

Climbing the Coconut Tree

A Partial Autobiography

KASTHURI SREENIVASAN

DELHI

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS

1980

Contents

INTRODUCTION

CLIMBING THE COCONUT TREE

EPILOGUE

GLOSSARY OF INDIAN WORDS

INDEX

Introduction

I have recently reached the age of sixty. According to the Hindu tradition which forms my background and which has dogged me in spite of persistent efforts to get out of its overwhelming influence, I have completed a full circle. The planets that influence one's life are supposed to be in the same configuration at sixty as when one was born. It is a new start, so to speak. And one is expected to undertake certain ceremonies in preparation for a new life and to prepare one's mind and spirit for the new problems that lie ahead. From now on, I ought to cultivate an attitude of detachment to the world and its problems, to hand over responsibilities to successors and prepare for the next world in a worthy manner.

But I regret to say that I find this life extremely interesting and cannot develop the spirit of other-worldliness that is the hallmark of a good Hindu. Nor have I acquired the dignity and gravity that is a sign of age and maturity. On the other hand, I have the unfortunate trait of being able to see the absurdities of the most sublime and serious moments. Nor can I think of the other world in which—however much I try—I have no belief. For me, this life is sufficiently fascinating, intriguing, challenging and occasionally frustrating. To echo Bertrand Russell, I believe that three things matter in life – the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and the unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind—thought I must confess that, as I grow older and perhaps a little wiser, the suffering of mankind seems to be somewhat deserved. Perhaps, if I had undertaken the ceremonies and celebrated my sashtiyaphapoorthi as recommended by the holy books, I would have been in a better frame of mind.

According to modern concepts also, the completion of sixty years marks a very definite stage. It is time of retirement from most jobs in India. Extensions are given only in some cases, on the basis of medical fitness, for one year at a time. One begins to think of one's provident fund and retirement benefits rather than in terms of new ventures. The younger generation feels you are an old fossil, a nuisance in fact, and you are in the way of a younger and better man. While a woman may be as old as she looks, a man is only as old as he feels. Though the muscles of my body are getting a bit stiff, my mind still seems flexible and willing to absorb new ideas, though the younger generation might dispute it hotly.

But irrespective of what the Hindu tradition might say or the younger generation might think, we are all subject to the tyranny of biological factors from which there is no escape. A man at sixty tends to look backwards rather than forwards. His struggles, his passions and his achievements, if any, are behind him unless of course he is a politician, in which case he still has some hope. Apart from growing roses or writing an autobiography, there is very little that is new that he can do. But I am not interested in growing roses; my wife knows much more about them than I do. One could of course exercise power, provided one has already acquired it. The desire for power is the only appetite that is not limited by

biology, and to many elderly people it is the only source of pleasure. But, unfortunately, I have never aspired for power-certainly not as an end in itself-and whatever power I have exercised has been based on the goodwill of others rather than on factors such as wealth or politics. Under these circumstances, I can only look back on the highly interesting and complex period through which I have lived, at the revolutionary changes that have taken place during this period, more as an observer than as a participant. Perhaps such an approach will lend objectivity to my story and is as good a reason as any for writing one's autobiography. In any case, it is better to recall one's first childhood before reaching the second.

Of course, the fact that I have reached the point of anecdotage in my life is no excuse for inflicting it on others and making them pay for it at the same time. If poetry is the recollection of emotion in tranquility, the same might be said of autobiography as well. It is certainly recollection and, unless it is recollected under tranquil conditions and unless there is some emotion, it would not be worth writing and certainly not worth reading.

If a person is famous or at least well known he writes an autobiography to put forward his point of view, to justify himself. This is particularly important for a politician who wants his contribution to be well understood and appreciated at least by history if not by his contemporaries. People might read the life of a famous author in order to find the sources of his inspiration or the reminiscences of an explorer so that they might share the excitement without the dangers. A film star's life might be read for its glamour as well as gossip. But why does one who is none of these want to write his autobiography? The reason is simple. In life, just as in sport, the view from the gallery may be much better than from the field, provided you have a good seat. One can see both sides and appreciate the finer points without getting too involved in the game. I have always prided myself on the fact that, even when I was deeply committed to some activity, another part would dissociate itself from the scene of battle and look at it as an outsider would. This might give the story that follows a value which it would otherwise perhaps lack.

Ultimately, a book is its own justification.

Finally, I would like to thank the Oxford University Press for their helpful suggestions in the preparation of this manuscript.

Climbing the Coconut Tree

1

I began life as a somewhat controversial figure. The controversy started with my birth and was between my grandfather and grandmother as to the exact time of my arrival into this world. While grandfather and father spent a sleepless night on the front Payal waiting anxiously for my arrival, grandmother and some other women of the village were busy ministering to mother's needs in a back room. Periodically, grandfather would walk into the house, stand in the dimly-lit and listen and make noises indicating his presence. Grandmother would come out and tell him brusquely that the awaited event had yet to occur.

'I was just wondering,' grandfather mumbled.

'I will let you know when it happens', grandmother laid the law down. It was an occasion when ladies had the upper hand and she was not going to give up the advantage.

'Will it be long?'

'It all depends.'

'I was thinking we ought to note the exact time – er –of the birth,' the old man said. 'You know, for the horoscope.'

He had recently been persuaded to invest a precious thirty rupees in acquiring a wall clock which ticked away in the front hall and announced the passing of the hours with loud metallic bangs that disturbed the stillness of the night as well as everyone's sleep. But having acquired a somewhat obtrusive piece of modern gadgetry purely as a status symbol, he thought it appropriate to take advantage of it on the one occasion when accuracy in time was considered essential.

'I will let you know' and the old lady went into the inner sanctum. Grandfather returned helplessly to the front payal.

Finally, when I did arrive, there was so much confusion that no one thought of going to the clock, which hung in a dark corner of the hall. When the morning light broke and the women of the village started coming to see me, one of them asked, 'What time was he born?' Needless to say, hers was the only other house in the village which boasted of a clock and hence the question. The two clocks never agreed.

'I think it was a little after three,' said grandmother, who had been too busy to note the passage of time.

But grandfather, who had been waiting for what seemed interminable hours, intervened. 'No, it was after four,' he said.

'I heard it strike three distinctly,' grandmother insisted. 'I came out to fetch something when I heard the clock strike, and as soon as I went in, he was born.'

'Let us hope your clock was right,' the visitor commented sceptically.

The matter became particularly important when my horoscope came to be cast a few months later. Evidently one of the stars influencing my fate was moving from one position to another at exactly 3.30 a.m that day. So, whether I would be famous and successful and happy or spend a miserable life depended upon whether I was born before three-thirty or after. Later, whenever I was praised for my alleged intelligence, grandmother said, 'So he should be, for he was born under that star, at three a.m.' Grandfather had no answer. Soon, it was tacitly assumed I was born under the favourable star. But whenever the predictions of astrologers went wrong – and they often did-people took shelter by saying that there was some doubt as to the exact time of my arrival.

Unfortunately, the importance that was attached to the time of my birth did not extend to the date and the month. My horoscope had been cast according to the Tamil calendar. In those days, there was no provision for the registration of births and deaths in villages. So when grandmother took me to the village school and the teacher asked for the month and date of my birth, she replied that it was in the middle of the fifth month. She meant the Tamil month and the teacher assumed it to be the English month of May. This little misunderstanding has made me older by many months. Consequently, I have always had two birthdays like the British queen-one official and the other real. I have also had to pay a higher life insurance premium and retire earlier because of grandmother's simple mistake. But I have had the consolation of possessing two birthdays, neither of which I have bothered to celebrate.

Soon after I was born, grandfather was supposed to have commented, 'My elder son will leave his property intact. But my second son will have to divide it, now that he has two sons. Pity!'

But grandmother is said to have retorted, 'He should have thought of it himself, before having two sons!'

From all of which it is obvious that grandfather was somewhat particular about money and property matters.

I was born in October 1917 in a village in Tamil Nadu. My ancestors were Telugu –speaking Naidus, but the family had lived in the Tamil country for many generations. My seventh grandfather cut down the forest, ploughed the first field and built the first house in our village. We must have been in Tamil Nadu even before that, but from where in Andhra we came and where we lived until we made a home in our present village remains unknown. Nor do we have any idea as to whether we came as conquerors or perhaps as refugees from Muslim rule. The only clue is a very old sword sheathed inside what looks like a walking stick, which has been in our family for as long as anyone can remember. On the strength of this slender evidence, the martial background of the family was presumed, but rarely insisted upon.

I have a very strong sense of the past. It evokes in me feelings which are out of proportion to the importance of events. Consequently, I have often wondered if I should attempt to find our family roots in Andhra, as Alex Haley has done with his family in Africa. But I think the evidence, if any, is likely to be extremely slender. Nor do I have the persistence necessary for such an enterprise. We must have left our home in Andhra, not as an individual family, but as a large group, for we brought with us Telugu-speaking masons, potters, leather workers and other occupational groups. We also brought singers and storytellers who were once nomadic and who used to visit the Naidu villages periodically and relate the story of their exodus from their homeland. But by the time I started taking an interest in these singers, most of them had disappeared, having taken to other professions and the tradition has been lost for ever. Anyhow, my roots in our present home are sufficiently deep without my having to probe any further.

Our village was known as Karadibavi, or karadivavi in Tamil. It means, bear-well. Tradition has it that during the clearing of the forest, a man came across a bear drinking water from a well and hence the rather unusual name. But no one has attempted to explain how there came to be a well in the middle of an uninhabited forest which was being cut down for the first time.

My ancestors must have been a proud and sensitive lot. They showed a healthy respect for authority, but within the limited sphere of their own social environment, they asserted themselves. Insults and slights, even when imaginary, had to be quickly avenged. They were easily offended by their own relations too, and the feeling of enmity continued as a feud for many years until, at some wedding or funeral in the family, the two sides were brought together after a long process of mediation by interested relatives. Women were the usual sufferers in such feuds.

There was an occasion when my third grandfather's brother who had no children by his first wife wanted to marry a second time. He wanted to marry his wife's younger sister, but the in-laws, understandably worried that their second daughter might also be left

without progeny, declined the alliance. This was considered an insult to the family by all the brothers. Not only was the wife concerned prevented from ever visiting her mother's home, but when the wedding of the sister had been arranged, all the Naidus of Karadibavi rode over to the bride's house on the day of the engagement ceremony and, in the presence of the large gathering, threw their chappals into the ceremonial rice, and rode back. Needless to say, such highhanded activity often led to skirmishes of various sorts.

Ours was not a fertile village. There was no river or stream or canal to water the fields. They were irrigated only by digging wells, and the water was mostly brackish- the bear must have drunk all the available fresh water! The Naidus were supposed to have settled wherever there was black cotton soil in Tamil Nadu and our village was no exception. It meant less work. There was a lot of dry land which depended purely on rainfall for cultivation, but the rainfall in our village was low and often unpredictable. There were no lush trees or vegetation, no grass or flowers. Even kitchen gardens were rare. Only a few thorny shrubs grew here and there in the backyards and along the hedges. Every home had a small well-at least in our part of the village-but the water was salty and drinking water had to be brought in pots from some distance away by servants.

On those rare occasions when it rained, there was jubilation. Men stood about on the wet, muddy streets and discussed the crops they were going to sow and from whom they were going to borrow money. On the strength of a good monsoon, they planned weddings and pilgrimages; a few even contemplated reactivating a feud long dormant, for now they could afford to go court and pay lawyers. But the women were careful to bring out the largest pots they had and collect the water that fell from the roof-tops and store it. It would save them a long and weary journey to the drinking-water well at least for some days to come.

If the rains were overdue and the crops withering, or if the sowing had not even taken place, one of the standard practices was to pray to our seventh grandfather whose weather-worn *samadhi* stood under a banyan tree on the outskirts of the village. There was also a reservoir nearby, which had been constructed by our sixth grandfather so that the rain water could be stored for the cattle to drink and washermen to wash our clothes. On the appointed day, all the married women went in procession to the tank bund, carrying pots of water and rice which was ceremoniously boiled under the shade of the banyan tree and dutifully offered to our venerable ancestor. Tradition had it that, as the ladies wended their way home, it would start to rain. However, the effectiveness of the ceremonies was somewhat doubtful since none of them got wet. But the importance of rain to our village community was obvious.

