

Roddam Narasimha: Epitome of perfection and tolerance

It was 1983 when I first went looking for Narasimha. I was nine months into my graduate studies at Caltech, some 9,000 miles from home, when I realised how far my studies had drifted from the magic that first drew me into engineering — years of exposure to airplanes from my father who worked at HAL in Bengaluru. Roddam Narasimha was visiting the department of aerospace engineering and I thought I might seek his advice.



MY TAKE

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Setting up the appointment was an intimidating prospect. My Brazilian friend Lacerda said his mentor rated Roddam the closest of anyone to the pinnacle of fluid dynamics. An Indian friend simply said that RN truly looked the part, a swashbuckling scientist dressed as sharply as the guy in Digjam suiting advertisements back home.

When I finally met him, I was disarmed to find someone else entirely — calm and



ALL EARS: Roddam delivering a lecture on Green airplanes at IIT-Gandhinagar in November 2012. Prof Amrutur Anilkumar seen in the front row

unperturbed by the competitive ways of the world, the image of my history teacher GK Nagarajan at National High School, Bengaluru. I discussed moving to aerospace with him and mentioned something about the turbulent world. He said Sarvam Turbulence Mayam in Sanskrit (the world is full of turbulence) and said he would have a word with the director, Liepmann.

That was the first and last time I discussed research with professor Narasimha. For the past 37 years we have debated and discussed everything else: life, politics, religion, history, culture, tradi-

tion, the world and, yes, India. We would talk on the phone very often, and at his home, at NAL and NIAS; to me the N in these institutions meant Narasimha. I liked every bit of it; it softened my view of the world, especially India.

It was in 2005 that I again came face to face with him at a meeting in Chicago. He had mellowed even more and looked very paternal. In 2009 I needed him the most when my mother suddenly passed away. He spoke at her funeral and handed me a copy of his own English translations of the Yogavasishta, an ancient dialogue about action in a morally complex and hugely im-

perfect world. From then on, I started worrying about Roddam incessantly.

I approached him on the phone one day in 2012 and suggested a seminar series in his name at the new IIT Gandhinagar. His initial reaction was that such things were only done after one passes away.

I said, "heaven can wait!", and eventually he was convinced. I saw him next in the hotel lobby in Gandhinagar on the morning of the first seminar. I asked him over breakfast how he was settling in, and he launched into a tale about trekking to Lothal the previous day. While returning from Lothal, he visited Sabarmati Ashram, stringing together the foundation blocks of ancient India and the modern republic in a way I could tell deeply satisfied him.

I have often wondered what I learned from arguing with RN all these years. I believe it was an appreciation of history and a strong belief that India will make it eventually. For this, I am eternally grateful. It is as if the two hands of wisdom, one of supreme perfection and the other of supreme tolerance, had reached consummation in Narasimha.