

MY TALE OF FOUR CITIES

An Autobiography

A close-up portrait of an elderly man with a balding head and a serious expression. He is wearing a light-colored, vertically striped shirt. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Jayant V. Narlikar

◆ AUTOBIOGRAPHY ◆

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Preface

In recent times a number of authors approached me with the suggestion of writing my biography. While I did not consider myself as a suitable subject for such an exercise, I began to wonder if I could have a dash at writing my own story. Will a middle class Indian born in a princely state adjoining British India—educated in an academic household in the serene atmosphere of Banaras Hindu University, followed by higher studies in Cambridge with a few years as Faculty Member at the ancient university, then returning to work in the prestigious Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in Bombay in India and finally migrating to the city of Poona to set up a unique institution—have anything interesting to say beyond these few lines?

The answer seemed in the affirmative, when I first did this exercise in my mother tongue Marathi. Encouraged by the venerable publisher the late S.P. Bhagavat of Mouj Publication, I went ahead and found the response very encouraging. As the book saw several reprints by Mouj, I also began to receive suggestions to write the English version. At the advice of the late Dr Ananthamurthy, I approached the National Book Trust to explore the possibility of an English version. Shri Setu Madhavan, Chairman, NBT welcomed the proposal and thanks to the help received from his colleagues the book is now in your hands!

The four cities referred to in the title, Banaras, Cambridge, Bombay and Poona, happen to be the four cities where I spent most of my life; although my work has taken me to fifty countries around the world. The reader will find

the pages relating to Cambridge are proportionately far more than those describing the other three cities. There are two reasons for this. Cambridge University recently celebrated its 800th anniversary and has successfully nurtured its academic traditions over eight centuries. For an outsider like me going there as a student, it was a fascinating place and even after spending fifteen years there, it continues to be the same. I felt that I should share my fascination with the reader also. The second reason was a practical one. I used to have regular correspondence with my parents during my Cambridge years and they had preserved all my letters, carefully filing them. Thus I had a ready account of the days gone by revived in contemporary form.

The three Indian cities have since been renamed as per their earlier historical names: Varanasi for Banaras, Mumbai for Bombay and Pune for Poona. I have stuck to the names that were current at the times described in the book.

My wife Mangala has helped by serving as a trial reader and she has made practical suggestions for which I am grateful. The photographs included belong to old times and with a few exceptions, it is next to impossible to recall who were the photographers. But I should acknowledge them all. I also thank Vyankatesh Samak for secretarial assistance.

JAYANT V. NARLIKAR
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