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Those Days

In the 1930s and 40s, Bangalore was a quiet and peaceful city, with rustic surroundings and a leisurely atmosphere. Not too far from Bangalore, there were tigers in the jungles. In the south of Bangalore, elephants roamed freely. Life in the city was simple and there was little room for excitement. One ate simple food at home at fixed hours and went to school. Young people played simple games in the evening, and only a small number of them played cricket and other modern sports. Roaming through the streets in the vicinity of one's residence or spending time with friends was the main entertainment. Roads in Bangalore were empty except for an occasional bus of the Bangalore Transport Corporation. It seemed everyone walked to school or college and a fortunate few owned bicycles. The mode of transportation for most people was walking. There were horse-drawn carts to go to the railway station if the luggage was limited. Bullock carts were available for transferring heavy goods. On any occasion, if one wanted to shop in the city market or in the big shopping area in the centre of the city, all he/she had to do was to walk for a few miles. One could also take a bus to the city market.

The simple life in Bangalore among adults was made interesting by frequent visits to restaurants for coffee, two sharing a cup (one by two) being common. Alas, children had no chance to visit these cafes since money was scarce. Vidyarthi Bhavan and MTR were favourite spots for

dosa and other delicacies. Bangaloreans loved life, and restaurant-visits were common. There were famous little shops that specialized in selling items like spiced peanuts which cost only a few paise. Nani's shop in Gandhi bazaar was one of them.

Weather in Bangalore was always nice. It was considered an air-conditioned city, except for a few hot days when we would occasionally see a person holding an umbrella. One did not seem to feel the heat of summer those days. There were no fans in houses or class rooms. One had not heard of air conditioners. Bangalore was green and it was no surprise that the fine weather of Bangalore and its serene atmosphere created the reputation of the city being a pensioners' paradise.

Bangalore was a major city of the erstwhile Mysore state, ruled by the Maharaja of Mysore. The state was progressive. Mysore state was one of the few states with steel mills, paper mills and dams for irrigation. The Maharaja lived in Mysore city, even if all the main offices were in Bangalore. Mysore seemed like a beautiful toy town. A special occasion there during the Dasara celebrations was the procession of the Maharaja riding the palace elephant on the last day (Vijayadashami) of the season. The day in Hindu culture signifies victory of good over evil. The palace is lit up by 100,000 bulbs on that day, making it appear like a palace in a fairy tale. The Maharajas were good to the citizens, Krishnaraja Wodeyar being the best example. The state had the benefit of a representative assembly to which people elected members. Even the council of ministers had some members from the public. Dewans of Mysore were outstanding planners and administrators. For example, the beauty of Bangalore owed much to Dewan Sir Mirza Ismail. Dewan Sir Seshadri Iyer was responsible for allocating the land and other facilities to establish the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore.

Mysore state had eight districts, and the hills and plantations of the *malnad* districts of the state were most attractive to visit. Malaria was rampant in the *malnad* area, until it was eventually eradicated in the 1950s. There was at least one government high school in each district of

Mysore state, but there were only two colleges, one for science in Bangalore (Central College) and the other for humanities in Mysore (Maharaja's College).

Electricity was not common in most parts of India, including in Mysore state. One still remembers the advent of electric bulbs in the homes of Bangalore. Till the late 1940s, human refuse was manually cleared by fellow human beings which was terrible to bear. Flushing toilets got introduced in the city in the late 1940s. Very few people had radios in their homes. Telephones were unknown and communication with another person required a visit or writing a letter. The postman was an important person in homes and offices and people eagerly awaited the arrival of postmen. The absence of modern communications facilities (which are considered to be essential today) did not seem to take away much from the happy life that citizens of Mysore state enjoyed at the time. Kannada was the language of the state. Bangaloreans, however, merrily mixed English with Kannada words.

It seemed Bangalore comprised one long road connecting Basavanagudi in the south and Malleswaram in the north. In between, were the city market and some shopping streets, and areas like Chamarajapet and Seshadripuram. After Malleswaram 18th cross in the north, there was the Indian Institute of Science, and one hardly saw people in this area, specially after working hours. There were two fine gardens in the city, Lalbagh and Cubbon Park, which were not crowded and provided much enjoyment to Bangaloreans. Lalbagh had unusual trees from everywhere and was a walkers' paradise. Cubbon Park, in the centre of the city, had a bandstand and also a nice restaurant. To the east of Bangalore, was the cantonment area visited by very few Bangaloreans. Entry to some of the Cantonment areas was forbidden to Indians during the British days. People of Basavanagudi always considered themselves as the custodians of the culture of Bangalore.

