. N.Sakthivelan, Professor of English in the Thiyagarajar Arts and Science College Madurai, was one. After quite some time i.e. in a letter dt. 16.2.1990, Prof. Sakthivelan wrote to N.S. as follows recalling those lectures: "What a pleasant shock it was when I opened your letter! Some kind of a mental flash - a high order lecture series in which rare and refreshingly bold lightning flashes on expediency, contingency and necessity in the process called History - that was ten years ago an honest, off the conventional, and clear stand, philosophically, sustained - impressions floating across my mind". This has already been quoted but one feels in this context it can bear repetition. This is how a learned intellectual reacted to N.S' public lecture. Those lectures were a sort of norm for him.
I think it would be appropriate to conclude this chapter with a quotation from Mrs. Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Bronte* (*mutates mutandis*)

I have written this with the strong desire to obtain a just estimate of N.S.' life, principles and achievements. Yet, what does it matter? He himself appealed to the world’s judgement for his use of some of the faculties he had – not perhaps the best – but still the only ones he could turn to stranger’s benefit. They heartily, greedily enjoyed the fruits of his labours, and then found out he was much to be blamed for possessing such faculties. Why ask for judgement for him from such a world?

“But I turn from the critical, unsympathetic public – inclined to judge harshly because they have seen superficially and not thought deeply. I appeal to the larger and more solemn public, who know how to look with tender humility at faults and errors, how to admire generously extraordinary genius, and how to reverence with warm, full hearts all noble virtue”.

These words apply almost exactly to N.S. whose life, work and character have so far been examined.

A superficial study of this thesis may suggest that besides being a list (with commentary) of his books, it is an attempt to defend the character and work of N.S. anyhow. But it may be at once stated that it has neither been the intention nor the performance of this work. A really critical estimate has been attempted; but it might so happen however that often the author of this thesis agrees on most N.S.’ values.

But whenever it was necessary stress was laid on certain disagreeable traits of his, which have hampered his ‘popularity’. Further except for a few

select scholars his works have not reached the vast intellectual public of the world. Locally there is a tendency for even learned writers to ‘adjust’ their writing to the tastes and fancies of an imagined average intellectual readership; nor can it be denied that resistance to serious rational thought is an important characteristics of the local readership.

N.S. makes the assumption somewhat unwarrantedly; that his average reader is equipped fully to completely understand the inner significances and subtler nuances especially in his creative writings and thinks that he is ignored by the intelligentsia. He evidently does not know if he is fully comprehended by his readers. This, one would suppose, is the main cause of his lack of popularity, as one understands it in the contemporary world. N.S. somewhat critically, assumes that it is impossible to ‘educate’ the world, nay, nor anyone for that matter. This he once frankly told me in the course of an interview. He thinks that those who agree with his values merely pretend to do so out of politeness. The rest he thinks care less than a straw for him. This one should think is too, unfair a view to take of the ‘educated’; most people merely are informed – and ‘information’ is not ‘knowledge’ nor knowledge wisdom; he quotes the Kural line (உண்மையில் என் வாழ்வை இருந்து உறியும்) (one’s inherent instinct will ultimately prevail)\(^{16}\) to support his rather cynical view.

The intention of the thesis is not to indulge in unqualified praise but is to critically weigh N.S. and his work.

\(^{16}\) Kural. 373