In an agricultural society, rain brings life, work, happiness, prosperity and plenty, and, occasionally, misery and destruction. But men cannot live without it; it dominates their lives, dictates the terms under which they live, regulates the seasons of hard work and lazy indolence. It controls the timing of weddings and festivals, gives people their faiths and their

beliefs and their superstitions. It is their eternal protector, benevolent master, their blind avenger of fate.

If there is no rain, life comes to a standstill. The wells go dry and the fields become barren. The sun-baked earth crumbles easily under one's feet and the soft brown soil is carried away by the wind, exposing the hard, stony ground underneath. The farmer no longer ploughs his land; the blacksmith does not make his implements, for they are of no use. The weaver cannot sell the cloth he weaves; women do not buy ornaments from the jeweller. Even the village priest who presides over every celebration or calamity is powerless. He rolls up his almanac and waits for the heavens to open.

If the prices are high, it is the fault of the townspeople. If the taxes are high, it is the fault of the government. But if there is no rain, it is fate. 'God is against us,' they say. 'It is beyond our hands; it is fate.' And people find consolation in such a statement. That is their philosophy and that is their religion, for they know no other. They merely turn to the heavens and ask, 'How long, oh god, how long are we to suffer?'

Not surprisingly, the rain attracted me greatly as a child; my first experience of the monsoon is still vivid in my mind. The hot sun and the white-hot sky disappeared dramatically. There was some wind which raised the dust. And then, thick, dark clouds came sailing past to the accompaniment of thunder and lightning. I was terrified as well as fascinated. I clung to my mother out of fear, but needed to watch this spell-binding panorama of nature all the same. I would drag my mother to a favourite window in the front hall, press my face against the iron bars and look out. The distant mountains could no longer be seen. There was a rustle of wind and the rain came down, first in large drops and then in torrents. Soon, mud-coloured water started flowing through the streets.

The rain stopped. The sky became clear and took on a hue of bright blue with a few white clouds wandering aimlessly. The mountains in the distance were visible again and the excitement was over. My mother could leave me now, although I was still glued to the window. Water was still flowing through the streets and the occasional drops of rain falling on the water created bubbles on its surface. It was enthralling watching the bubbles form, move a few yards along the current and then disappear. The mild shafts of sunlight that followed the rain played on these bubbles, making them glow in different colours all at once. I counted these bubbles as they formed and as they disappeared, for a holy man who had been to our house had said that life was as transient as bubbles on water. Counting them before they vanished I said to myself, 'another life, another life'.

The torrent usually washed away the dirt and the filth that had accumulated in the streets for days and the roofs looked fresh and clean. The last drops were still falling from the rooftops. The monotonous sound of running water and the croaking of frogs in the distance could be heard. I yearned to go and play in the running water, but this, alas, was disallowed for fear of my catching cold.

On the outskirts of the village, along a path that led towards the town, were large tamarind trees reputed to be more than a hundred years old. Local tradition had it that they were planted by Tipu Sultan because our village was on the director route taken by his army when moving from Kerala towards Madras. As one travelled past the village, the landscape was bare and brown, the monotony being relieved by a few hardy trees, thorny hedges marking the boundaries of farms, and small farmhouses which were not used for living but merely for storing implements or as sheds for cattle. But occasionally, one would come across a bright patch of green indicating that the well in that farm had plenty of water.

Ours was a large family. There were grandfather and grandmother, my father and mother and my brother and sister. When I was born my brother was living in the town, where he was studying in a high school—he was twelve years older than I - but my sister who was only six stayed with us. My uncle had not got on with grandfather and so had taken his share of the property and left the family fold, but was still living next door. Besides, grandfather's sister, widowed for many years, as well as mother's sister, also widowed recently, lived with us too. My grandfather's sister had once been a power to reckon with in the family, but she was now an old and infirm lady who was constantly complaining about people not looking after her properly. My aunt, on the other hand, was still young and had no children of her own. She more or less adopted us, looked after us, and was generally a great help to my mother.

None of my ancestors had been famous—or even notorious—in any way. The only exception was a brother of my great-grandfather who wrote a poetic drama in the classical Hindu style, very high-sounding, but somewhat pornographic. The book was considered quite respectable, however, because the heroine fell in love with Lord Krishna who came to her in a dream. The Story describes, in rather vivid detail, everything that happened in the dream and the subsequent efforts of the heroine to find her divine lover. It was published by a Madras publisher more than a hundred years ago. Though it is out of print now, tattered old copies are still doing the rounds in the villages. It is a long, dull and uninteresting story, occasionally illuminated by alliterative wit and flashes of humour. Unfortunately, the pornographic songs are the most interesting. They are very lyrical as well as humorous. When I was a boy, these were sung in lonely farmhouses at night when the womenfolk were safely tucked away in their houses in the main village. Rumour had it that the author was infatuated with a woman of the mason's caste and it was she who inspired him to rise to such poetic heights!

The descendants of my seventh grandfather—about fifteen families—lived at one end of the village. They all had large spacious houses with tiled roofs and white-washed walls, with carved doorways and pillars. Every house had a cowshed and a well in its backyard. The houses were all built to a similar pattern of the eighteenth century when things were unsettled and life was not safe in the villages. They had a small open courtyard in the centre which allowed light and air to come into the house. The open space was surrounded by halls

for living in and rooms for storing things. The size of the house was determined by the size of the open courtyard. There were no windows on the outside and the walls were built like sandwiches, with mud and stone on two sides and sand in the middle. It was easy to protect such a house against thieves and marauders. If someone tried to make a hole in the wall- this was the way that thieves usually got into a house in those days – it was soon filled with sand. The doors were reinforced with iron plates and crossbars so that they would not give way under attack from outside.

To this basic design, different ancestors had added various bits and pieces. Our own house had a front hall, elaborate kitchens and store-rooms at the back as well. My father added his own quota of buildings. The front hall was extended but separated from the rest by iron bars. For some unknown reason, this type of room was very fashionable among affluent agricultural families of the period. A wooden table with drawers was purchased and put in this room along with the wooden chairs that were available as the nearest approximation to an office. My father also added a 'bathroom' for heating water and much later, a garage when we acquired a car. The inner rooms were used to store agricultural produce such as cotton or grain until it was sold. One room was used to store foodstuffs such as rice and lentils, all of which were purchased on an annual basis. One of the inner rooms which was always referred to as grandfather's room had an iron safe. Another was used for storing bedding, which were brought out at night and spread round the open space, depending on which side was expected to catch the breeze.

One of the fixtures in our house about which the family was rather proud was a very elaborately carved doorway with iron crossbars and decorated knobs. It was said that my third grandfather had loaned some money to a Chettiar family in another village. Unfortunately, the Chettiar lost all his money in some ambitious venture. But he was anxious to keep his promise to my ancestor, so he came and told him. 'I have lost everything except the house in which I am living. You are welcome to take it from me in lieu of the loan.' But my ancestor, who had been to his house many times, told him, 'I do not want to deprive you of your house. Let me have the carved doorway which I shall replace with an ordinary one, and you can consider the debt fully repaid.' The doorway was brought and duly installed in our house. It represented not only the aesthetic taste of the family, but also a measure of its magnanimity and also perhaps indicated the values by which people lived in earlier days.

There was very little furniture in any of the houses. Our own house could boast of three wooden chairs, and two benches which, when put together, made a sort of bed for grandfather. There was a large wooden cupboard in which the clothes of the men were kept and a couple of steel trunks for the saris of the ladies. Though all the fifteen families were not equally affluent-my father was the wealthiest- they were all reasonably well-off farmers and socially equal to each other. The men were all uncles to me and I was taught to refer to them not by their names but by their houses of farms. Thus, we had the Corner House

uncle, the New House uncle (though the 'new' house was now more than fifty years old), the Big House uncle, the Centre House uncle, and so on. My own father was known as Small Farmhouse uncle by the other children. The reference was to the fact that when the property acquired and developed by my seventh grandfather and his sons was at long last divided between the various descendants, my great-grandfather got the smallest farm. Since then, in spite of the fact that father and uncle were the largest landowners in the village, our house was still known as the Small Farmhouse to everyone. The force of tradition was very strong indeed!

By prudent farm management and a succession of good harvests, grandfather had been able to save money. Investment in industries or even in banks was unknown to the village people and the only alternatives open to them were to keep the money in a safe, buy more land or lend it to other farmers at a reasonable rate of interest. My grandfather chose the last alternative. He charged a standard rate of twelve per cent per annum and lent money only to those who, he thought, were capable of paying it back without ruining themselves. Sometimes, when a relative or a close friend wanted to borrow, he would refuse bluntly saying that if he did so, he would lose his money as well as his relationship. But in order to soothe their feelings, he would give a much smaller sum and say, 'Return it if you can; otherwise, it does not matter.' As a result, the farmers trusted him and, with rare exceptions both he and his borrowers flourished. My father followed the same policy, though he did not practice money lending for any length of time.

But when I was a child, farmers from many of the neighbouring villages would come to our house regularly, either to borrow money, or to pay the annual interest. On such occasions, one of the uncles would be pressed into service to write the promissory note as dictated by grandfather and then witness it. I heard it so often that by the time I was six or seven, I could repeat the wording of the I.O.U.s, which was considered very clever on my part.

Between the fifteen families, there was cohesion and a solidarity born of a tradition of seven generations. They presented a united front to the rest of the village, particularly to the Gounder community who formed the majority and who were also agriculturists. If a member of the group was insulted, everyone smarted under it and all joined together to avenge it. Though the properties of the fifteen families were separate and each had his own income and his own problems, there was a sort of communism and a sharing in celebrations as well as in the sorrows of each family, in those days, frequent celebrations of one sort or another were held in our house. A large number of Hindu festivals were observed. For the child, there was first the purification ceremony when he was born; there was the naming ceremony, the hair-shaving ceremony, the ear-piercing ceremony and the alphabet ceremony when he or she went to school. All these occasions were religious as well as social and gave an opportunity to invite all the fifteen families for a meal and get-together. Our house became a centre of activity during such festivals, not only because

grandfather was the oldest of the descendants of my seventh grandfather, but the affluence that he had been able to achieve was tacitly admitted.

The various uncles had their own idiosyncrasies. These were well known to all and were discussed and commented upon. If a person did something unusual it was remembered and referred to at every opportunity, so that it pursued him for life. Only when a person did something totally outrageous or humiliating was reference to it taboo. But the reserve with which that person was treated made it obvious what others thought about him, and it was long time being forgotten.

One of the uncles was known for his forgetfulness. Then there was the *Shandy* Uncle who went to the weekly market six miles away without fail and did everybody else's shopping. It was his hobby. Another was known as the Engine Uncle because he had imported western civilization into the village when he bought a 'Ruston' oil engine and installed it in his well for irrigation. One of the uncles was a widower. He was supposed to have had a roving eye for lower-caste women, but by the time I knew him he was quite elderly and his adventures were well behind him. On the other hand, he had become very religious and the name of Rama was always on his lips, perhaps in expiation of his former sins. But the other uncles laughed about his religion and said. 'What is the use of going to Banaras when your sins are inside your dhoti?' It was said that whenever he had a woman to visit him she had to have a bath and put on a local scent that was available in the village. And when the women went to work in the fields the next morning or to fetch water from the well, they sniffed each other to see who had been with uncle the previous night. Fortunately for him, none of the husbands ever found out and, instead of being murdered, he died of decrepit old age.

Another uncle was known as 'Emden,' after the famous battleship of the First World War. Like that vessel, he too was very clever at avoiding battle and adopting evasive tactics and getting away with them. The exploits of the ship which fired a few shells into Madras harbour were well remembered in the villages and the word was temporarily incorporated into local usage. To me, these uncles and their simple characteristics seemed larger than life and they impressed themselves on my mind very deeply.

Perhaps the most original and interesting person in the village was the 'New-well-house' uncle. He was frequently referred to as the 'Awkward' Uncle, though we children were not allowed to call him that. The Engine Uncle would often say that if every one in the village was ploughing from east to west, the Awkward Uncle would insist on ploughing from north to south. This was the height of contrariness as far as the village was concerned. In a society in which all activity as well as belief and ethics were reduced to a rigid code of conformism, to be original was extremely difficult if not impossible, and it took considerable social pressure from the other fourteen uncles to make him toe the line.