Money was hard to come by those days. People were thrifty and one rarely saw exhibition of wealth. Most people in Bangalore came

from middle class or poor families. The few who were rich were not noticeable. There were no politicians crowding the city at that time. There were no billboards and larger-than-life cut-outs of politicians and other lesser known persons. Many who became politicians later were freedom fighters or nationalists at that time, and most of them wore simple clothes (Khadi, commonly) and some of them preferred to walk bare-footed. Occasionally, there would be some excitement in Bangalore in connection with the visit of a VIP, or due to a seasonal festival. *Karaga* elicited an enthusiastic response from a section of the people. [Karaga is a festival to celebrate the goddess of Shakti — the Priest of the Dharmaraya temple decorated in feminine attire usually walks with a delicately balanced earthen pot on his head. The procession that accompanies him has men demonstrating their wizardry with swords. The earthen pot represents the goddess of energy and power. It is celebrated even today.] Ganesh chaturthi and Rama Navami were other socially important festivals. Bangalore looked forward to the month-long music concerts held all over the city during Rama Navami celebrations. I remember the visit of the Viceroy of India in the early 1940s when all the school children were lined up along the streets.

The most significant events during 1940–47 were the nonviolent processions and demonstrations against British occupation and the cry of people for freedom. The freedom movement was specially strong in 1942 and continued till 1947 when India eventually got freedom from the British. The freedom movement in Bangalore did not seem to be as intense as in northern India, and yet there was occasional shooting and lathi charge in the streets of Bangalore. There were rumours of some of the leaders of the movement going into hiding. One of the experiences that I cannot forget relates to the conditions in Bangalore and elsewhere during the Second World War and a few years later. Food and cloth were rationed. Rice, wheat, kerosene and cloth could only be obtained through ration cards.

In Bangalore of the above description, I was born on June 30, 1934 in Basavanagudi, in the home of my maternal grandparents, located not far from Bugle Rock (close to the bull temple) and the famous temples of Ganesha and Hanuman. I do not remember the days that I spent in that location. I remember, however, that my grandparents moved to another house close by on Nagasandra road (now D.V. Gundappa Road). Close to our house was Mr. D.V. Gundappa, the famous literary personality. Mr. Nittoor Srinivasa Rao (later Justice and the first Vigilance Commissioner of India) was frequently seen in the locality, taking walks with Mr. Gundappa. Nittoor lived upto the age of 100 and seemed to know everyone in microscopic detail. Other companions of Mr. Gundappa during his evening walks were Mr. R.L. Narasimhiah (a fine physics teacher in Central College) and Mr. Somashekhar Rao (a lawyer). I mostly associate my childhood with the corner house on Nagasandra road with two champak trees in front. At the end of the road was the house of Nettakallappa who took pride in hunting tigers. His house was full of stuffed tigers and other animals. Masti Venkatesha Iyengar (Masti), a renowned literary personality, lived not far from us, in Gavipuram.

My maternal grandfather (Belur Seshacharya) was a teacher of Kannada and Sanskrit and taught at the Ladies Intermediate College and later in some of the schools. He told me once about his childhood. His father (my maternal great grandfather) apparently took sanyas (became an ascetic), and left home when my grandfather was very young. My grandfather was brought up by his mother. One fine day, when my grandfather was grown-up and well established, my great grandfather showed up in a sanyasin's garb and breathed his last. My grandfather was a strict disciplinarian and dressed in an orthodox fashion, with a brocaded turban, close-collar coat and dhoti. I do not remember him taking a bus or any other vehicle to go anywhere in Bangalore. He always walked. My maternal grandmother (Padmavati Bai) was an extraordinary person, full of life, and she dominated the home. She



*Rao's maternal Grandmother,
Padmavathi Bai*

could compose instant poems and songs, and sing as well. She was a great conversationalist and social being. She was an excellent cook and her filter coffee was famous amongst friends and relatives. For a person with two or three years of schooling, she commanded an extraordinary presence. She would enthrall her listeners with her stories of people and places. I remember an occasion when Rajaji (C. Rajagopalachari, the first Governor-General of India) visited Mr. Navaratna Rama Rao who lived close to us. My grandmother took good strong coffee for

Rajaji and sang a few Purandaradasa's compositions (devaranamas) for him. My grandfather and all of us were dumb-struck by her boldness and natural charm. She had a great sense of humour which compensated for the very silent, serious nature of my grandfather. She was generous to a fault and there was no limit to visitors, free loaders and all kinds of relatives who came for lunch or for short stays.

