

P L Deshpande in Andaman cell.
By Prem Vaidya

(Shri PL Deshpande was in Andaman Island on 20th May 1983, to celebrate 100th birth anniversary of Veer Savarkar)

Introduction

Shree Prem Vidya worked for the Films Division of Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of Government of India from 1954 to 1985. He rose from being a Cameraman to the position of Producer/Director. His greatest contribution was production of the documentary on Veer Savarkar, released in 1983. While shooting for the documentary on Savarkar on the Andaman Island he heard a speech by well-known Maratha, Purushottam Laxman Deshpande, popularly called P.L.

Deshpande was a man of many talents; actor, writer, orator, film director and musician. He acutely observed peculiarities of human behaviour. He was awarded the title *Padma Bhushana* by Government of India. In 1974 he was elected President of Marathi Sahitya Sammelan and also President of Marathi Natya Sammelan in the same year.

Deshpande and his talented wife Sau Sunita donated hundreds of thousands of rupees to charities without seeking any publicity.

In 1983, on the occasion of the birth centenary of Savarkar, Pu La Deshpande visited the Cellular Jail in the Andamans. He gave an eloquent speech on Savarkar. The following is an English translation of Prem Vaidya's narration of the episode -

P L Deshpande in Andaman Cell
By Prem Vaidya

A true story of the last century.

In life, one always experiences the extreme difficulties in pursuing a good cause. However, when faced with darkness from all sides, one also experiences some wonderful unforgettable moments.

In November 1977, I was asked to prepare an outline for a documentary film on Veer Savarkar. Unfortunately the work never got started. Then came Mrs Gandhi back in power in January 1980 and surprisingly on 15 August 1982, I was asked to start producing a documentary on Savarkar at the earliest. I covered the part of Savarkar's life in Bhagur, Nasik, Pune, Ratnagiri, Shirgao in Maharashtra. I started shooting on the Andaman Islands some 2,000 miles away from Mumbai on 25 February 1983. On 26th, Shree Harshe, a retired prison officer who has settled on the islands said to me, "Today is the anniversary of

death of Savarkar. By sheer coincidence, a famous Marathi writer Purushottam Laxman Deshpande is here on the islands. I have invited him to address the members of Maratha Mandal, Andaman. Marathas serving in the Indian Navy and stationed on the island will also be present. I therefore suggest that you suspend your shooting today.” It was a rare occasion indeed. I gladly suspended my shooting. In the evening P.L was welcomed by Marathas.

Savarkar was brought to the prison here 72 years earlier. P.L was taken along the same route. P L climbed the three storeys and after walking along a long and narrow corridor came to the cell where Savarkar was once kept. He went inside and in a choking voice said, “Our Taty (pet name given to Savarkar by his family) was kept here?” He could not say another word. P.L always used to make people laugh. This was the unusual face of P.L that we were seeing. We never saw him so sombre before.

The cell barely measured 13 by 7 foot. With greatest respect, P L put a garland on the picture of Savarkar hung on the wall. For a moment or two, there was dead silence. Then some one said with great emotion, “Vande Mataram Bharat Mata Ki jaiLong live Veer Savarkar. “

P L walked down to the ground level. This was the place where prisoners were once flogged during the British Raj. P.L then gave the most thrilling speech in memory of Veer Savarkar. He said –

“Friends, I consider today as a day of great fortune. I do not believe in re-birth, so I cannot say that I must have done something good in my previous birth as a result of which I have been given this opportunity. I say that I have done something somewhere in this life and as a result, I have this opportunity today.”

“We have just garlanded Savarkar’s picture. We always refer to *that room* as “A cell in Andaman”. But when a radiant person like Savarkar is kept there it becomes like a sacrosanct part of a temple. Before we take our meals we say *Tejaswinaa vadhee tamastu*. We say those words without realising their meaning. But if we have to search for a person in modern Indian History, who in his body, mind and soul was illustrious, we have to point out to Veer Savarkar. His life teaches us that we should utilise every second of our life to remain ever glowing. He was an enemy of darkness, whether that was in the form of ignorance, blind faith or slavery imposed by a foreign rule, he always fought against it.

