

## Varadaraja Iyengar & Abalāśrama

*Dr. D. V. Gundappa*

I vividly remember the opening ceremony of the *Abalāśrama*. It must have been in 1909 or 1910. That day of celebration started with the traditional *nāgasvaram*. The weather was pleasant with sunshine; it was neither too warm nor too cold. Many important people of the city were present. The most prominent amongst them were – Retired Sub-Judge S. Varadaraja Iyengar, the Headmaster of *London Mission High School* K. Ramachandra Rao, Advocate Seshagiri Rao, K. S. Krishna Iyer, A. R. Nageshwar Iyer, Shivashankaram Pillai from Penukonda, Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramayya from Andhra, and others.



Three-quarters of the work on the building had been completed. Some of the work for *sabhāmaṅṭapa* (stage) was still pending. I remember that the assembly was outdoors under a temporary shelter.

Varadaraja Iyengar was the chairperson. The keynote address was delivered by K. Ramachandra Rao who was an excellent orator, an erudite scholar of English literature, and a social service enthusiast. He was a great man who had helped hundreds of students in many ways. His speeches were graceful, dignified, and filled with meaning. On that day, during his speech, he explained the rationale behind starting the *abalāśrama* and its goals. He prayed for the welfare of the *abalāśrama* having sought everyone's support for this deserving cause.

Varadaraja Iyengar's presidential address and the concluding speech by Shivashankaram added brilliance to the event.

The history of the organization, as known to me, is as follows – An important Englishman, I. J. Pitt— Issac J. Pitt, ICS—from the Indian Civil Service, was a collector in the Penukonda and Bellary areas. He was friendly with the Indians and won over their confidence. His wife also wished to take up some work that would be beneficial to the women of our country. The Pitt couple developed an intimate friendship with Advocate Shivashankaram of Penukonda. Pitt died while in service, long before he was due to retire. His wife returned to England and began living in the city of Cambridge. She regularly wrote letters to Shivashankaram and expressed her desire for charitable work that she had envisaged in the past. One of her many dreams was to setup an institution that would care for orphaned girls and child-widows. Shivashankaram also liked this idea. Mrs. Pitt expressed a desire to donate towards this cause a sum of three thousand rupees from the money she had received from her husband. If I remember right, this was the seed fund for the *abalāśrama*.

KRISHNAMMA AND VENKATAVARADA IYENGAR, THE FOUNDERS OF THE ABALASHRAMA

There is another episode that precedes this piece of history. An organization by the name *Indian Progressive Union* was started in Bangalore during 1904-05. I remember that Varadaraja Iyengar was its president. His elder son, Advocate Venkatachala Iyengar, was the secretary. Among the prominent members who had



joined that organization were: K. Ramachandra Rao; Editor of the newspaper *Mysore Standard*, M. Srinivasa Iyengar; Pleader G. Venkataramanayya; and C. Venkatavarada Iyengar. The members of the Union met every now and then and discuss social issues and the need for reform. The Union used to bring out a monthly magazine called '*Hitavādi*.' I was a student in those days. I was a regular reader of the *Hitavādi*. I first learnt from the *Hitavādi* magazine that it was possible to take up serious issues and write about them in simple, lucid Kannada. I still remember a couple of articles from this magazine. One was about the life of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar. Ishwarchandra was a famous Sanskrit scholar from Bengal and a social reformer; he campaigned for widow marriage and worked to establish it in law. His life history was beautifully portrayed in lucid Kannada by our scholar Bellave Somanathayya. The second article from *Hitavādi* that I remember clearly was on the topic of "Ashoka and Marcus Aurelius." This was also a sublime essay. It looks like this was written by Venkatavarada Iyengar. The Kannada people were unable to muster the generosity to save such a magazine.