My maternal grandparents had three sons and four daughters, and my mother was the eldest of the children. My mother (Nagamma, born 1908) was a very orthodox person and prayed for several hours in the day, starting at five in the morning. She had little use for worldly possessions and found complete happiness in her prayers. She was self-educated and was much interested in current affairs, considering that very few women went to high school those days. She was an ardent reader of newspapers. My father (H. Nagesa Rao, born 1905) worked in the education department of Mysore state. He was an M.A. in History, Economics and Politics and had degrees in Education. He was highly



Rao's Mother, Nagamma at her daily prayers



Rao's Father, Nagesa Rao

disciplined and was a stickler for punctuality. He had to have coffee at 6.00 a.m. in the morning and tea at 2.15 p.m. His main hobby was reading newspapers and books. In fact, whenever I think of him, the image that comes to my mind is of my father holding a book in his hand. He took extraordinary trouble about the food we ate, choosing the fruits and vegetables himself. He did not believe in astrology and was a great champion of family planning. Despite the contrast in their personalities, my parents shared respect for scholarship and education. They were both progressive in their outlook. My father was very strict with financial matters as well. Yet, when Vinobha Bhave started the bhoodan movement, he gave away our ancestral lands near Chintamani to the movement, to be distributed to the toiling farmers.

My father came from a family of landlords not too far from Bangalore on the border of Andhra Pradesh. The lands had been granted by the Maratha Government under Shivaji who ruled Bangalore, Kolar and nearby places at one time. My forefathers who collected taxes for the Maratha Government had the title Deshmukh. They had hailed from Kolhapur area several decades earlier. Apparently, my paternal great grandfather (Deshmukh Ananda Rao) was well off, but was a spendthrift. My paternal grandfather (Deshmukh Hanumantha Rao) tried hard to bring stability to his family by regaining some property. He lost his wife quite early and had to raise a family of two sons and three daughters with much difficulty. My father was the eldest son and the first one to go to college in the family. He had to manage his studies with the meager funds available to him. My contact with my paternal aunts was limited since they all lived away from Bangalore in Kolar district, but my paternal uncle (Narayana Murthy) used to be a constant visitor to our house. An interesting feature of all my relatives on my father's side was that they were all adept in classical music. Some were professional musicians as well. I remember the day in 1939 when my grandfather died in his sleep. I did not get to know him well or live with him for long. I was fond of one of my paternal aunts (Puttamma).

Unfortunately, her husband (a music vidwan) disappeared when the family had gone for a picnic on a river bank. My aunt did not recover from the shock.

I was very close to my maternal aunts and uncles. I must specially mention my aunt Susheela, who lived in the north of Bangalore, whom I visited often. She was a lovable person and a fine cook. My uncle and she were always very good to me. Another aunt, Kamala, lived far away in Vadodara and there was no way that I could visit her. Another aunt of mine, Indira, was a fine person who died prematurely. Her husband had put her in a horse-cart and sent her to my grandfather's place when she was close to having a baby. She died in front of my grandfather's house, as she entered it. One of my maternal uncles (S.R. Swamy) was an expert in Montessori education and was dedicated to the cause of nursery education through out his life. Another maternal uncle of mine (Murthy) was a little older than me and was my classmate through school and college. He was an amateur artist and we used to play together. The third maternal uncle of mine (Sridhar) was much younger to me.

I must mention an important aspect of my background. Families of both my mother and father were staunch believers in Madhwa philosophy. Madhwa ideology provides a practical way to lead one's life. According to Madhwacharya, there are two distinct worlds — there is the world of adhyathma (the spiritual world), but equally important is the world we live in. In this real world, we are encouraged to live properly and serve mankind. There is much sense in this simple statement.