That he was unusual was not surprising. In his youth, he had learnt to practice yoga from one of the wandering mendicants. Later in life, he claimed that he was well on the way to floating on water in the *Padma Asana* pose, that is, sitting cross-legged. He had also learnt to sing and to play the harmonium and was the star performer at the temple *bhajans* on Saturday nights. A combination of yoga and devotional singing was a somewhat explosive mixture as far as successful domesticity was concerned. At the age of twenty, he decided to become a mendicant and devote his life to the service of god. While the Naidu community were all far religion, they knew that a little of it went a long way and were certainly opposed to any member of their clan taking it to its logical conclusion. They also believed in the therapeutic value of marriage as an antidote to excessive religion in a young man. The moment he showed the least signs of donning the saffron robe and the begging bowl, a bride was soon found and uncle was married off before he could say 'Om!' While singing at the temple continued, the yogic exercises were replaced by a succession of small children at regular intervals. In spite of this success in domesticity, he found adjustment somewhat difficult. While others talked about what 'is done' and 'not done' in any given circumstances, he spoke of 'right' and 'wrong,' which his cousins and parents found rather inconvenient.

In later life, the Awkward Uncle took to astrology. He was very popular in that field of specialization as he did not charge for his services, which rather annoyed the professional astrologers. Poor villagers would come to him from far and near, with the horoscopes of their sons and daughters, seeking help in choosing their life partners, picking auspicious times for weddings or in deciding whether they should buy a plot of land or not. Once, a person who owed money to my uncle had come to sell his land and pay off the debt which he could not clear in any other way. He had been persuaded to do so after some effort, but he brought his horoscope 'just in case' and showed it to my uncle. The uncle looked at it and told him that the combination of stars in the near future was going to make him lucky and he might come into some property. So the debtor said to himself, 'If that is so, why should I sell my property now?' and walked away.

On another occasion, the income-tax department had sent a letter to my father asking him to submit his accounts for assessment. As a money-lender, he had to pay tax on the income received as interest, but agricultural income was free from taxation. From that year onwards, we had a Brahmin clerk from the town who came for a week every year to write up the accounts and submit them to the income-tax department. The tax itself was very small in those days, but that we had to pay it at all was considered a status symbol. The Awkward Uncle felt this affected the 'equality' of the fifteen families, that my father was the only one selected for this unique 'honour' by the British government. So he went to Coimbatore, searched out the income-tax office, paid fifty rupees on a bogus income and exhibited his receipt proudly to all the other uncles, just to prove that my father had no right to steal a march on his other cousins!

Agricultural operations in the village were intermittent, periods of hard work interspersed with periods of indolence. But whether there was any work or not, the men went to their farms in the morning. They returned in the evening, had a wash in the backyard or in the bathroom, if they had one, and after supper, gathered on the front *payal* of our house to discuss the affairs of the day. They would discuss the prices of crops, about purchases and sales of cows and buffaloes, or about the doings of others who might not be present. There was nothing private or secret in those discussions and the activities of everyone were thrashed out with equal interest and curiosity. I remember one of the earliest such discussions that impressed me was about the 'engine'. It was such a novel and revolutionary innovation that it was the subject of debate for weeks.

'You don't have to feed the engine when it is idle,' the Engine Uncle would defend himself. 'But the bullocks eat whether there is any work or not.'

'And I suppose your engine gives you manure for the farm!' the Awkward Uncle would retort.

'It only gives you black smoke and a foul smell.'

'And can you use your engine for ploughing or carrying your crop to the market?'

'I say it is still cheap!'

'Yes, and how much did you pay for it?' another uncle would inquire. 'I bet you could have got another farm for the price you paid for it!' This was a subtle hint that the Engine Uncle had kept the price of the engine a closely guarded secret. This was not considered fair by the other uncles.

'In six months, you will be looking around to borrow money to buy an extra pair of bullocks, because the engine will break down before the next sowing season.'

And so, the discussion would go on.

We had a bullock cart as well as a horse cart. Though one had to sit cross-legged in them, they were considered most comfortable since the wheels were mounted on springs which absorbed the bumps in the tracks. While grandfather was fond of horses, my father was a connoisseur of bullocks. These were of two kinds-trotting bullocks, which were used for light carts carrying people, and farm bullocks which were used for ploughing, irrigation and carrying produce to the market in heavy open carts. Whenever father heard of a pair of trotting bullocks, he had to go and inspect them and buy them if he thought they were better than those he already had, so that, generally, we had the fastest pair in the area. The best of them could perhaps travel at the phenomenal speed of about eight miles per hour. But it was a matter of pride and joy not only to my father but for all the fifteen families that we should own the best. To breed them, to train them and to look after them took a lot of father's time. One of my earliest delights was travelling in those carts to mother's birth-

place, which was about five miles away. To race against other bullock carts in the muddy tracts-there were very few roads in those days-and to overtake them, had all the thrill of participating in a motor race today. I became so fond of travelling that whenever my father went anywhere on business and one of the carts was brought out, I would get in and cry when I was taken out. So whenever father was ready to set out on a journey, one of the servants took me away somewhere until the cart had safely departed.

Though there was no hierarchy between the fifteen families, respect for age and sex was very strong. The young always referred to the older people of the same generation with the appellation 'elder brother' or 'elder sister' after the name. Men did not address their wives by name but as 'so and so's mother'. Similarly, wives did not utter the names of their husbands or their fathers-in-law. If another boy happened to have the same name as her husband, the lady referred to him as 'so and so's son'. Grandfather always addressed his wife as 'that old woman' though what he called her when they were younger, I don't know. My father addressed mother as 'who is on the other side'. Because I was given the name of my maternal grandfather, which many ladies could not utter without seeming rude, they called me Raju. Wives did not sit down in the presence of their husbands or male in-laws and rarely came face to face with their fathers-in-law during the first year or two their married life. When a lady had to walk past a group of men in the street, she averted her eyes and hurried as quickly as modesty would permit. Though the customs have all changed since then, these are indications of the atmosphere in which I grew up.

But respect for men did not mean that women had no responsibility of power. Supervision of many agricultural operations was left to the ladies. During the cotton harvesting, my mother would be off to the fields at dawn and not return till late afternoon. She was responsible for dividing the produce between the workers. Similarly, operations such as weeding, in which women workers were employed, were supervised by the womenfolk. They generally knew quite a lot about farming and did not hesitate to offer their views, though not in the presence of other men. One of the fifteen uncles could never make up his mind about anything-whether it was selling his cotton crop or buying a cow-without asking his wife. People referred to this weakness of his with mock subtlety, saying, 'he can't decide unless he goes into the kitchen for a drink of water'.

As a child, I had very few toys. The first toy I had was a wheeled push-cart made of wood by the village carpenter. It had three small wheels and a stand and was intended to teach me to walk without falling. But since I had no other toys, I used to push it around long after the need was over and later dragged it with a piece of string. I couldn't move in a straight line as one of the wheels had worn more than the others and I kept going round and round in the backyard. Occasionally, wandering gypsies would bring rattles made of palm leaves and I was given one of those. The cattle boy we had at that time, Subban, was very good at trapping little birds and he often brought me a sparrow tied to a piece of string, chirping and trying to fly away. He also taught me how to make a little bullock cart out of

corn stalks and was my favourite friend and hero. Often, I would not eat my supper unless he brought me a bird on a string. But mother always insisted that the bird should be let loose without any harm. On many a moonlight night, I would sit on grandmother's lap in the backyard holding a piece of string with a bird at the end of it while she told me stories from the *Ramayana* and fed me supper. The last course was always curds and rice. By the time we got to it, I was nearly full and did not want any more. But grandmother said. 'You see, Raju, rice and lentils are like the attendants at Rama's coronation, the vegetables are like the ministers, *rasam* is the priest Vasishta; now they are all waiting for Rama to arrive. The curds are Rama. If you don't eat curds there will be no coronation; do you want that?' And I ate the curds too.

But the village did not consist only of these fifteen families, though they were the wealthiest. There was the Gounder community who were Tamil-speaking, who were also agriculturists and who lived adjacent to us. They were in a majority in the village. There had been feuds between the two communities in the past, but by the time I was born these had all disappeared and a social equilibrium established, the higher economic status of the Naidus being compensated by the numerical superiority of the Gounders. Many Gounders had started borrowing money from grandfather and they were on very amiable terms.

Several stories were told of those feuds, not always to the advantage of the Gounders, since it was the Naidus who told them. Once, some Gounders decided to harvest the cotton crop in grandfather's farm under cover of night. While making up bundles of cotton in their blankets, they were discovered, but managed to escape. The blankets and the cotton were however recovered and a complaint was duly filed with the police. When the case came up for hearing, the accused, who had been identified on the basis of the dhobi marks on the blankets, denied all knowledge of the crime. They also disclaimed ownership of the blankets. But grandfather's lawyer told them. 'The case has been dismissed; you can now collect your blankets.' There was an immediate rush forward as each man recovered his blanket. Needless to say, they were all then convicted.

Beyond the Gounder's area lived the other castes-the masons, the washermen, the potters, the barbers, etc. Here, the houses were small, and often thatched and not tiled. The walls were not plastered or whitewashed. One came across the soot from the potters' kilns and pigs that grunted and rooted in the mud and filth, and the washermen's donkeys wandering in search of something to eat. The lanes were narrow and the gutters flowed in the middle of the streets. The untouchables lived about a furlong away from the main village in a colony of their own. The communities were thus separate and distinct, by tradition and custom, no one ever thought of moving from their own section to any part of the village. Economic as well as social constraints made it impossible. It is so to a very large extent even today.

The toddy shop and the arrack shop were located away from the village but at strategic points so that untouchables as well as touchables could use them, though the

former had to sit outside to drink and not enter the shops. Prohibition had not yet been heard of, but drink was considered evil and anyone who drank was looked down upon down upon by the rest of the community. They were patronized mostly by the lower classes, but if any Naidu or Gounder did so, it was done stealthily and usually under cover of night.

There was a hierarchy in the village that was understood and accepted by all. The untouchables had to raise their hands in respectful greeting whenever they met a Gounder or Naidu. Generally, lower-caste people were respectful towards the higher castes and addressed them in the plural. A mason or a carpenter might earn more than a Gounder or a Naidu, but he was still their social inferior. Within the same caste, there was a certain amount of social equality, though very poor Naidus or Gounders showed respect to the landowners. Among Naidus and Gounders, ownership of land conferred a higher status.

A sense of permanence about these social distinctions made them seem unalterable. God had made these distinctions and they would continue ever after. But everyone was somebody in the village. Everyone had a status, high or low. Everyone was recognized for what he was. Undemocratic though this society might have been, oddly enough there was no anonymity, no indifference and no neglect. The sense of belonging pervaded the entire community. Every child in the village, including myself, absorbed these social values as part of one's nature, without being aware of it. These were, loyalty to one's family and caste, pride in one's community and village and fair treatment to all-but only according to the ethics of the caste system.

The feelings of caste were very strong in the village. To break a rule of caste was to invite criticism and public censure in major cases. Once, my brother brought a friend along from Coimbatore to stay with us for a few days. The first question the guest was asked was about the caste to which he belonged. On replying that he was a Brahmin, grandfather told him, 'In that case you cannot eat in our house; we will make arrangements for you to eat with the temple priest.'

'But I don't mind eating in your house!' protested the young man.

'You may not mind it', chided grandfather. 'But we do. We do not want to aid and abet in the breaking of caste rules.'

So the friend had to eat with the priest as long as he stayed with us in the village.

It never struck me that there was anything wrong with the values and relationships of the caste system which had existed for many generations. At least I never questioned them and tended to accept them as eternal and unalterable. Only later-when I had left the village-did I attempt to judge those values on the basis of a new-found wisdom.

A number of events and people stand out in my memory from the days of childhood and early boyhood. They are as real to me today as they were when they happened –in many ways far more real than subsequent events, though they are from a very different world.

One of my earliest and most vivid recollections is of a trip to the temple hill of Palani, about sixty miles away from our village. In fulfilment of some vow when I was born grandmother had decided to take me to the temple and have my hair shaved there. I did not know what was to happen when we reached, only that we were going on a long trip with all the other children and grown-ups. It was a great family occasion and all the fifteen families were invited. About ten bullock carts set off one morning. We took everything with us; cooked tamarind rice and curd rice for the journey, puffed rice mixed with friend lentils for the children during the journey, drinking water and a sack of rice, lentils and spices for preparing our meals when we got to the temple. All these along with a few servants were in two of the bullock carts, while the other eight carts were full of uncles and aunts and their children. I travelled in state with grandfather in his horse cart because it went faster, but got bored after a little while and he had to stop and let me get into one of the bullock carts where the company was much more congenial. There was fun and laughter and shouting among the boys and shy giggles from the women and girls.

