J V Narlikar: The Accessible Astronomer*

For most scientists, the urge to make science accessible to the public comes as an afterthought. J V Narlikar was a stellar exception to this unwritten rule. His science writing can be traced back to his days in Cambridge when he wrote an article on the discovery of quasars for the popular science magazine *Discovery*. At that time, he was working with Fred Hoyle, who was a science communicator par excellence, and perhaps there was something in the chemistry between the supervisor and the student that had an effect on Narlikar's science writing career. Fred Hoyle not only wrote on science for people at large, but he also gave lectures on radio, and even wrote science fiction on speculative topics that did not find any takers in the scientific establishment at that time. Incidentally, it was during a radio talk that Hoyle had coined, in jest, the now all too famous phrase 'the Big Bang model'. When Hoyle's idea of giant clouds bearing molecules in interstellar space could not be published, he wrote a novel (*The Black Cloud*) on the topic, which became quite popular.

Narlikar had witnessed these events very closely and started writing and speaking for the general public while he was still in the UK. Soon after returning to India, Narlikar penned his first Marathi book *Ganit Ani Vidnyan* (*Mathematics and Science*), which was published in 1975.

In an interview much later, he said that he wanted to emulate Fred Hoyle: "*I thought what he had done in England, I could attempt in India, and I'd use Marathi language, my mother tongue to start with.*" He had not only imbibed his guru's literary flair, but also had occasions to brush his shoulders with literary giants like E M Forester, who was his neighbour in King's College for a while, and with whom he often exchanged ideas on literary matters. It was, therefore, simply a matter of time before Narlikar would also try his hand at fiction.

It so happened that the Marathi Vijnan Parishad had organised a competition for science fiction around that time. Narlikar had submitted a story under a pseudonym, and it went on to win the first prize. The story was praised by none other than Durgabai Bhagwat, the then president of the Marathi Sahitya Sammelan, who encouraged Narlikar to write more such stories, which, she pointed out, would start a new kind of writing in Marathi literature. This encouraged Narlikar to write more science fiction stories, which were published in a well-known magazine *Kirloskar*, edited by Mukundrao Kirloskar, and also other periodicals. Soon, a collection of Marathi science fiction stories, *The Gift of the Yakshas* (*Yakshanchi Denagi*), came out in 1979.

From short stories, he then graduated to writing science fiction novels. He had translated some

*Vol.30, No.7, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12045-025-1829-7

of them into English, and some were translated into other Indian languages, such as Bengali and so on. Doordarshan, the National TV channel, had even telecast a film based on one of his stories, *Dhoomketu* (*The Comet*), in 1985, produced by the Children Film Society of India. This was a story of contrast between what astronomers and scientists do and how astrologers dupe people. In it, a Bengali amateur astronomer from Calcutta was shown to have spotted a comet that was going to directly hit the Earth, and how he alerted the international astronomical community about his discovery, which led to an effort to divert the comet. In contrast, the wife of the amateur astronomer in the story had consulted an astrologer, who performed some rituals for the same, and claimed that the collision was ultimately averted because of the ritual. This story is a good example of how Narlikar used the medium of fiction to spread awareness among general readers regarding the contrast between rationality and superstition and bring out various aspects of the interactions between science and society. It is no wonder that Narlikar's stories have found their way into Indian school textbooks and for good reasons. His idea of a good science fiction was woven around bringing out some scientific principles through the medium of a narrative, just as Hoyle had done in the case of *The Black Cloud*. For Narlikar, stories in which magical things happen out of the blue and the cause is ascribed to some yet unknown but supposedly scientific idea did not belong to the category of science fiction. His science fiction stories always contained a strong scientific core.

Within a decade of his return to India, Narlikar also started writing about science for general readers. *The Lighter Side of Gravity* (W H Freeman & Co, 1982) became an instant success and was translated into several languages including Russian, Japanese and Spanish. Around this time, during 1980–81, he was also associated with a Marathi serial that was telecast from Bombay TV, titled *Akashashi Jadale Nate* (*On Developing Relationship to the Sky*), which covered different aspects of astronomy, and it also became popular. A few years later, when Carl Sagan's serial *Cosmos* was screened by Doordarshan, each episode began with an introduction in Hindi by Narlikar. Judging the popularity of these episodes, Narlikar then proposed that a serial on astronomy in Hindi should be screened. The proposal was readily accepted, and Narlikar went on to devise the serial, called *Brahmand* (*The Universe*), which was produced by the Films Division of India. The series described several discoveries in astronomy through stories that involved school children and was divided into 17 episodes, which were screened during 1994–95. Through this series, Narlikar became the face of astronomy in India among the general populace, especially because of the involvement of school children in the episodes.

For several decades, Narlikar continued to write for the general readers in Marathi, Hindi and English. The number of popular articles written by him runs to over 400. He was also a popular public speaker, again in various languages, and gave lectures in different parts of the country. For him, the growth of scientific temperament in the general populace held the clue

to the further growth of the country and people, and his engagement with lay people was absolute in this regard. His efforts towards science dissemination can be exemplified in one interesting experiment that he had undertaken. There used to be a regular demand for his autograph from school children, and he began a practice of asking the autograph hunters to send him postcards with some scientific questions to which he would reply with his signature. This novel exercise generated a large volume of such postal correspondence with questions and answers. A subset of these postcards was published by the Marathi Vidnyan Parishad in a booklet called *Postcardatun Vidnyan* (*Science Through Postcard*). The popular TV programme *Surabhi* on the National Channel, which was incidentally the only channel available before the present millennium, often featured Narlikar, who answered scientific questions from viewers during the programme.

Having been trained in Sanskrit at an early age, Narlikar had studied the work of ancient Indian scientists in the original. This was again a rare and unique situation in which a modern scientist was well-acquainted with the history of science in ancient India, and nonsensical claims that are often made by people with various agendas would find rejoinders from Narlikar. When there was an attempt to introduce astrology as a subject in Indian universities by the government, most scientists and all science academies and scientific establishments maintained a cautious silence; Narlikar voiced a strong protest in an article that was published in a prominent daily. He was not a mere celebrity scientist for the general public in India but also a scientist with a conscience.

His sustained efforts towards making science accessible to people—through writing, lectures, fiction and television programmes—marked him as a rare breed in the community of scientists. He was awarded the prestigious Kalinga Prize for the popularization of science by UNESCO in 1996. The Indian National Science Academy also awarded him the Indira Gandhi Prize for science popularization in 1990.

Biman B. Nath
Raman Research Institute, C. V. Raman Avenue
5th Cross Road, Sadashivanagar
Bengaluru, Karnataka 560 080
Email: nath.biman@gmail.com