I did not go to primary school and studied at home under the guidance of my mother. She was an extraordinary teacher. Every day she would make me do arithmetic and read lessons. She was terrific in doing mental maths and could multiply and divide large numbers so easily. She would tell me stories, particularly from Mahabharatha, Ramayana and Bhagavatha. By the age of 7 or 8, I knew probably most

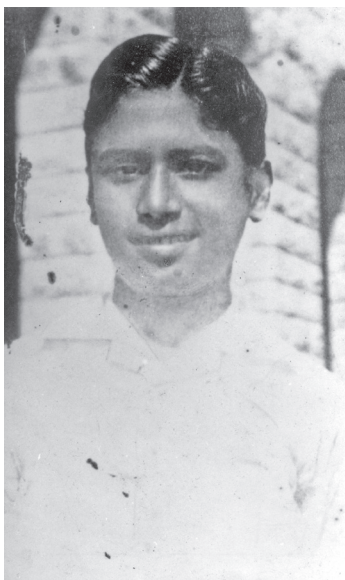
of Ramayana and Mahabharatha. I had to narrate them back to her on some days. I did not enjoy sports much, and my main hobby was talking to people in the neighbourhood. I started going to middle school at the age of six. (There was no age restriction for admission to schools those days). My classmates were all older than myself, but this did not affect me in any way. I used to tutor many of them in English and Maths. I spent time with my friends near my home in the evenings, mostly talking. I completed the lower secondary (LS) examination (equivalent to 7th class/standard now) of the Mysore State in 1944 with a first class. The examination was held state-wide with great formality and external examiners evaluated the answer scripts. Passing the LS examination with distinction was considered to be a great accomplishment at that time, but it made no impression on me. I was 10 years old. My father gave 4 annas (25 paise) as a reward to eat an ice cream in MTR. The biggest reward that I received was one rupee from my grandmother's aunt (Sundarakka). An important news that I remember when I was a student in the middle school was the death of Rabindranath Tagore (1941). I remember my mother telling me about the greatness of Tagore, and how he had received the Nobel Prize for literature.

When I went to high school, I could study either in Kannada medium or in English medium. My father insisted that I should study in Kannada medium since the subjects were best learnt in the mother tongue. I became a Kannada medium student, but at home my father spoke to me in English to make sure that I did not suffer from the lack of knowledge of English. I went to more than one school during my high school education since my father was being transferred to different locations in the education department of the state. This enabled me to see places in Chickmagalur and Shimoga districts, the beautiful malnad areas of the state. I used to accompany my father to interior areas, specially hills and jungles, encountering wild animals in their natural habitat. This meant walking for miles with my father and some attendants. We saw elephants, bears and tigers in the wild on some

occasions. I enjoyed my time in high school, particularly my science classes. I had outstanding science teachers in high school and I specially remember my chemistry teachers, Mr. Shivarudrappa, Mr. P.S. Narayana Rao and Mr. S. Krishnamurthy. They were inspiring and showed excellent experimental demonstrations in school which I remember to this day. When in high school, I participated in debates and essay writing (both in Kannada and English), and took part in Kannada plays. One of my interests during the school days was to read Kannada literature. This was mainly because my mother enjoyed reading and we would read books together. I would bring many books for my mother and read them with her. I even tried my hand in writing poems in Kannada. When I was 11 years old, I took a little poem to Masti and asked him if he could publish it in a journal edited by him. Masti was very kind and told me to come back later with a longer poem.

One occasion that stands out in my memory is the visit of Professor C.V. Raman to my school, Acharya Pathashala, in Basavanagudi. Roddam Narasimha who was my schoolmate also remembers the occasion. Professor Raman gave a fantastic lecture and unveiled the photograph of Madame Curie. This made an extraordinary impression on me. It is possible that it was at that moment I took the subconscious decision of becoming a scientist. Professor Raman asked our teacher to bring two or three of the good students from the school to visit his laboratory in the Indian Institute of Science. I was lucky to be one of them. Prof. Raman spent more than an hour telling us about what he was doing in the laboratory.

