

## 1.

The districts of Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg are famous as land of beauty, natural prosperity, and splendid coastline. The region is also a birthplace of many legendary personalities. One such significant personality, Mr. Nath Pai was born in the scenic town of Vengurla on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1922. Nath Pai's original name at the time of his birth was Pandharinath, named after the famous deity from Pandharpur, Lord Vithala.

The name 'Pandharinath' got shortened and became Nath, which stayed as it is, till Nath Pai breathed his last at the age of 48. His mother, Tapibai, and his siblings affectionately called him 'Raja.' Nath Pai had three brothers, three sisters and a stepsister by the name Indira whom he called 'Akka' (older sister).

Nath Pai's father, Bapu Anant Pai, had a Bachelor's degree in Arts from the times when getting a degree was not really an easy thing to achieve. He worked as a Post Master for a while, but since it included transfers at regular intervals, he left that job and took up a job of a teacher in A.P. Mission High School in Vengurla.

Nath's father passed away when he was just 8 months old. It was a shock for the family. But Nath's mother, Tapibai was a strong and formidable woman. Her parents' family at Adari, a small village from the tehsil of Vengurla was a rich and well to do one. But she brought up all her children on her own without taking any financial assistance from any of the relatives.

A famous anecdote of Nath's childhood speaks a lot about the values the single mother instilled in the children. During the summer holidays in Vengurla, the children would pluck nuts from the cashew fruits and sell it to the trader. This would generate additional income for the family. The eight siblings would sit and work together. Their mother would sit near and supervise to see to it that none of the children eats even a single nut. In fact, it did not matter as the trader would anyway not notice the shortfall but the mother was making sure that the children learn the value of honesty and sincerity.

Nath Pai completed his primary education from Vengurla. The man who grew up to be a barrister, a pundit of languages, an excellent orator, was weak in mathematics in school days. In those days, a deputy education officer would visit schools and conduct viva of the students. In mathematics, the students would be asked to some quick calculations orally. Nath was popular student in school. The teachers loved him. During one such exams, it was decided between teachers and students that the fellow classmates would write solutions on their slates and show it to Nath so he would be able to answer the examiner. When Nath came to know of such a plan, he refused to be a part and rejected such help. He stated to his classmates and teachers that he would not look at the slates even if they are showed to him. Even in those early years of childhood, he said that he would gladly accept the failure rather than the stain of dishonesty. These were the early signs of the man of principles.

Nath's birthplace, Vengurla is a scenic coastal town. As a child Nath would often visit the beach in the evening and get lost watching the boats far away at the sea and the fishermen on the shore. The white of waves and the blue of the sea mesmerized him as a child. His love for Vengurla and its people and beauty never really ebbed.

In later years of his life, when he was at London, based on the banks of Thames, Nath wrote to a longtime acquaintance, Vasu Deshpande. In this letter, his love and admiration for his birthplace is very much evident. He writes:

“So, you are in Vengurla, I hope you are aware of the great historic importance of the place. Do you know who was born there? Of course, you do. Apart from this do not you think it is a lovely little town, what with its many temples, its blue sea, golden sand beach and its intelligent, friendly citizens. Blessed is those who live in that little town. Have you visited the dreamy, poetic, enchanting little villages nearby? I mean Dabholi, Aravli, Shiroda, Redi, Math, Vetora. Their very names breathe music. Konkan is the land of beauty, land of great.”

\*

## 2.

Nath's eldest brother, Anantrao alias Bhai opened a grocery shop in Tilakwadi, Belgaum and the family shifted from Vengurla to Belgaum. The next few years that Nath spent in Belgaum greatly shaped his life.

Nath enrolled in Benon Smith Missionary High school and continued his education further. It was a famous school ran by Methodist missionaries. Though it was run by missionaries the school maintained a very liberal outlook. It did teach Bible as a mandatory subject. Learning bible at such a young age helped Nath a lot to improve his oratory skills. Nath, who proved to be proficient in Marathi, Sanskrit and English, went on to win various elocution competitions for his school. Everybody from the school could see a great orator in making. He had a great memory and also a knack to remember and reproduce exact references from Sanskrit or History to substantiate his arguments. He would often remember everything he heard and use various quotes from History, English and Sanskrit in his fine speeches that would often leave the listeners in awe and admiration of Nath Pai. In later years, his well worded and in-depth speeches on topics ranging from finance to defense, criticizing the policies and voicing the concerns of the voiceless attained quite a reputation. It's said that then speaker of the Lok Sabha as well as the then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who himself was proficient in English, admired Pai's keen observations and oratory skills.

Nath Pai's elder brother, Bhau Pai, led a very active social life. He led from the front when it came to running a gym or organizing the public Ganesh Festival, initiated by the late Bal Gangadhar alias Lokmanya Tilak. It was in his company that Nath Pai took the early lessons in public life. Times were changing with the change of leadership of the movement against the British. Mahatma Gandhi was leading the battle. Everyone was ignited and inspired by the idea of freedom from the rule of the British. Nath Pai was a teen who was keenly observing and adapting to the changing socio-political scenario of his times. He passed the Matriculation exam and went to Lingraj College in Belgaum. Here, again, he won a lot prizes in elocution competition.