We spent the night in a *choultry* after we had done nearly forty miles and set off again early next morning. Our ablutions were performed along a river bank, the rest of the tamarind rice and curd rice was eaten and we reached Palani at lunchtime. The servants with the provisions had gone on earlier during the night and they had lunch ready for us by the time we got to the temple town.

I did not realize that I was the hero of the occasion until the barber was summoned and my locks of hair were ceremoniously removed. As the barber's knife scraped against my tender scalp I cried, but there was very little I could do about it as I was held in the firm grip of one of my uncles. I was bathed; my shaven head was covered with sandalwood paste. I was dressed in a new, red silk dhoti and a white silk shirt and taken to the temple, to be blessed by the presiding deity- Lord Muruga, whose clean-shaven head in most pictures resembled mine at the time.

In the sights and sounds around me, I soon forgot my misery. At the foot of the hill was an elephant shaking its head and raising its trunk to accept bananas those who offered them. Walking up the steps of the hills, I saw monkeys for the first time and marvelled at their cleverness in lifting bananas and coconuts from the trays of the unwary pilgrims. The devotees were raising slogans in praise of the Lord or singing hymns as they walked up the hill. There were beggars sitting all along the steps with shaven heads and saffron robes or with long flowing beards. Those men with beards impressed me as being really holy and I was a little frightened of them. There were men carrying *kaavadies* as a sign of penance and

some had iron needles piercing their tongues or cheeks as a sign devotion. I was already beginning to acquire an interest in religious matters, and suffering in the name of god greatly fascinated me.

The presiding deity at the temple was reputed to perform miracles. One of the standard legends related how a hen, if sacrificed in the name of the god and made into chicken curry and carried to the temple in a pot by a true devotee, would jump out and march away in dignity if the pot was opened in the presence of the Lord. Many people believed and trotted out this story to indicate the power the glory of Lord Muruga. While I was religious and only too eager to believe in miracles, as a vegetarian I looked upon this particular miracle with mixed feelings and unease. In any case, it seemed a pointless exercise. If the hen was going to be alive and well in the end, what was the point of inflicting needless cruelty on the poor thing? Unless, of course, the hen too wanted to achieve salvation through a short cut.

When the shaving ceremony was over, the older boys patted my smooth round head, laughed at me and said that my head was like the corn pudding usually prepared for the *Mariamman* festival-smooth and brown and glossy. It was humiliating, and all the excitement of the journey, the visit to the temple and the new clothes did not compensate for the indignity of being subjected to the barber's knife and the teasing of other children. Some years later, when I was about twelve, grandmother wanted to take me to the temple at Tirupathi to have the performance repeated in fulfilment of another vow. But she had left it rather late and I refused, saying that she had no business to commit me to a vow without my knowledge or consent. She was greatly disappointed and assured me that the gods devise their own ways of having promises fulfilled. Perhaps she was right after all. Though I refused to have my hair shaved at the temple a second time, I have been paying in installments ever since I was thirty years old. The last installment is almost due now!

The Lord of Tirupathi was - and still is – famous for granting the wishes of his devotees and consequently gets the biggest income of all the temples in India. As already observed, one of the standard ways of pleasing him is to go there and have one's hair shaved. Even today, on certain auspicious days, a large array of shaven heads can be seen at railway stations and also airports for miles around Tirupathi-devotees returning home after the satisfactory fulfillment of a vow. On such occasions, the barbers attached to the temple are understandably kept busy and each one tries getting as many customers as possible. One of the ways adopted by them to get the maximum business was not to complete the shaving of one customer before starting on another, and to shave a little off each head positioned in a line so that the poor customers could not get up and walk away. In our village, whenever a man did two or three jobs together, none of which he completed, he was likened to the Tirupathi barber.

My brother was married when I was about six and he was only eighteen. It was perhaps too young an age to be married even in those days, but he had failed to cross the

barrier of the public matriculation examination and his studies had come to an end. On the other hand, our family was now too affluent for him to work on the farms along with ordinary farm labourers, as would have been the case a generation or two earlier. Had he worked on the farm, my brother would have come home every evening exhausted physically and would have been only too willing to go to sleep contentedly. But it was recognized that youth and idleness might lead to mischief and marriage could bring a degree of contentment as well as a sense of responsibility.

The wedding stands out in my mind mainly because of two things. One was 'gas' lights. In the village, we were used to nothing more than oil lamps, candles, or, occasionally, hurricane lanterns, all of which gave a dull, soft glow of light. For outdoor functions at night, we had the washerman with his torch, made out of a long stick of about four feet, one end of which was covered with old rags. These rags were soaked in oil and lit while the washerman held the other end. Spoonfuls of oil were added so that the rags would not burn themselves out and acted as a wick. Now, for the first time, we had modern civilization invading the village in the form of 'gas' lights which were carried on the heads of special carries or placed in the ground on a special tripod. They consumed a mixture of kerosene and air and had a 'mantle' instead of an ordinary wick. Their power of illumination was many times that of a hurricane lantern. As a youngster who was seeing them for the first time, I was dazzled by these lights as were many other village people and I watched the men cleaning, oiling and lighting them with fascination.

The second memorable thing was the arrival of a motor car that was hired for the occasion. It came with the hood down, with its brass and chromium fittings gleaming and with the bulb horn dispersing unsuspecting cattle and donkeys. The driver was a very special person indeed and was treated rather like an important guest from the bride's house. He sat at the steering wheel, a king in his throne on the day of coronation. My father himself came out to meet him and instructed the people to keep the children away and not allow anyone to touch the car.

In the past, whenever there was a wedding in the village, people would come to borrow one of our horses for the wedding procession. The groom would sit on it anxiously while it was led through the streets of the village to the accompaniment of music. At the outskirts of the village he gladly dismounted and, after that, it was all bullock carts. There was considerable discussion in our house as to whether we should engage a double-horse chariot for the wedding procession-the usual means of locomotion for wealthy bridegrooms in those days-or a motor car. 'A motor car is too low', my mother protested. 'In a chariot, a bride and groom would be much higher and be visible to the entire crowd.' My father tended to agree with her. But my strong-willed aunt, who had previously consulted my brother, was all for modernization and progress and the motor car and she carried the day.

My own aim in life at that particular time was to have a ride in the motor car. I had been promised that I would travel with my brother to the bride's village, which was about

three miles away. But the procession was due to start at the unearthly hour of 3 a.m. I feared that, if I went to sleep in the bustle and the confusion, people might forget and leave me behind. But I had a plan. The footboards for cars in those days were very wide and if I could sleep on one, I calculated I could not easily be left behind since it would be difficult to enter the vehicle without stepping on me. So I went to sleep on the footboard away from the steering wheel. When the procession was about to move, the car was summoned. The driver cranked the handle, started the machine, got into the driving seat and began moving. But within the first few yards, someone spotted me and shouted to the driver to stop. It was fortunate that I hadn't fallen off the footboard of the moving car. I was picked up and put inside it, but I was still asleep and remember very little of that first ride in a car to which I had looked forward so much.

I also remember Gengan. He was a homeless, shiftless character, detested by everyone in the village, at least in my part of the village. He was a Naidu by birth but, strangely enough, he did not seem to have a family. He was always involved in drunken brawls and reputed to have stabbed people at the slightest provocation, and generally when under the influence of drink. Since none of the Naidus would associate with him, he was usually to be found in the mason's or potters' quarters' and with their womenfolk. There were all sorts of stories about him and often, when children were naughty, they were threatened by being told they would be handed over to Gengan if they didn't behave. On those rare occasions when he came into our street, children hid themselves and women gave him a wide berth. He had been arrested by the police on a number of occasions and had been to gaol once, but was let off at other times for want of evidence. He had a genius for picking quarrels with everyone.

One afternoon. I suddenly came face to face with him in the corner of our street and there was no escape. As soon as he saw me, Gengan bent from his enormous height, looked at me closely and said, 'Come to me, Thambu.'

No one had called me Thambu before, an affectionate term for a younger person. Perhaps, he did not know my name. I wanted to run away but, somehow, I couldn't. I stood glued to the spot, staring at his dark face and deep, piercing eyes.

'Come to me,' he almost pleaded. 'I won't hurt you.' But I did not move.

He came and picked me up. His dhoti was dirty and his body covered with dirt and sweat. His breath smelt oddly; I did not know then it was the smell of alcohol. He put me on his shoulders and started to walk away.

'No one likes me, he muttered. 'They use my name to frighten children like you. But I am not bad; you don't think I am bad, do you?'

I was too scared even to cry out. 'I will buy you sweets from the shop. I will show you I am not bad.'

We went to the only shop in the village and he asked for some sweets.

'What are you doing with that child?' the woman who kept the shop challenged him.

'I am not doing anything,' he said. 'All of you have been trying to make even children my enemies so that they hide at the sight of me. I am going to make them like me. I am buying sweets for the boy and I am paying you for them in honest money,' and he produced some change from a corner of his dhoti.

'You had better take him back to his house, or you will be in real trouble,' the woman warned him.

'Here, have a sweet', he handed me one. I took it and put it into my mouth and he gave me another to hold in my hand. Slowly, the terror I had felt was giving place to a kind of dreadful fascination.

'Everyone says I am bad, but I am not bad, you know,' he continued as we walked slowly. 'It is just that I have no one to care for. But you like me, don't you?'

I was silent, wondering what was expected of me. His tone changed. 'If you don't like me, I will throw you into that well,' he threatened as he picked me up again.

'I like you,' I said more out of fear than anything else.

I realized we were now walking back towards our house. 'If I take you away for some time, they will say I have kidnapped you,' he said. 'So, I will return you to your house. But you don't need to be frightened of me. Will you tell everyone that I am good?'

'Yes,' I answered with relief.

We went into our backyard. As soon as Subban saw me with Gengan, he went and brought the cook and, finally, my mother appeared.

'What are you doing with my child?' she demanded. 'Put him down!'

'Amma!' Gengan addressed her politely. 'Thambu has been good to me. He says he likes me. I bought him some sweets.'

He put me down. I ran to my mother, crying.

'You like me Thambu, don't you?' he almost pleaded now.

I looked at him with awe as well as a sort of affection. 'Yes', I said. 'You gave me sweets'. And I opened my palm to show my mother the sweet I still held in my palm.

The servants started to threaten him. 'I am going,' he said. 'All I wanted was for Thambu to like me.' Looking at me gently, he walked away.

From then on, I never thought of Gengan as a rogue and a bully. In an innocent, childish way, I felt sorry for him and was fascinated rather than horrified at his exploits. He too became my hero. When a few months later we heard that he had been killed in a drunken brawl, everyone said that he had been asking for it and it served him right, but I remembered his pleading eyes, asking to be liked, and was sorry. Looking back on it in later years, I have often wondered what might have happened had someone shown some affection for Gengan. Perhaps he went the way he did because there was no one to understand him and offer him sympathy.

It is surprising how fate or chance takes different turns in the case of different people. Chinnappan was a colleague of Gengan and many of the robberies and atrocities were conducted jointly by them, though Gengan was undoubtedly the leader. But after Gengan's death, Chinnappan was like a leaderless soldier, an easy prey to unscrupulous policemen or other rowdies. He returned from a short term in gaol, broken in body and in spirit and was gradually drinking himself to death when he heard the name of Gandhi and the civil disobedience movement. Someone had told him that if he joined the group in town, which was picketing foreign cloth shops, he would get his keep for nothing.

Chinnappan went more out of hunger than anything else and found himself picketing a foreign cloth shop. He was soon picked up by the police along with his colleagues and sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment. When he came out, he was a different man altogether. There was peace and contentment on his face and a kindness in his eyes that had not been there before. He had given up eating meat, and, of course, drinking, wore nothing but khadi and was polite and considerate to everyone. He would expound Gandhian philosophy to whoever cared to listen, sit in the village *choultry* in the evening and listen to other people reading the newspaper. No one would employ him because of his past, but with the few rupees he had, he bought some goats, tended them carefully and, in course of time, built them up into a respectable herd which provided for his simple wants.

One could say it was the rebirth of a lost soul, a true regeneration. The village people called him Gandhi, and his original name, Chinnappan, as well as his past misdeeds was forgotten.

Another interesting character in the village was the *Vaidhiar*, as he was universally known. He was an ayurvedic physician, belonged neither to the Naidu nor the Gounder community, but was from Kerala. He must have come to our village about 1900, as he was already middle-aged when I first knew him. As a young man he had evidently been unhappily married; so he left his home and wandered all over south India until he came to Karadibavi. What attracted him we did not know, but he settled down in the village *choultry* as a permanent resident, engaged an elderly woman to cook for him and started to practice medicine.