I completed the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) examination of the Mysore State in 1947 with a first class. SSLC had two categories ECPS standing for eligible for college and public service and EPS meaning eligible for public service. Those with EPS could not go to college for further studies. I wanted to get a Bachelor's degree in science. This took four years after S.S.L.C. I spent the early part of this period in Shimoga (Intermediate College) and later joined Central



CNR Rao as a college student (1947)

College, Bangalore. India obtained freedom in August 1947, when I had just entered college.

Mysore state did not readily join the Republic of India soon after India gained independence. The Maharaja had been wrongly advised by the Dewan and others. There was serious agitation in the state against the state government which lasted for a few months. It was exciting to participate in processions and slogan shouting. On a few occasions, I gave public speeches with some of the leaders. The college was closed during that period. Mysore state soon joined the Republic of India

and we had a democratic government installed with leaders of the congress party ruling the state. A remarkable feature of the first Independence Day was the smooth transfer of power from the British to the Indians. Partition caused much pain and agony for the people in Punjab and Bengal, but we in Bangalore did not fully comprehend the enormity of this occurrence.

August 15, 1947 has a special place in my life, and even today if I close my eyes, I can hear the great speeches of that day. But soon after, Gandhiji was assassinated (January 30, 1948). I was stunned by the event. It took me a long time to recover from the terrible loss of Gandhiji whom I had loved. I had seen him once when I was in the second year of high school in Acharya Pathashala. Some of our school teachers took us to Madras (now Chennai) to see Gandhiji. I felt that it was most ironic that the sage of nonviolence was brutally killed by a mad, violent man.

As an undergraduate student in Central College, Bangalore, I studied physics, chemistry, mathematics and other subjects. We had good teachers in physics and mathematics. I had to depend on my own to learn chemistry. I must remember Prof. B.S. Madhava Rao (a collaborator of Homi Bhabha) for his fine mathematics classes. It seemed as though my best teachers were during my school education. During my college days too, I participated in debating, writing short stories (in Kannada) and in Kannada plays. I was secretary of the Sanskrit Association in the college. I do not remember anything academically interesting during the four years of college. I, however, still remember a debate that I attended with Norman Cousins and S. Radhakrishnan as speakers. The topic was related to the advantages of English as a language compared to Sanskrit. Cousins told the audience how one can express oneself in many ways and exactly in English. For example, he asked what the word was in Sanskrit for "Precision". Radhakrishnan was at his best and asked what the word in English was for "Dharma", and concluded that he would rather have dharma than precision.

One of the difficulties that I faced in college (and even earlier) was from studious classmates, who were always talking of the so-called important topics for the examinations, and were studying day and night. They would constantly ask me whether I had studied one topic or the other. I could only read something once or twice and could not read the same thing over and over again. I had to keep mum when my good friends would argue on what the important topics were for the exams. In retrospect, I understand the difficulty with exams that we faced at that time. To get 60% marks in an exam was considered remarkable. Teachers would say that the answer to a question was perfect and give 6 or 7 marks out of 10. English exams were especially bad. I fancied myself as being adept in English, but I never got good marks in the exams. However, in spite of everything, I completed my B.Sc degree examination with a first class. I was one of the very few students who got first class in the B.Sc examination of 1951 of the University of

Mysore. My father was pleasantly surprised since he always felt that obtaining a first class in B.Sc was next to impossible. After the results were released, I rushed to my aunt Susheela to tell her, and then to a temple as per my mother's instructions.

My undergraduate days were marked by activities which made me nationalistic. I became a great admirer of Pandit Nehru and a few other leaders. I participated in activities which involved voluntary work and editing magazines. We played khokho, kabbadi and such games during evenings. I used to wear a Gandhi cap up to my second year in college and participated in meetings and lectures where national leaders and other personalities were involved. I regularly attended lectures at the Gokhale Institute of Public Affairs (run by Mr. D.V. Gundappa and Nittoor) and at the Indian Institute of World Culture. I got to know Dr. H. Narasimhiah of National College, Bangalore, during my undergraduate days because of my interest in Gandhian ideas and in voluntary work. (Narasimhiah became a popular educator in Bangalore and was highly respected in the community.) One of the occasions that I remember is a session of the congress socialist group with Yusuf Meharauli, Narendra Deo, Jaiprakash Narayan and others. We were involved as volunteers in making various arrangements. We used to recite certain parts of the Gita once a week.