Some information about the *Indian Progressive Union* would typically appear on the cover page of the *Hitavādi* magazine. On that page, the secretary Venkatachala Iyengar's name would appear. During those days, I lived in the towns of Kolar and Mulabagal; I would read this and aspire to meet the great man. When I came to Bangalore in 1905-06, Venkatachala Iyengar had set up his office in a house in Aralepet. While going towards or returning from the Railway Station, I would see his name plate and fold my hands in admiration. A few days later, I was bestowed upon the joy of his acquaintance. The father, Varadaraja Iyengar and the son, Venkatachala Iyengar are in the frontline of the noble personages that I know. Their behaviour was rich with humility. Their character was pure. Both were utterly honest. They had a generous bent of mind. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that a hundred good people grew under their care.

The *Indian Progressive Union* worked under the influence of such people. The *abalāśrama* took shape from the discussions and activities of this group. The *Indian Progressive Union* and the *abalāśrama* stand testimony to the kind of social environment that existed some sixty years back in Bangalore, to the extent of the nobility of aims of eminent citizens, and the depth of the interests of the scholarly people of that era.

I mentioned Venkatavarada Iyengar's name earlier. Chakravarti Venkatavarada Iyengar was the inspiration and prime-mover for both the *Indian Progressive Union* and the *abalāśrama*. The story of his life can be the subject of a dedicated book. He hailed from a village near Malur. He studied in the *Maharaja's College* in Mysore; he was a disciple of Bhabhasaheb. When he was in the F.A. (First Arts Standard) class itself, he collected donations from students for the Congress and then send it to the party. Later on he worked as a Proof-examiner at the Government Press. His marriage could be termed as some sort of 'reform.' His wife Smt. Krishnamma was a *mādhva*. She hailed from Penukonda. She too had genuine commitment towards the progress of society. Shivashankaram of Penukonda was a friend of both. Shivashankaram had a taste for Andhra literature and particularly loved the *Bhāgavata*. He was adept in the usage of English and generous by nature. Shivashankaram was the primary motivator for both Sri. Venkatavarada Iyengar and Smt. Krishnamma. The *abalāśrama* was the life accomplishment of this couple. It was a sapling that they planted.

Venkatavarada Iyengar's circle of friends was quite extensive. The editor of the *Mysore Standard*, Srinivasa Iyengar was the most prominent among them. Others such as Sathur Narayana Rao; Narasoji Narayan; Bapu Anantajoshi; Venkatachala Iyengar and his younger brother Shyam Iyengar also assisted him in his efforts. These preeminent personages were in the forefront of efforts towards co-operative societies as well. I remember that some of them were amongst the founders of the *Bangalore Co-operative Bank*. Everyone had complete faith in the commitment and integrity of Venkatavarada Iyengar. And because of that, no appeal he made with regard to the *abalāśrama* was futile. Many people willingly donated money and offered other help to the best of their abilities. Thus the *abalāśrama* began to grow.

On the day of the opening ceremony, a festive lunch was organized at Venkatavarada Iyengar's house. There, I first chanced upon Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramayya. During our conversation, the topic of the (print) media came up. Someone from Andhra alluded to the Telugu *Kṛṣṇāpatrikā*. At that point Pattabhi Sitaramayya said something that has stuck in mind – "A good magazine raises the standard of living of its region." My friendship with him grew. It continued for around ten to twelve years. Then our paths diverged.

The *abalāśrama* that started with enthusiasm and celebration became weak over a period of time. Venkatavarada Iyengar and Krishnamma became aged. Resources grew scarce. Then it was Sri. A. R. Nageshwar Iyer and his wife Smt. Sundaramma who committed to restore the deteriorating institution. Among the honourable persons who came to their help, the first was Dr. B. K. Narayana Rao. Then Smt. Indirabai Vasudevamurthy assisted them. Sri. S. Narayana Rao helped them. Sri. P. R. Ramayya and his wife Smt. Jayalakshamma further supported them with great interest. Many other charitable men donated generously to the institution. By the efforts of all these people the *abalāśrama*—home for destitute women—recovered and is showing signs of progress. This institution is good for the Hindu society and deserves to be the pride of everyone.

#### **About the Author: D V Gundappa**

*Devanahalli Venkataramanayya Gundappa (1887-1975) was a great visionary and polymath. He was a journalist, poet, art connoisseur, philosopher, political analyst, institution builder, social commentator, social worker, and activist.*