Being an outsider, he was treated as an equal by everyone. He attended on all and sundry produced many types of oils and mixtures of herbs, took money when people paid him, but never asked for any for his services. He was universally popular, took part in all the village festivities, played with the children, settled disputes among the smaller farmers and lower-caste people and was an indispensable part of every celebration or calamity in the village.

I had been suffering from asthma almost since birth. The only doctor who was consulted said that it would disappear as I grew older and stronger. But when I was about eleven, the *Vaidhiar* gave me some powders and put me on a very strict saltless diet for twelve days. The diet was an ordeal for a young boy and twelve days seemed like eternity. But I put up with it and my asthma was cured. Though the usual doctor attributed the change to my getting older, in the village the *Vaidhiar* got the credit.

As far I was concerned, he was a wonderful story-teller, a master in the art of exaggeration who kept me amused by the unusual Keralite accent with which he spoke Tamil. He said that he had wheels under his feet (because he liked to travel) and holes in his palm (for money never stayed there). But he was never in want, for he was welcome everywhere in the village, ate in whichever house he happened to be and, in later years, became a sort of mascot to the whole village. His hundred and first birthday was celebrated as a grand occasion by the whole village and he died at the ripe age of 102.

There was a small hill temple about ten miles from our village where a car festival was held once a year. It was an annual pilgrimage and outing for me for a few years and I looked forward to it eager expectation. A part from the crowds and the noise and the confusion in which I delighted, there were shops of all kinds where one could buy sweets and biscuits covered with flies which the shopkeepers somewhat ineffectually tried to keep away. One could also get a sweet syrupy liquid called 'colour' from a bottle. There were flowers and sandalwood paste and scented sticks required for the puja, apart from mirrors and ribbons and combs and rattles for the children. The people and the dust and the smells combined to create the peculiar aroma of a Hindu festival, which I adored.

Then there were the swings and the roundabouts, all motivated by human labour, and where, for the price of one anna, one could have half an hour of delicious fun. For me, it was exciting in more ways than one, for the swings upset my stomach and I was very sick afterwards. But in spite of it all, I enjoyed myself and came back to tell everyone what a wonderful place Sencheri Hill was.

Naga was my grandfather's concubine. In the days of his youth, it was considered quite respectable-even desirable-for a man to have a permanent mistress if he could afford such a luxury without endangering the financial prospects of his family. To have a mistress and to exhibit her on occasions was a status symbol. It had the same value then as a prosperous industrialist today buying an imported, air-conditioned car from the State

Trading Corporation, except that when once acquired, a mistress was not changed as often as a car is nowadays. The wives thought nothing of it and did not feel jealous in any way provided they were not neglected. (I have used this relationship as the basis of my novel Devadaasi.)

Naga was a delightful old lady when I knew her. Even at that age, she was full of fun and laughter. She had been a dancer in her youth and had given it up because of my grandfather. Everyone in the family including my grandmother loved her. In the old days, when my grandfather's sister had come back to her paternal home as young widow, she used to run everything including my grandfather. As a young widow, she used to run everything including my grandfather. As a young widow, she claimed sympathy and understanding from her brother who listened to her rather than to his own wife in matters concerning the house. My grandmother was a meek and mild lady who suffered at the hands of her sister-in-law. In those days, it was Naga who took my grandmother's side, argued with my grandfather and saw to it that my grandmother was given her due place. She would visit us about once a month and bring sweets from a Brahmin coffee shop. Grandfather was a great stickler for caste rules and would not touch anything cooked by her!

Everyone in the family looked forward to Naga's visits. They would tell her their troubles and their problems and she would settle them. She would intercede with the menfolk on behalf of the ladies, give advice when it was necessary, or offer praise or consolation as may be required. But she never exercised any authority, was always respectful to the members of the family as befitted her station and deferred particularly to my grandmother in every respect. She never went into the kitchen or the puja room and always ate after the other ladies had eaten. She used to say that everyone loved her because she had no power and they knew she loved them all equally.

I too looked forward to Naga's visits, for she always brought something for me. But more than the gifts, it was the demonstration of affection that pleased me. My family-though loving and affectionate-were reticent by nature. Any effusive or outward show of affection was considered improper and relationships were governed by one's duty rather than love. But as soon as Naga Came, I would run to her, she would pick me up and hug me and kiss me and say what a pleasure it was to behold my face.

By the time I knew her, her relationship with grandfather had become platonic, though he liked to chat with her alone. He asked her about her family, about her farms and about the various people he used to know in her village. They talked about the old times and about the different servants he had had and the difficulties he had overcome. He would tell her about his problems, about his failing eyesight and about the doings of his children, particularly about his elder son-my uncle-who had left the bosom of the family. Then after lunch, while he rested, Naga would go to the back of the house and repeat to my grandmother everything he had said. She would depart in the evening with instructions

from my grandfather not to be so long before coming again and to tell the bullock-cart driver to drive carefully.

Though Naga was fairly well off because of the money that grandfather had settled on her, and her children were all married and established in life, the old gentleman always gave her some money each time she came. But he was careful not to give too much. Later, when I was little older and when his eyesight had completely failed, he would shuffle along towards the safe, squat in front of it, open it and take out a bundle of notes. Then, he would call for me, 'Raju! Raju! Where are you, boy?'

I was usually waiting on the sidelines and would come forward. 'Here I am grandfather!'

'Here! What denomination are these notes?'

'They are hundred rupee notes, grandfather.'

He would put them under his right toe. Then he would take out another bundle of notes. 'What are these?'

'They are ten rupee notes, grandfather.'

He would keep them under his left toe. 'Now run along.'

'You have forgotten my sweets, grandfather,' I would remind him.

'Here, take this,' he would give me a few coins. 'Now run along, run along!'

Then he would call Naga. 'Has the boy gone?' he would ask.

'Yes, he has gone.'

He would then take out a few notes from one toe and a few from the other toe count them carefully and hand them to her. 'There is no point in the whole world knowing what I am giving you,' he would remark. 'And don't you go and waste it all on some silly little purchases!'

Naga would promptly go to the back of the house and show my grandmother how much she had been given. The ladies agreed that, though the old gentleman's eyesight might have failed, he had his wits about him. I remember telling Naga once that I knew why grandfather gave her money. She laughed and pinched my cheek and said I would be as bad as my grandfather when I grew up. Unfortunately, her prophecy has not come true.

In the village, some knowledge of sex came to one at a fairly early age and in a very natural manner. We had a lot of cattle at home and, periodically, the cow or the buffalo had to be 'taken to the bull'. Often, I watched a calf being born and the servants discussing with my father the problems of calving. It was not at all unusual for us to see stray animals

performing their natural functions in the streets-particularly where the washermen and the potters lived. I also spent a lot of time with the servants who discussed sex among themselves as if I was not present. I knew from knowledge of mythological stories that chastity was the most prized virtue for a woman though it was never emphasized in the case of men. But it was understood that sex was reserved for marriage and any infractions should be viewed as wrong.

Deepavali was an important occasion in the life of the village. It was the one day of the year when everybody without exception wore new clothes. The barber would come early in the morning and give all the men and boys oil baths. We donned new clothes, a large breakfast was eaten and fireworks were let off by the children. I looked forward to it for days. My father always provided a generous supply of fireworks though grandfather grumbled about the waste of money. While I loved sparklers, the bangers not surprisingly frightened me a bit and I preferred to let the servants light them. When all the farm workers came in the morning, my father distributed dhotis and towels while I was told to give away some fireworks to each of the children. But I carefully removed the attractive labels before giving them away as they had colourful pictures of Chinese ladies printed on them.

Once after Deepavali I was playing with the boy next door when I showed him those pictures. He said he had got better ones in his house and brought some one hundred rupee notes to show me. Having seen grandfather count them out, I knew they were valuable, so I offered to exchange my pictures for his notes and he eagerly agreed. When the transaction was successfully completed, I brought the notes home and proudly showed them to my grandfather. He questioned me about how and where I had got them and they were duly returned along with some severe strictures from my grandfather to the uncle next door about keeping money safely. I felt the whole thing was unfair since I had got those notes in a normal commercial transaction, but my Chinese pictures were never returned. This was the most profitable deal I ever concluded!

Pongal, which usually came in the middle of January, was a different kind of festival altogether. It lasted for three days. On the first day, the God Sankaranthi was supposed to come round every house and inspect it for cleanliness as well as prosperity. All the houses were cleaned, the walls whitewashed and the floors painted with cow dung. The houses were also decorated with neem leaves and wild flowers. Even the mortar that was used to pound grain had to smell sweet, indicating the preparation of sweets so that the god would go away satisfied.

The second day was Pongal proper. The dish known as *Pongal*, a sweet consisting of rice, lentils, sugar and ghee, was prepared. Pongal also means 'to overflow', implying prosperity. Whether the sweet originated from the festival or vice versa, it is difficult to say. It was also the time when young girls went gathering flowers, singing and dancing the *Kolattam* –a folk-dance with sticks. The third day was a farm festival, when cows and bullocks were bathed, their horns painted in different colours and *Pongal* prepared in the

farmyards and distributed to the workers. A large group of men sang and danced in front of the village *choultry* and trained bullocks with bells on their horns followed them in their dancing. While it was more of a community festival than Deepavali, I remained more a spectator than a participant in the festivities.

Only once was I thrashed really hard by my father. I had never seen him so angry either before or since. My brother was on holiday from school and had a pen-knife which I coveted. He wouldn't let me have it, saying I would cut my finger with it. But I took it nevertheless and hid it under the mattresses in one of the rooms. I was questioned about the missing knife and naturally denied all knowledge. Subban, the cattle boy, was then suspected of having stolen it but he denied it with tears in his eyes. He had been told that if he didn't produce it within a day, he would be sacked. Things had become much more serious than I had anticipated and I was sorry Subban, who was my friend. My behaviour gave me away and under my mother's gentle persuasion, I confessed and produced the knife. I got a good thrashing from my father and later, when he had calmed down, a long lecture on honesty and truthfulness. He had never spoken so seriously to me before. Simple virtues such as these were taught in the home and I absorbed them more or less unconsciously. To preserve one's honour, not to let one's friends down, to uphold the status of the community and the family, were considered matters of primary importance for a child to learn. As far as I was concerned, one good spanking was enough.

I was generally of very peaceful and easy-going disposition. Even as a boy, I never quarrelled with people and tried to adjust myself to them. If I came across anything that seemed unfair, I tried to set it right or at least not be a party to it. So, when something like that happened to me, I had my first quarrel.

The son of the temple priest was a little older than me. One of his major interests was to get catalogues from shops in Madras and order things by post and sell them to the village people. Though he thought he was performing a sort of social service to the poor and the ignorant villagers, I had a feeling that some profit motive was involved. Once, he came across an unusual advertisement which enabled him to acquire a wrist watch for two rupees. All he had to do was to order five coupons at two rupees each sell four of them to his friends and send the money as well as their names and addresses, for him to get the watch. Each of the coupon holders could get four more coupons which they could sell to their friends in turn and get a watch for two rupees also. This was a kind of perpetual motion, or a chain reaction in selling. The only trouble was to find enough people to buy the coupons as their number increased very rapidly.

So the priest's son got four of us to buy the coupons from him and he got his watch. But when we in turn tried to sell four coupons each, sixteen people were not available and, as the Awkward Uncle pointed out with logical precision, the next lot to buy the coupons would have to find sixty-four people. Others who heard about it said how one clever Brahmin boy was able to get the better of four Naidu lads.

Apart from the money, a feeling of having been made fools was rankling in our minds and we went to the priest's son, handed back the coupons and demanded our money back. He took the attitude of a virtuous shopkeeper, 'Goods once sold cannot be taken back.' He simply laughed at us. This infuriated us still further and we relieved our feelings by giving him a good thrashing.

I was roundly scolded by my father for my part in the beating up. But I tried to point out that the boy had cheated us. My father's reply was, 'You should have known you could not sell sixteen coupons and refused to buy it. But having bought it foolishly, you should have written off the two rupees as a bad debt.' But I was uneasy about the whole thing because the ethics of the situation worried me. I was not able to formulate what was worrying me until much later. It was this; 'Was a person who had greater knowledge, entitled to take advantage of an ignorant one for his own benefit?' Lately, I have learnt that many business transactions are based on each person thinking he is cleverer than his counterpart. But since those early days, whenever anyone has offered me an 'attractive' business proposition, I have looked at it with a great deal of scepticism.