Have faith in Science

A man has to struggle against three forces namely, Man and Nature, Man and another man, Man and himself. These battles are constantly going on. Maratha Saint Tukaram says,” We have to fight day and night.” In any war, you must

believe that you are going to win. Any one, who thinks he would lose, would never win. Savarkar had emphasised time and again, "At least die fighting." He said, "fight wherever you see ignorance." We need to show great respect for him for preaching faith in Science to resolve our problems. He asked us to be Science-oriented. He spent all his life for that. No other leader has preached that we should follow Science as Savarkar has done. **Unfortunately we do not even read what he had preached.** If I were to ask you, how many of you have read the writings of Savarkar, I am sure very few would raise hands. The more we read his thoughts in depth, the more we realise what prophecies he had made. On what basis was he saying, " A day will come when people will erect statues of us here?" He knew that once you start a fight with determination nothing can stop you. We have to follow Science in today's times. There is no alternative to this or else we would become simpletons.

Be fearless

We say that 26 February is a day of Savarkar's *atmarparna* (Self-immolation)* but that is in the words of mortals. His every day was a day of self-immolation.

Savarkar was a tremendous force in this cellular jail in Andaman. We feel terrified even when we just visit his cell. Can you imagine what he must have felt at the thought of spending 50 years in this place and that too in the company of those vicious scoundrels who would not hesitate to kill for a penny? And yet, he believed that one day the shackles would be broken up and be removed. He once told his fellow political prisoners "A day will come when our statues will be erected on this ground." What a self-confidence!! He was convinced that he would cause changes to take place. Hindu Dharma tells us that we are the sons of nectar (*Amrutasya Putrah*); we are here not just to die one day but live with dignity. Savarkar knew that God never favours the weak. He always denounced feebleness.

* Note - There is no equivalent word for *atmarpana* in English. In 1966, at the age of 83, Savarkar decided that his life's mission was accomplished and decided to say good-bye to the world. He fasted for 20 days and left this world on 26 February 1966.

You have probably read what punishments he suffered in Andaman, from his book *My Transportation for Life*. However I am certain that, in this book, he has not described even 10 % of what he actually suffered, because he did not want pity or sympathy from us, neither did he want people to react and merely say, "My God, what horrors Savarkar suffered." He wanted youngsters to react and say, "I too am prepared to suffer like Savarkar for our nation." In his old days he did not meet many people. It is my conviction that he did not want any one to see him as a tired old man with little energy. Just as a lion would not like to be seen weak in his old days but would prefer the spectre of being seen as a roaring animal in jungle. Similarly, Savarkar did not see many people in his old age. And it was because of this that he fearlessly met his death by *atmarpana* (self-immolation).

Savarkar always despised the weak, feeble, incapacitated, and those devoid of backbone. This is apparent in his writings, dramas, and speeches. He always told us, "You are descended from the divine (*tejasya putraha*)." At the same time, he did not want arrogance. Like Lincoln he too would have said, "As I shall not be a slave, so I shall not be a master." In his book *My Transportation for Life* we find that he had a vision of a nation state encompassing ALL human race. (And yet today many Indian leftists brand him as a stooge of the British) How could he have tolerated the British Empire? All his life he fought against all forms of exploitations.

Excellent orator

Shree Harshe has requested me that I should tell you some of my personal reminiscences of Savarkar. To tell you the truth I never dared go near him. He was like the Sun. We see Sun only from a distance for we fear that if we go any nearer we will be burnt. I met Savarkar through his books. I heard him speak on the occasion of his 75th birthday. What a thrilling experience it was. I heard his speeches as a young boy. They were like flow of the river Ganga.

Great linguist

Savarkar has made our language rich. Today we use many words once coined by him. But we know very little how he had to fight for introducing their use and how he was ridiculed by scholars of those days. Ah, those words were created by a sage and not by a Government Department. For 'Reporter' he suggested '*Vartaha*', one who carries away the news. Today we say *Mahapaur* and not Mayor. Same goes for *Sampadak* (Editor) and the titles of others in the newspaper industry. In the Film industry, the words we use freely were all gifted by Savarkar. But at the time he suggested those words he was laughed at and ridiculed.

If you feel that youngsters should be able to speak fluent Marathi, then make them read Savarkar's essays loudly every day. They will become great Scholars of language as well as of thoughts.