I was not too sure of what I wished to pursue professionally during my undergraduate days. There was considerable temptation to take up engineering or medicine, after my Bachelor's degree in science. Some of my relatives suggested that I could go for civil service. Fortunately, my parents told me to do what I liked best. This helped me to arrive at a satisfactory decision on my own. I had a romantic notion about doing research as a scientist, but had nobody to guide me. When I was in the first year of the B.Sc programme, I had come across a journal published by the University of Mysore containing research papers. One of the papers on magnetic susceptibilities of some compounds had Mr. Venkataramiah (a physics lecturer in Central College) as an author. I

went to him to enquire whether I could do research in summer, but he did not encourage me. I used to see people who worked at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) as research scholars. Somehow, they did not seem so inspiring. The research students from the Institute did not tell me much except that getting a Master's degree by research could take an indefinite period. At that time, IISc did not give degrees and one had to get them through Bombay and other universities. One of my teachers in Central College (P. Mallikarjunappa), who himself was not a research scientist but had received a Master's degree in chemistry from Banaras Hindu University came to my rescue. He told me that for a Master's degree in that university, doing research was part of the programme and showed me a research paper that he had published in the Journal of Indian Chemical Society. He urged me to go to Banaras Hindu University to do a Master's degree. This made a big difference in my life. I would otherwise have joined IISc for a diploma in chemical engineering, to be followed by a research degree from a university. A Master's degree from Banaras which included research seemed to be the best option of that day. I wrote a letter to the head of the department at the university (Prof. S.S. Joshi), and received a telegram a few days later admitting me to the M.Sc programme in chemistry. I did not look for any other option.

I often dream of those days in Bangalore. I cannot forget the happy days with my maternal grandparents, and my grandmother's innumerable stories and anecdotes. I remember walks with my father, specially in the jungles. Even today, certain individuals, incidents and stories appear like flashes at the most unexpected times.

I think of Kuchela, my dearest friend during the four years of college who migrated to Canada (and is no more).

I can feel Kittu (who claimed to be a distant relative of mine) tapping on my shoulder in a music concert, just to tell me about the progress being made by his innumerable children. He would say, you know, my 7th one is much smarter than the 6th one (he never used their names).

Then he would say, do you have any money in your pocket? Let us have a one by two (coffee) somewhere. Kitti was a poor man, with a large family, but I did not know a happier man.

I recollect the story told by Navaratna Rama Rao who lived close to our home. When he was a judge, he scolded a thief accused of day-light robbery in a house. When he asked the thief, why he stole household goods, the thief got terribly angry and retorted, “don’t accuse me of such petty thefts. I have always gone for major robberies worth something. I have some standing in my profession”.

I think of Mr. Shastri, my grandfather’s friend, who was always complaining about his wife and telling the entire town how he would have nothing to do with her. She, however, bore a child every year.

I think of the great playwright and satirist, T.P. Kailasam, walking around in his underwear with a cigarette in his mouth and a cigarette tin in his hand.

Narasinga, the imbecile young man, who wandered the streets of Basavanagudi talking to anyone he came across, became a martyr in 1947. He was one of those few who got shot by the police in the independence movement.

I recollect little of the early days of the parliament of independent India. I must, however, recount something that I heard from a senior M.P from Karnataka (I do not know whether it is true). A member of parliament from Karnataka got up and started talking in Kannada. He had not spoken before. Everyone got confused. Pandit Nehru suggested that it be translated. On translation, it was found that the member had only said, “I am feeling hungry. It is getting late for lunch”.

I often think of Dr. M. Shivaram and the harmless humour in the magazine Koravanji, that he edited.

I frequently dream of those dreaded final exams and wake up with a start. I dream that the exam was in physics, but I would have prepared for chemistry. I dream of the Sanskrit exam or of the English exam on Shakespeare. I appear for an exam on Macbeth, but the exam would be

on Hamlet. The worst dream is of a maths exam. I do not recognize any equation or understand any question. I hate final exams of the kind that I took which once and for all decided what one did in life.

The dream that I cherish most is the one of the first independence day on August 15, 1947 when my neighbours and friends went around the streets with bells and gongs.

*Where have they all gone,
those simple men with great character,
those unsung heroes with fine minds,
but little riches.
Alas, times have changed,
there are many making loud noises,
some with much riches, but few with
sense and substance.*

– Anon