My only daily contact with what might be described as modern civilization was through the medium of the clock in our front hall. Other objects such as gas lights or a motor car were a passing phenomenon about which I soon forgot. But the clock had been there since before I was born and I rather tended to take it for granted. The second and more important thing that came into my life to represent modernism was a gramophone which my brother brought from Coimbatore with considerable difficulty, as the loudspeaker in the form of a horn would not fit easily into our horse cart. It came with a few records of south Indian music, sung in a shrill voice by a lady known as S.R. Kamalam. One could not easily forget her name as she ended every song with the announcement 'My name is S.R. Kamalam.' I was thrilled by the gramophone, not so much because of the music as by the method by which it was achieved. It provided the mystery and the magic that our rather drab life needed. To wind the gramophone, to change the records, to clean the needle, were all things that fascinated me and I played it at the slightest provocation. Not only I, but the entire village was attracted by it. Each time a record was played; anyone walking in the street would stop, peer through the window and then walk in. Soon a small crowd would gather and everyone would listen spellbound, and when the music stopped, comment on the cleverness of the white man in producing such gadgets. 'We don't know what to expect next,' they would say. 'They say they have got moving pictures now in the city.'

'Yes, we can see all the gods and goddesses of our mythology for a paltry sum of eight annas.'

'It shows our gods must have existed; otherwise they could not have been put into the pictures'.

It was on such simple faith that life thrived in the village.

When I was about ten years old, a conference of Naidus was held in our village. How Karadibavi came to be chosen for this unique honour remained somewhat of a mystery. It was possibly because the fifteen uncles were generous, or foolish enough to agree to host the conference. It was called the 'Kammawar Conference'. Our community was known as 'Kammas' in Andhra and that word was used to distinguish ourselves from other brands of 'inferior' Naidus. As one of the organizers from Coimbatore put it, 'Nowadays, anyone who speaks Telugu calls himself a Naidu and if he happens to speak Tamil, he calls himself "Mudaliar". So one has to be careful.' This was the biggest event in the history of the village and my uncles proceeded to celebrate it on a grand scale.

While we were all eager and enthusiastic – the children having caught the enthusiasm from their elders-none of us knew the first thing about organizing a conference. When people from Coimbatore talked about 'chairmen of sub-committees' and 'subjects for discussion' and 'plenary sessions', our elders were completely lost. So, the few Naidus-sorry, Kammas-from Coimbatore who were responsible for initiating the idea had to come and do all the spadework while my uncles were reduced to providing what might be called logistic support.

Our house-as the headquarters of the reception committee-was a hive of activity with all sorts of people coming and going. Meetings were being held and decisions were being taken. In the process, many meals had to be served and gallons of coffee prepared. My mother was kept constantly busy by the demands of these townspeople. Having just finished school and not having much to do, I became the unofficial messenger boy and watched the preparations with interest. At the end of it all, I felt I could easily organize a conference single-handed.

The first step was the formation of the reception committee and the election of a chairman. He had to be from among my uncles, who were hosting the conference, and he was chosen not on the basis of organizing ability or even financial contribution. Since the fifteen uncles were considered equal in status, the oldest was elected to represent them all. Accommodation for the delegates, food and bathing facilities had to be arranged in different houses as well as in the village *choultry*. The open space in front of the school was cleared of rubbish, the ground was swept and levelled and a Shamiana of coconut matting was constructed. It was big enough to hold about a thousand people. Banana trees were tied in the form of arches at the entrance and 'welcome' signs were strung across the tamarind trees on the road to the village. My uncles were good at all these things because these were no different from organizing a big wedding.

But the representatives from the city wanted all sorts of details. They wanted sub-committees and chairmen for different sessions. They wanted a 'subjects' committee to prepare resolutions for the main conference. It was also proposed to organize Kammawar women's conference as well as a youth conference. When it came to these problems, my

uncles were all at sea and wisely suggested that all these might be done without any further reference to them.

The headmaster of the school was engaged to write the speech for the chairman of the reception of the committee. But not being a Kamma, he could not be expected to place the same emphasis on the problems of our community and the first draft had to be radically revised, putting forward various demands to the government and urging the community to be united and march forward from strength to strength. The final speech was printed for distribution to the delegates and the chairman was urged to read it in advance and familiarize himself with it so that he could read it fluently when the time came. 'I haven't read as much as this since I left school fifty years ago,' was that uncle's comment, as he declaimed it in a loud voice to the amusement of all his nephews.

'Do you think the government would listen to us and do all these things that we are demanding?' the Engine Uncle asked the chairman of the reception committee.

'How should I know? I am only reading it because all of you wanted me to do so.'

'But no one from the government is going to be there!' the Awkward Uncle announced. 'Then, how will they know about our demands?'

The committee members from Coimbatore explained that all these demands would be put in the form of resolutions and forwarded to the government for necessary action. But my uncles remained somewhat sceptical and, in the end, they proved to be right.

At last, everything was ready. The conference was to last for two days. The delegates started arriving on the previous evening with bedrolls and little bags or steel trunks, inspected the arrangements and commented, 'I suppose you can't expect anything better in a village.'

The president arrived next morning in a motor car engaged specially for the occasion. He was met about half a mile from the village by the members of the reception committee and taken in procession to the conference *Pandal* to the accompaniment of music and slogans, and the conference got off to a splendid start with prayer followed by the welcome speech from the chairman of the reception committee.

My role in the conference was that of a volunteer. I was given a badge and asked to distribute drinking water to delegates who might be thirsty. But I was also an interested listener as speaker after speaker spoke about the need for unity among Kammas, about asking the government to declare the Kammas a backward community so that all the privileges of backwardness would be available to us, about the need for learning Telugu and establishing closer ties with the Kammas in Andhra, and about the disabilities from which we were suffering. Reservation of posts in government was demanded and separate electorates-as in the case of Muslims-were suggested. One speaker suggested that the

wealthy Kammass should establish a fund for awarding scholarships to poor and deserving Kamma boys. It was, I suppose, a conference for the regeneration of the community.

In the afternoon there was the subjects committee meeting when resolutions on the various suggestions made were drafted to be placed before the plenary session the next day. The women's conference was somewhat of a failure. There were no women delegates from outside and the local ladies were all busy cooking and seeing to the comfort of the men delegates. But one of my enterprising uncles rounded up some Gounder ladies for the occasion. 'The visitors would not know the difference,' he explained to us. They stood in a corner-they would not sit down in the presence of the menfolk-and giggled while speaker after speaker harangued them on the need for the education of women and social reform. The youth conference fared slightly better because a bus-load of students had been imported and they, with some local support, made a better showing than the women.

With the passing of resolutions on the second afternoon, the conference came to an end. A committee was formed to go to Madras and place the resolutions before the authorities concerned, but I am doubtful if anything materialized. The conference became a subject of discussion for weeks afterwards between the various uncles, but my grandfather's comment has impressed itself on my memory. 'Our small farm ought to yield a good crop next year. A thousand people have used it for their morning ablutions for three days.'

In India, one often comes across these conferences based on caste, pleading for special privileges. In the prevailing socio-cultural atmosphere, this is perhaps not surprising. But what is surprising is that politicians and statesmen who claim to be working for a casteless and even classless society should associate themselves with such conferences and even encourage them.

Most of our clothing requirements in the village were supplied by the handloom weaver from the neighbouring village. Periodically, he would visit us with a large bundle of unbleached dhotis of various sizes, and saris of certain standard designs which all Naidu ladies were in the habit of wearing. They were measured not in metres or yards but in cubits-a cubit being the length from the elbow joint to the tip of one's middle finger. But since all arms were not of the same length, the tallest man in the village was chosen for the job of measuring. This 'honour' usually fell to my grandfather who not only had long arms but was also good at bargaining. Sometimes, he would spend a whole morning, measuring, bargaining and buying dhotis for the whole street. The weaver would complain, but there was no escape for him from the 'arm' of my grandfather. The ladies had their own method of quality assessment and grandfather did not then come into the picture.

For weddings, visits to Coimbatore were necessary. So also when buying cloth for shirts, which were beginning to be worn by children from the more affluent families. Since I rarely went, I was never measured for a shirt. My father would take an old shirt and tell the

tailor, 'Make it slightly bigger, because the boy is growing up.' But the tailor's ideas did not always correspond to my growth. As a result, my shirts were generally on the tight side.

4

When I was about five, I was sent to the village elementary school. An auspicious day was selected and the priest came and performed some pujas which were intended to invoke the blessings of Saraswathi, the goddess of wisdom, and to ensure my intellectual brilliance in later life. I was taught the word 'Om' and given a glass of milk to drink. My grandmother escorted me to the school and I was duly enrolled.

I cannot say I enjoyed it. In fact, I cried all the way to school and for some time after grandmother left me. The atmosphere in the school did not help matters either. We had to sit on a low, long plank raised about three inches from the ground, along with a lot of other boys whom I didn't know and who tended to pinch me if the teacher wasn't looking. We were not allowed to move from our places except to answer calls of nature. We had to put one or two fingers up, depending on what we wanted to do and it was left to the tender mercies of the teacher to decide whether our request was genuine or not. Consequently, it was not unusual for a boy to wet his dhoti if the teacher had refused permission or because he was too frightened to ask. At one corner were a wooden table and a chair and on the table was an ominous-looking cane which frightened all of us.

In front of each of us on the floor was a small heap of fine white sand. The teacher wrote a letter of the alphabet on the blackboard and pronounced it loudly. We shouted it after him. At the same time, we had to spread the sand flat and write the same letter in the sand. The teacher inspected our performance, corrected our mistakes and went on to the next letter. If one made a mistake or if the teacher was annoyed for some reason, he would bend down, press our finger hard into the sand and trace the letter, until the finger hurt. The cane was used only for major infractions of the law, but the fear of punishment was ever present.

After we had learnt the alphabet in this manner for some days, each of us given a bag of tamarind seeds. The teacher would announce a letter and we had to construct the letter from memory by using these seeds. It took longer than writing on sand, but since it had to be done from memory, it ensured that we had learnt the letter properly. It also kept us busy while the teacher was attending to the next class. We used the same techniques-sand and tamarind seeds-to learn the numbers also. This method of memorizing the alphabet and numbers was cheap and perhaps had a lot to recommend it so long as the teacher did not rub our fingers too much into the sand.

The tamarind seeds had to be returned at the end of the day. Many boys had no toys of any sort to play with and they would have liked to take away a few tamarind seeds for

that purpose. But any loss of tamarind seeds was a major misdemeanour and brought the teacher with his cane. Nor had the boys any place where they could hide the seeds. Only a few of us from affluent families had shirts with one small pocket. The rest had just small dhotis round their waists and nothing else. So it was a little difficult to hide the seeds. Usually, they were pushed under the wooden planks with the hope of recovering them later.

After a few days of misery, I learnt to adjust myself to the school hours and discipline. I was also able to inspect my environment more thoroughly than on the first day. The school consisted of one long room with a verandah along its length, and the room accommodated all the five classes, from the first to the fifth. The division between the classes was somewhat informal as there were no partitions. Since lessons in all the classes were learnt by intoning them after the teacher, the school was characterized by a cacophony of noises. There were only two teachers and the headmaster to handle all the classes. My own teacher taught classes one and two, the other three and four, while the headmaster coached the fifth class as well as doing the necessary administrative work. While the first two classes sat on the floor on long planks, the next three had benches. On the walls hung faded coloured pictures of animals, vegetables and fruits with their names printed prominently under each. Behind the head master's chair at the other end of the room from where we sat was a picture of George the Fifth, the King- Emperor.

The boys and girls from various communities were all allowed to sit together but there were very few from the lower castes. The potters, masons, washermen and carpenters had little incentive to learn in those days and, even when their children started school, they soon dropped out after a year or two so that the school consisted almost entirely of Naidu and Gounder children. When the untouchable children came –if at all – they had to sit on the Verandah and the teacher paid periodic visits to them and gave them some work, so they too soon dropped out.

I must have been in the first class for about a year or so when I was promoted to the next one. There were no examinations or tests for such promotions and it was dependent on the will of the headmaster. In the new class, I was given a slate and pencil as well as a primer which taught me words like 'cat' and 'dog' and about relationships such as 'father', 'mother', 'brother', and so on. I had to copy the words from the book on to the slate while repeating them loudly at the same time. I learnt to write the numbers from one to a hundred and did simple sums of addition and subtraction. Later, I started on the multiplication tables. These too had to be repeated in unison by all the boys so that we got them by heart.