His brother started attending the meetings of various leaders and freedom fighters. A strong desire to be a part of the freedom movement was brewing within him. Everybody wished that the British should suffer defeat in the Second World War. An Atlantic Charter was signed and sanctioned between America and England. The charter stated that the nations which would lose the war shall be set free from the colonial rule of the British. It had list of the nations but surprisingly India was excluded. This further fueled the dissent against the British.

One had to pass F.Y. then to appear for Intermediate exams. Nath moved to Pune for F.Y. He took admission in Fergusson College which was founded by Lokamanya Tilak and Gopal Ganesh Agarkar. Once in the college, Nath started participating in the Inter-collegiate elocution competition. In those times, The Gokhale Trophy for elocution was a thing of prestige. It was named after Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a senior congress leader and the guru of Mahatma Gandhi. Law College, Pune and Wadia College, Pune were the chief contenders. Nath wanted to participate in the competition. A bright student, G. P. Pradhan was a year senior to Nath and had participated in the prestigious competition. The secretary of the debating society of the college, R. V. Pandit took Nath to meet Pradhan. When Nath told Pradhan about his desire to participate, Pradhan skeptically remarked that it was difficult for Nath to be selected because there were a lot of other deserving candidates. But in a test debate, Nath's oratory, his command over English and his unfaltering pronunciations impressed everyone including G.P. Pradhan. Nath was selected for competition. Not only Nath won the first prize in the competition, but Ferguson also won the prestigious trophy that year.

The debating society of Fergusson College also organized a mock parliament where students participated and assumed the roles of members of Parliament. This mock parliament would have a ruling party and an opposition party just like the ones in the British Parliament. Nath was a part of this initiative too. Nath read a lot in these years. He read biographies of Italian revolutionaries. He read accounts of the French Revolution and American freedom struggle.

In the summer holidays, when he came to Belgaum, Nath met the young, Arvind Yalgi. They had a conversation about the poverty in the country and both were vocal about the necessity to be a part of the freedom movement.

Nath was 19-20 years old then. His mother was a bit worried about her young boy. But Nath on the other hand was quite charged up and determined to contribute in the freedom struggle. When his mother voiced her concerns, Nath responded in a bout of fury. He said to her "there are 20 crore mothers like you and I need to be part of the freedom struggle for them."

The political scene was changing. The British were losing the war. Mahatma Gandhi called for a movement as a signal to the British to leave India. The Quit India Movement garnered a huge response as many young Indians took to the streets. The British started putting the Congress leaders across the country behind the bars. Belgaum was soon affected and Nath and his like-minded friends went underground.

Nath Pai and his friends were fascinated by the armed revolutionaries and their fearless attacks against the British. Nath and his friends staged quite a few daring attacks against the British. They attacked a postal consignment coming from Sawantwadi which was 100 kilometers away. They made a futile attempt at looting an Imperial Bank.

The British army had their stack of hay at the dairy in Belgaum Military Camp. Nath's friends came up with the idea to set the same on fire. The attack was carried out with detailed planning and survey. They closely observed the guards and duty and soon realized that they had a window of time to execute the attack. One fine evening they set the hay ablaze and Belgaum was covered in thick layer of smoke. The police and military had no option but to be a mute spectator. In response the police launched a frantic search for the young men who plotted the attack.

The young freedom fighters suspended their attacks for some time only to land a more fatal blow to the British. On 10<sup>th</sup> March 1943, they set ablaze a police station in Thalakwadi, Belgaum. Nath snatched the weapons in the attack and the young men dumped the weapons into the Congress Vihir (well). The establishment was shaken and livid. They again launched an extensive search for the disruptors. During the attack on the Police station, everyone except Nath and Gajanan Yalgi had covered their faces. The fearless Nath wanted the British to know that Nath had come and was a part of this attack. When one of the accomplices was caught in a raid by police, he was mercilessly beaten and thrashed. As a result, he disclosed the names of his accomplices, making it easier for police to nab them. Arvind Yalgi, Diwakar Valavalkar, Madhukar Kulkarni, Jotiba Patil and others were arrested. They too were subjected to inhuman torture. The beating did not deter their will and determination and they kept refusing to give away the whereabouts of Nath and Gajanan Yalgi. Nath had fled to Khanapur to a home of government employee who was also a supporter of Rashtra Sewa Dal. He believed that the police will not search there. A couple of days later, he shifted to another hiding place. The news was out that Nath was hiding at a home of the family named Nesrikar and at around 2 am, the teams of police made their way to the place, only to find nothing there. But someone there gave away the whereabouts of Nath and he was nabbed from his sister's place the same night. Nath was relieved that the police did not find the pistol in his possession because carrying a pistol meant death penalty for the freedom fighters.