

# Inspiring life story of Prof Biswa Nath Datta, a great well wisher of vidya



PROF. BISWA NATH DATTA

In the past several weeks, these pages of *News & Events* presented several news stories featuring Prof Biswa Nath Datta, a great well wisher of Vidya. These stories were all related to the International Conference conducted online to honour and felicitate Prof Datta on his 80th birth day. As part of the various talks in the Conference, Prof Thomas Kailath presented a moving account of the rise of Prof Datta from very humble beginnings to his current position as a Distinguished Research Professor in Northern Illinois University, USA. The Editorial Team of News & Events obtained a transcript of the talk by Prof Kailath. The same is appended below for the benefit of the readers of these pages.

[Prof Biswa Nath Datta's remarkable life story  
as told by Prof Thomas Kailath](#)

Dear friends and honoured guests,

I have had the privilege of learning a little about Biswa's remarkable life story, some of which I am privileged to present to you today.

Biswa grew up in a very small village in West Bengal in a family of very limited means. He told me that they often had to share their little hut with unwelcome visitors, especially snakes. His village only had a primary school, so for high school he had to walk, barefoot and in the mud, to a village about 2 miles away. To add to this, he says that he had the greatest misfortune of losing his mother when he was just nine months old. While his father soon married again, Biswa had a miserable childhood: growing up in extreme poverty, with almost no mother in his life. In spite of this, he developed an intense desire for learning, and often had dreams of "travelling all over the world as a scientist".

Those of you who know Biswa, may now believe that if you dream hard enough you please make come true. This reminds me of a movie some of you may have seen, in which another driven person was led to build a baseball stadium in his small town. Someone had told him: if you build it they will come!

So Biswa was driven to get good grades in school, and in time he applied successfully to a college in a town 15 miles away from his village. He was not sure how he would be able to support himself, but again fortune favors the brave. He met a rich and kind person, who offered him shelter in his own house in exchange for tutoring his three school-going children. And a kind Doctor in the town happened to be a member of the Governing Board of the college, and arranged to have Biswa's college fees waived. And later, his hard work and excellent grades got him a fellowship that allowed him to move from this small town to the big city of Calcutta (now called Kolkata) to pursue his studies for a Master's degree in Mathematics. Here again, he found himself a tutoring job in a family where he was offered boarding and lodging. But he had to take another tutoring job to pay his college fees and very modest living expenses. He says he managed with 2 shirts and 1 pair of trousers, which he had to wash and get ironed on the weekends! Nevertheless he also worked hard to keep up his good grades. Then he was struck with a personal tragedy: his beloved father died only seven days before the final examination. Those who are familiar with the then Indian Education system know that the final exam is essentially the sole deciding measure of performance. Despite this tragedy, Biswa still took the exam to fulfill the last wish of his father. And to his great surprise, **but I should add not ours**, Biswa passed the exam with a first-class.

After this, he took a job in a Government College in a city nearby Kolkata so that, following Indian traditions, he could support the family of his step mother and her two children, as well as the educational expenses of one of his cousins. He sent applications to several colleges in the UK and was admitted for a PhD degree at King's College in London. Though he was initially promised by the college of financial support, but after arrival in London, he was denied of that support because of a new regulation for foreign students studying in the country. He had to take a job as a part-time school teacher to support his expense there and was forced to become a part-time student attending college at night. Another lucky contact led him to apply to McMaster University, in Canada. Canada at that time was seeking to encourage the immigration of talented people. So McMaster offered him a full scholarship for tuition and living support as well as, would you believe it, air fare from London. After his Masters degree he joined the University of Ottawa where he got his PhD degree under a well-known numerical analyst the late James H. Howland. In Ottawa he also met and married a fellow graduate student, his now late wife, Karabi Datta.

In 1973 Karabi and Biswa moved back to India to work in the Gas Turbine Research Establishment in Bangalore. But the job involved more administration than research and so they were led by mutual friend to a position at the State University of Campinas in São Paulo Brazil. There they spent 4 happy years, Biswa wrote a book in Portuguese. And their 2 children were born there. There Biswa continued his research and in 1981 he was nominated by Hans Schneider and several other prominent mathematicians for a position at Northern Illinois University. Here he has had a very distinguished career, and now holds the title of Distinguished Research Professor.

But his travels have by no means ended- in fact they have expanded. He has taught at and lectured at universities and research organizations around the world. His mind-boggling list includes more than one visit to (bear with me) Australia, Brazil, Chile, China, England, France, Hong Kong, Greece, India, Mexico, Malaysia, Portugal, Spain, Taiwan, and Venezuela. One of them led to a connection some years ago with Vidya University and to Dr. Sudha and then to this wonderful celebration today.

So before turning the stage back to Dr Sudha, let me end my remarks with a summary of his own life by Biswa.

**He declares that the THEMES OF HIS LIFE STORY are:**

**"WHERE THERE IS A WILL, THERE IS A WAY"**

**"DREAMS CAN COME TRUE"**

**"And, channeling former Pres. Barack Obama: YES YOU CAN. IF YOU TRY".**

Thank you all for your patience with me today.