We were also taught a few songs-the equivalent of nursery rhymes-and some aphorisms which were popular at the time-sayings like 'Father and Mother are the gods in front of one', 'Do the right thing', 'Control your anger'. We learnt them without absorbing their meaning and certainly without conviction, since the teacher did not bother to explain

them to us. They entered our minds merely by constant repetition. In the same manner, we learnt a song in praise of the King-Emperor. The equivalent of 'God Save the King' in Tamil.

Since the teacher had to attend to two classes, it was impossible for him to keep an eye on us all the time. When he was busy with the other class we had the time to fidget, whisper to each other or even quarrel in low tones. The longer his absence, the more we were prone to make a noise. But one shout from him silenced us.

I imagine I was a reasonable and well-behaved pupil, for I do not remember ever being caned. Perhaps my father's affluence had something to do with it, however. Only occasionally did the teacher pull my ear because of some minor misdemeanour. Gradually, I began to read story books based largely on mythology and intended to teach us the basic virtues. I was able to do simple sums and advanced in the multiplication table.

Side by side with literacy, I also began to learn more about my environment. Now that I was getting older and had some friends in the school, particularly from the fifteen families, I was allowed to wander further a field in the village. But the boys were all older and, generally, I followed them rather than led. In the evenings, I would come home from school, have some sweets and go out to play with my friends. I was considered very careful with money in those days. People said I had inherited this trait from my grandfather. Not that I was miserly or even ungenerous, for religion had taught me to help the poor and the needy. But I did not like wastage of any sort.

One evening, I wanted some sweets and my mother sent the servant to the local shop to get some. Soon after he left, Naga arrived. As soon as I saw her cart, I ran after the servant and asked him to come back.

'Why did you do that?' asked my mother.

'Naga would have brought some sweets and that is enough. If she hasn't brought any, he can always go back.'

Sure enough, Naga had brought some sweets. 'Like grandfather like grandson,' laughed the old lady as she handed me the bag of sweets.

After the sweets, we would wander round the village, gather some wild berries for eating if they were in season, make kites with bits of paper, the ribs of coconut leaves and a ball of twine; or catch butterflies and keep them inside empty match boxes with a few leaves for their food. But they mostly died. During the mango season we would hunt for discarded mango seeds and played a game with them. Each contributed two seeds and we built a pyramid in the centre of a circle. We threw stones from a distance and whoever was able to knock the seeds out of the circle could claim them. A boy's wealth was counted by the number of mango seeds he had managed to accumulate during the season. But when

the season was over they were thrown away and forgotten. We all had tops which we spun and tried to catch in the flat on our palms. And we naturally played marbles.

I would come home at dusk, tired after all these exertions and my mother made me wash my hands and feet in the backyard. She lit the lamp in the puja room and I had to prostrate before the pictures while she herself meditated. After her meditation was over, I brought my school books out and did my lessons in the dull glow of that oil lamp. I had to sit very close to the lamp as it was not very bright, and had to read my lessons out aloud. If I did not, someone came into the room and said, 'Are you falling asleep? I didn't hear you study.'

Some years later, when I had started to learn English, I would study the language in the same manner by shouting the phrases out in a loud voice. My grandfather listened to me and muttered when he heard my English. 'He is not studying; he is just making foolish and meaningless noises!'

'But this is English, grandfather!' I said.

'Well, it sounds terrible,' he commented. 'No wonder our elders called it *Rakshasa Bhasha*.'

In the summer we went swimming in the big irrigation wells. A large piece of dried cactus root, which was very light, was used to keep us afloat as we learned to swim. The wells were deep and dark, sometimes covered with vegetation from the sides and I was a little frightened, though the other boys soon learnt to jump into the water from a great height. My father was also not very keen that I should go swimming and told me that some of the wells had weeds at the bottom and, sometimes, people got entangled in them. Consequently, I never learnt to enjoy swimming and did not become a particularly good swimmer.

On Saturday nights I used to visit the temple to participate in the *bhajana*, but my religious development needs a separate section to itself.

The most important event in the school was the annual inspection to which both the teachers and pupils looked forward with a certain degree of anxiety. Days before the inspection was due, the school and its surroundings were thoroughly swept and cleaned and we were instructed to walk at least a hundred yards away to answer calls of nature which we normally did behind the school wall. Records like attendance registers and the school-fees register were brought up to date and defaulting parents were urged to pay up arrears. A drive was organized to get more pupils into the classes, particularly those who had been enrolled earlier but had dropped out for some reason or other. Boys in the fifth class, the highest class in the school, would be examined by the inspector and given certificates if found proficient. (I still possess mine because it is only evidence of my date of birth, though a wrong one.) Usually, the parents of the boys in the fifth class had to foot the bill for the

inspector's visit since their sons stood to benefit. Practically no one in the village studied beyond the fifth class in those days and the certificate represented the crowning glory of their educational career. The job of a village munsif was hereditary, but a man could not succeed automatically. He had to have an educational qualification as represented by the school certificate. To what other use these certificates were ever put, I have not been able to discover. But some of the more affluent farmers also contributed some money for the occasion so that any shortfall in the school accounts might be made good before the inspector's visit.

On the fateful day, the boys were instructed to put on clean clothes. The headmaster, Mr Subba Rao, himself put on a closed coat and turban and was very severe and dignified for the occasion. As soon as the inspector arrived, our loud sing-song of the lessons stopped and we all stood up in silence. He threaded his way between the classes spending a few minutes in each, asked an odd question here and there, spoke to the teacher concerned and patted a boy if he had given a clever answer. With the fifth class, he spent more time and each boy was questioned in turn regarding his scholastic achievements. The whole inspection perhaps took an hour. And then, we were all sent home while he went through the school records with the headmaster and the other two teachers.

There were a lot of stories about the kind of questions that the inspectors asked. Since there was no set syllabus, the questions were intended to test the boys' general knowledge and ability. Once an inspector was supposed to have asked a pupil, 'How many crows are there in your village?'

'One hundred, sir,' the boy replied promptly.

'Supposing there were more?'

'They must have come to visit their relations,' the boy replied, 'and if there are less, they must have gone on a visit.'

It was the first time I had seen anyone in European dress. Even trousers were a novelty in the village. And here was the inspector in full regalia, with a tie and collar and a black coat. In addition, he had a turban on as well. The dignity of the head master faded into insignificance before the grandeur of the inspector and, as far as I was concerned, he was next only to god, even though one never quite knew kind of clothes god wore. We talked about the visit for days afterwards. While other inspectors came and went, that first visit has impressed itself on my mind.

Another event that was celebrated with a certain amount of pomp was the festival of the goddess of learning. We were supposed to worship not only Saraswathi but also our teachers, as embodiments of wisdom. Ever since the Phoenicians invented money, worship or appreciation has always taken the form of offering some money. So we were trained to sing special songs for the occasion and we went in a procession round the village to each

house and sang. A pole was decorated with coloured streamers and carried by the oldest of the boys. The parents usually gave some money or some grain if they had no money, which was shared by the teachers. The advantage from the view point of the boys, apart from a holiday, was that in some of the wealthier houses we were given sweets. This old custom of going round and collecting money for the teachers on Saraswathi puja day had to be given up before I left the school as regulations did not officially permits teacher to receive money from parents.

Later, we celebrated Saraswathi puja in the home after arranging rows of dolls in tiers. All gods and goddesses found a place there as well as host of other characters. This was essentially for girls and my sister took the initiative in organizing it. It was observed for nine days, culminating on the ninth day in our homage to the goddess of learning. On each evening, girls from the village gathered in our house, songs were sung, puja was performed by my sister and sweets were distributed. My contribution consisted in playing the gramophone for the occasion, which usually attracted a bigger crowd. On the ninth day, all our books, mine as well as my sister's, were piled in front of the goddesses and we worshipped them in the fond hope that some of the wisdom contained in those books would enter our heads.

On the Telugu new year's day, we had to start the morning by eating something sweet and something bitter. This was supposed to teach us that life was essentially a mixed blessing.

The first pets I kept were white mice. But they did not last long and I soon got tired of them. Then someone gave me a pair of white rabbits but they too did not interest me. One of my friends kept pigeons and every evening he used to persuade us to accompany him to his father's farmhouse where he fed them and saw to it that they were safely locked up for the night. But I didn't think much of them as pets. Finally, one of my maternal uncles bought me a puppy, a sort of white terrier of uncertain pedigree. I took to it immediately, but was not allowed to bring it into the house as dogs were considered unclean and it had to be in the backyard or in the cattle shed at night. But I became very fond of the dog and, except when at school, it became my constant companion. It was called 'Rose' for some unknown reason.

I spent a lot of time training the dog, but my knowledge of dogs was non-existent and there was no help from any other member of the family. My mother was naturally kind and fed the dog at regular intervals. But the puppy followed me wherever I went, chased hens and pigs and donkeys much to the amusement of my friends. When we went to learn swimming in the big irrigation wells, it would jump into the water and swim with us. It was so affectionate and friendly that even my father, whose interest in animals was solely confined to bullocks, liked it. But in those days, protection against rabies was unknown - at least in the villages-and poor Rose had to be destroyed. I was upset for days and resolved never to have a dog again.

When I was about nine years old, Mr. Subba Rao the headmaster who had been in our village for many years and who had seemed to us to be more or less eternal, was transferred and a new headmaster arrived in his place. Mr. Subba Rao was interested in keeping things going and avoiding trouble. He got on well with everyone in the village, knew their idiosyncrasies and made allowance for them. Our new headmaster Mr. Krishnaswamy Iyengar was a younger man, full of ideas and enthusiasm about how a school ought to be run. He was appalled at the way things had been going on and did not hide his opinions. He believed in 'modern methods of education', in an integrated development of the mind and the body, in parents' participation in school activities and in pupils acquiring a general knowledge about the external world. But the village people would have none of it. They were sceptical, and said he was a brash young man who would ruin the school and its age-long traditions and drive the boys away from it instead of attracting them.

The new headmaster kept us-the upper class boys-after school hours and talked to us as if we were grown-ups. He said he was amazed that there was no provision in the school curriculum for our physical development, such as sports and games or even drill. So he started drill classes for the whole school. The other teachers did not know anything about drill; nor were they interested. Consequently, he had to conduct those classes himself. But he was undaunted. Half an hour before the school was due to break up, all the pupils of all the classes were marched into the open yard in front and made to stand in two rows facing each according to height. Mr. Iyengar explained briefly what we had to do and then proceeded to demonstrate it. We followed him and lifted our arms upwards, sideways and downwards in unison. Then we were asked to touch our toes alternately, that is, the right toes with the left fingers and vice versa. On this, too, we obliged. When he felt that we had learnt it he said, 'Right, now we will do it properly.' He then started calling out the numbers from one to ten in ascending order and then in descending order as he performed the various movements. Used as we were to repeating everything in the classroom, we too started shouting the numbers as we swung our arms. But he told us it wasn't necessary, which we found rather strange.

The drill class seemed a meaningless waste of time to us and to the villagers who saw us performing these exercises as they were returning from their farms. They did not hesitate to tell the headmaster that it was downright foolish. 'My son has a more useful way of getting his sweat out when I put him to work on the farm. I send him to school so that he can learn to read and write and do sums and that is what the teacher is supposed to teach them, not these silly acrobatics', they said. 'Everything he does is upside down. Look at the way he calls the numbers, from one to ten and then from ten to one. Why can't he call from one to twenty and be done with it? Next, he will be teaching them to read from right to left!' But in his superior wisdom, the headmaster persisted in his efforts to help our physical development. The farmers grumbled but did not go further. When the inspector came, he complimented the headmaster and spoke to the villagers about the importance of discipline, physical and mental coordination, etc., none of which they understood. But the

opposition to drill died down and we continued to swing our arms and legs for half an hour every day.

Next, the headmaster introduced games. A few of the boys had been proud possessors of small rubber balls before, and we kicked them about sometimes. But Mr. Iyengar levied a fee of one rupee each from the upper class boys. With the money collected, a football was purchased from Coimbatore with a pump to inflate it and a kit for mending punctures. The open space in front of the school yard was cleared and the field marked out. We had no goal posts and stones about a foot in height were planted in their place. We also learnt the rules of the game.