True Rationalist

I give just one example of his Rationalism. In his will, he had stated that his body should be cremated in an electrical furnace, meaning that a dead body has no further function of any kind. But many a so-called Secularists insisted that his ashes should be immersed in the waters of Ganga, Yamuna or some such river. Savarkar also had stated that after his death no prayers should be said for his soul. Today we just can't imagine how much people were angry with him when he propagated that the Cow is just a useful animal and nothing more.

Legacy of Savarkar

Persons like Savarkar never die, nor ever say Goodbye. They are eternal. Even one line or one word of from them gives us inspiration. In one of his poems Savarkar said – *Kshana to Kshanat Gela. Sakhi hatacha sutonee.*

“Moment was lost within a moment. My friend, it was gone for ever.”
What a wonderful idea! For this one line, he should have been given the Noble prize. He has become eternal because of his creations as this. We only have to see if out of his own light of wisdom, a ray from his light can produce a spark in our mind. When we offered flowers in his cell in memory of him we experienced something unique, we were emotionally moved. If we retain that sensation, it would make us a bit more fearless if circumstances demand. Our Bharatiya culture asks us to become fearless. Why did Savarkar suffer such hardships in this place? It was for our better future. Today we have come here as free men and women, which was made possible because of the hardships suffered by Savarkar and others. We revere him and want to participate in his *Punya*. If a man dies we merely observe his death anniversary and perform *Shraaddha*. But death anniversaries of persons like Savarkar are called *Punyathithi*, which are a day of remembrance as well as an auspicious day. That is the difference between the two. On the days of *Punyathithis* we are lucky that we share some *Punya* of such great persons. We have inherited Freedom and Fearlessness from Savarkar.

One of the most inspiring poems for freedom was composed by Savarkar.

Jayostute Shree Mahanmangale Shivapsade Shubhade

What a wonderful poem! Let me tell you the thrilling experience I recently had. During his internment in Ratnagiri (1924 to 1937) Savarkar worked hard for the emancipation of the untouchables. He organised get together of people of all castes, social functions in which untouchables would be admitted, the famous Patit Pavan Mandir which was the first temple open to all Hindus including the untouchables. Savarkar wanted them to give up caste differences among themselves; and get educated.

Recently I went to a village Mhaisal near Sangli. My friend Mr Madhukar-rao Deval runs a co-operative project for the Dalits. These people used to be so poor that their women had only one set of clothes and therefore were ashamed to come out of houses. But today, the circumstances have changed. They came out in expensive clothes. I was told that they were going to sing a song. From my recent experiences I naturally assumed that it must be a film song. It would be harsh to start with and these women would sing even more harshly and make me miserable. But surprise! surprise!! They sang Savarkar’s famous song *Jayostute shree Mahanmangale Shivapsade Shubhade ...*

I was thrilled. I thought to myself, “It is not I who should be listening to this, it should have been Savarkar being present here to listen to this song. He would have then appreciated what seeds he sowed and where it had borne fruit. He should have experienced at least one moment of this singing.”

The seeds sown by him have been so deep rooted. Persons like him can never die by any vicious attacks, or neglect or propaganda against them. They are self-made. They live like the great Banyan trees providing comforts to others in their hour of need.

There is a difference between ordinary drinking water and holy water dispensed by a priest in a temple. There is difference between normal tap water which we use for bathing and the water of holy river Ganga. A place where we merely wash our bodies is called a bathroom. But a place where water cleanses mind as well as body is called a *Tirtha*. Our holy river Ganga does both; therefore it has become a *Tirtha*. Today, we have gathered at such a *Tirtha*. Andaman has become a place of pilgrimage.

Really, so much has happened here in this place that every Indian should come here and bow to the memory of our freedom fighters like Savarkar. **We need to think how his thoughts could be spread in all the Indian languages. I have expressed this wish to Balarao Savarkar** who was Veer Savarkar's personal secretary for 14 years. He has devoted all his life for this mission. I am sure we all will support him in his endeavour.

Observe a day of remembrance

Once again I bow to the memory of our freedom fighters, who were imprisoned here. To remind our people every year, there should be a day of celebrations, right here in the Cellular Jail on national level. And it should be presided by the highest authority of the country.

Notes –

* Balarao Savarkar died in Mumbai in November 1997. P L Deshpande died in Pune in June 2000.

* On 3 May 2003 Entire Works of Savarkar in Hindi was published in 10 volumes by Prabhat Prakashan of New Delhi, under the auspices of Indian Prime Minister A B Vajpayee.

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