There were of course certain handicaps in playing the game properly. We did not have twenty-two players to make up the two sides, so we had to play with six or seven a side. The size of the playing field had to be adjusted to the availability of land, which was not quite rectangular. Along one side of the ground was a thorny hedge and whenever the ball hit the hedge, we faced the risk of a puncture. Often, when we should have been playing, much time was spent in mending punctures made by the thorns in the hedge. And finally, a bullock-cart track passed right in the middle of the ground and whenever a cart passed, the game had to come to a stop. Under such handicaps, even the persistence of a Robert Bruce might have weakened, but our headmaster persevered for months until the football was beyond repair with too many punctures, and the unsympathetic farmers refused to part with more money for another ball.

Mr. Iyengar was also able to get a group of young men together and persuade them that the recreational facilities in the village were non-existent and it was their duty to create such facilities and to participate in them. He talked enthusiastically about eliminating the backwardness of the villages and bringing them into the mainstream of civilization through games and sports. He emphasized the need to modernize and to move with the times and do the things that people in the towns were doing, so that we would not be called uncivilized by any casual visitor. The younger farms with a little money and leisure soon became interested in these ideas. If they could all be modernized for the cost of badminton equipment, then they certainly did not want to remain backward. Soon, some money was collected, Mr. Iyengar went to Coimbatore to buy the equipment, a badminton court was laid out in front of the village *choultry* and young men returned from their farms earlier than usual in order to hit a yellow woollen ball back and forth-much to the chagrin of their elders. The older people grumbled and said that when young men gave up useful farm work in order to indulge in useless pastimes, it was obvious that *Kali Yuga* was advancing fast towards its own destruction. But like all things that are grafted on to an alien environment and culture without adequate preparation, badminton too was somewhat short-lived. The young men felt that they were not making adequate progress since the headmaster always won; they quarrelled over rules, over decisions; the attendance dropped and finally it stopped altogether. The headmaster said that they had not learnt the spirit of the game,

which was to lose gracefully. I too could not understand it since the whole objective of playing was to win. Though badminton had stopped, the net became useful for the local untouchables in trapping birds.

But the reformist zeal of our headmaster could not be damped by such minor setbacks. He said he was determined to make our village the most progressive in the whole taluk, however much it cost him (or us!). He next started private tuition in English for such of the boys as cared to learn it by paying five rupees per month. Very few people in the village knew English in those days. Apart from the headmaster, the only other person who could boast of knowledge of the language was the village *Karnam* who maintained the village accounts. Contact with the ruling power was only through minor officials in the taluk headquarters, and no one felt the need or the desire to learn the language of the rulers. The villagers always referred to it as 'crooked letters'. My brother was the only person who knew a little English, as he had been to a high school in Coimbatore for some years. Now, the headmaster spoke to the leading farmers in the village about the importance of English, about higher education for their children in a high school or even college, about their sons becoming lawyers or doctors, or perhaps even collectors, and how they should not be content merely with being farmers forever. (The district collector was the highest dignitary the villagers could think of in those days. Anyone higher was too far removed from them and beyond their comprehension.)

Certainly, the arguments about becoming lawyers appealed to most of the parents. They had to go to courts because of litigation over land or occasional feuds when they beat each other up and the police hauled them all before a magistrate. On such occasions, they had had to engage lawyers, pay them exorbitant fees and watch them argue before judges in a language they did not understand. A villager did not like to be subjected to the discipline of officialdom and he did not think much of the collector in spite of the powers he wielded. But the profession of law gave a kind of freedom that the farmer cherished. Therefore, apart from professional dependence, there was a mutual sympathy between lawyers and agriculturists and the average farmer could quite visualize the possibility of his son becoming a lawyer with some satisfaction.

So the English classes were started in the evenings in one of the empty houses in our compound. Books and notebooks had to be purchased and again Mr. Iyengar had to collect money and go to Coimbatore to buy the necessary things. I think the book was called King's Primer with a picture of George the Fifth on the front cover. There were about ten boys to start with, including myself, a number which dwindled to five before the end of the first month. One of the difficulties we experienced was with regard to pronunciation. The sounds 'B', 'G' and 'F' were not known in Tamil and for some of the boys this was a great obstacle to start with. We struggled over 'A Big Fig' for days before mastering it. But when it came to making a sentence and learning grammar, our teacher's own knowledge was somewhat rusty and we spent months merely learning words without being able to use them.

Another effort of our headmaster in bringing our village up to date was in the intellectual field. Along with starting English classes, he felt there ought to be a library in the village so that knowledge acquired in the school could be strengthened and enlarged. By now the village people were getting used to his enthusiasm and feeling that perhaps there was something in what the man said. He managed to collect a few hundred rupees from among the affluent farmers for the establishment of a library. The village carpenter made a large shelf according to Mr. Iyengar's specifications. Another journey was made to town to buy books and the library was housed in the school. While a majority of the books were concerned with religion and philosophy, there were also quite a few novels. Most of the people had neither the time nor the inclination to read books, though they all agreed that the library was a good thing. Only a few religious-minded ladies like my aunt and a few of the older students made use of the new facility. But it was soon discovered that while people borrowed books, they rarely bothered to return them. Often a servant was sent to borrow the books and, while on his way back, someone else took the books from him to save themselves a journey. They also borrowed from each other freely, so that ultimately the books could not be traced. And people got annoyed when asked to return the titles they had borrowed! "After all, I paid twenty-five rupees to start the library and you come and ask me about a miserable book costing five rupees. Anyone would think I had stolen it!" was the indignant answer. Consequently, like most good things, the library gradually melted away until there were no more books to borrow. The bookshelf was quietly shifted to the headmaster's house and that was the last we heard about it.

It was when I was about ten that I developed a passion for reading. Stories had always fascinated me and I listened to the mythological tales of my grandmother with rapt attention. But the tales in school books were dull and insipid and I learnt them as a boring duty. My sister, who was about six years older than I, was a voracious reader of novels and there were always some books in the house. I do not remember exactly how I started my first novel but I soon found myself devouring them. Many of these were sentimental romances in which the good always-and ultimately-prevailed over evil. But there were many ups and downs while it happened. In these books, the heroines were always virtuous; the villains had no redeeming features whatever and the heroes no blemishes, except that of temporary bad luck. There were also some detective stories and religious books from the library. I read them all indiscriminately. Fortunately, there was no bar about reading novels in our house and any reading was considered better than no reading.

Another of Krishnaswamy Iyengar's activities was the organisation of a teacher's conference in the village. The Palladam Taluk Teachers Association had existed for many years but in a more or less dormant state. Our headmaster resurrected it and the first meeting was held in our school. The only thing I remember about it is that we had the afternoon off from school and the arrival of a photographer with his black box to record the occasion for posterity.

There was a superstition in the village that having one's photograph taken shortened one's life-span. It stands to reason, they said, that when your image is recorded, something from you must go out. Consequently, people looked upon the activities of the gentleman with the black box with considerable misgiving. Having come all the way from Coimbatore just to take a group photograph of the Palladam Taluk teachers, the photographer was naturally interested in soliciting other custom. My family was sufficiently progressive not to believe in the superstition and we wanted to have a picture of our grandfather who was by then past eighty. But the old gentleman would not hear of it. 'Fifteen rupees for having my picture when you can see me in flesh and blood for nothing! It is nothing but robbery!'

'But we want to have your picture after you are gone, grandfather,' my sister explained. 'It will always be there to remind us of you.'

'I am not going yet, don't you worry,' said the old gentleman. 'And you can see me as much as you want. If I should die, then you can have a picture taken and keep it.'

And that was that!

The group photograph of the teachers with myself sitting at the feet of our headmaster-like a true *sishya*-still hangs in our house in the village. It was rumoured later that the authorities frowned upon the formation of such associations. Our headmaster was told not to indulge in such activity in the future. It was one thing to get the farmers' sons to contribute money to play football or badminton, but quite different when it came to organizing teachers who might start talking sedition! Anyhow, that was the beginning as well as the end of the teachers' association for a long time.

But the civilizing mission of the headmaster was brought to an abrupt halt when he was suddenly transferred-some said under a cloud. It was discovered that he had collected far more money than he spent on his various reforming activities. He had also left a lot of unpaid debts. Many of the farmers nodded their heads in self-righteous indignation and said they had always known that he was no good. Without the presence of an active and progressive force, the various activities which were already languishing came to a stop and the village lapsed back into its old lethargy and contentment.

I have always been of a religious nature-not in the narrow sense of the word 'religion' but in its broadest sense. That is, I have generally considered that the ethics of a problem are more important than its solution, that means are more important than ends, the pursuit

of the ultimate truth as being more vital than happiness or contentment. I do not know whether I inherited this trait or acquired it, but I became religious very early in life.

This is not surprising. Generally speaking, every Hindu child absorbs the myths, the traditions, the superstitions and the morality along with his or her mother's milk. Participation in ritual and ceremonials is so much a part of one's life from very early childhood that they enter the subconscious and possibly influence all subsequent behaviour throughout one's life. At every religious function—even at weddings and funerals—children always had ringside seats watching everything, listening to mantras, following the activities of the priest in all the minutest detail. The importance of ritual was imprinted on young minds. Statements like 'if you do that god will punish you', or 'you will not go to heaven', were made quite seriously and accepted as absolute truth. This early and informal domestic training in religious practice is perhaps one of the reasons for the survival of Hinduism in spite of the absence of an organized theology and clergy.

The other reason for its survival is to be found in the fact that, while conformity to tradition and ritual is insisted upon, an individual is free to believe what he likes. Hinduism is the only major religion that is not based on a single, universal concept of god. It is not the result of the inspired teachings of a single prophet; nor is it based on a code of ethics and behaviour, as most of the other religions are. The concept of god is a matter for the individual or for the group to which that individual might belong. He may worship god as a universal spirit that is the basis of all creation, or he may worship one or more of a thousand gods. Or he may create a god out of his own inspiration and imagination. He might be an agnostic who questions everything or a ritualist who practices all kinds of ceremonies and superstitions. He may be a monogamist or a polygamist, a strict vegetarian or one who makes animal sacrifices. But behind all this apparent diversity and contradiction, there is a fundamental unity of attitude and approach to problems that is the result of centuries of integration between various groups and people living together. The different social groups in Hindu society are like the different pieces of a jig-saw puzzle, each having a separate and distinct existence but each fitting into a particular position to make up the overall design of the social fabric.

Such extreme freedom of belief meant that no two people had a common idea of god. There were no doubt philosophers and prophets from time to time who interpreted the Vedas and the Upanishads or who enunciated their own concept of god, and they have had many followers both in their time and since. But there was nothing formal. No codes of beliefs were laid down, no formal admission of members or excommunication of non-believers. There was no religious hierarchy enforcing discipline with an iron hand and eliminating all forms of nonconformity. It was completely voluntary. Members of the same family might worship different gods. Sometimes, the same individual might worship one god today and another tomorrow. This complete lack of theological control and direction and

absolute freedom of thought for the individual has had long-standing repercussions which we can notice even today.

This combination of complete freedom of thought for the individual on the one hand, and absolute conformity to caste, tradition and ritual on the other, has led to a form of idealism that is completely divorced from reality. A man's thoughts, values and ideals were not limited by anything other than his imagination, and he could cherish the highest sense of right and wrong without feeling in any way compelled to put them into practice, for his practice was determined by a sense of obligation only to his caste. A man might believe in one universal spirit and yet worship a thousand gods because other members of his caste did so. He may not believe in ceremonials and yet submit himself to a whole lot of practices because his family obligations dictated it. In Hinduism there has rarely been any correspondence between these two. Today, with the spread of science and a sophisticated cynicism, they are more divorced than ever. Ideals are to be cherished and worshipped and revered, but not necessarily to be followed. No effort has been made to bring about a compromise between these two extremes. It has led to a wide, often unbridgeable gulf between theory and practice, between thought and action.

Thus, even toddlers absorbed a lot of religion. Every evening my mother would wash her hands and feet, light the oil lamp in the puja room and sit in front of the coloured pictures of the various gods and goddesses and meditate for a few minutes, completely oblivious of her environment. There was a picture of Vishnu-Venkatachalapathy, the god of the seven hills. He occupied the centre while on either side of him were Saraswathi and Krishna. I was greatly attracted by the picture of Krishna since he was depicted as a small boy trying to steal butter. But the pictures themselves did not matter. I remember my sister adding a picture of Christ to the Hindu pantheon some years later. Each time my mother got a calendar with the coloured picture of a god; it was cut out, framed and hung somewhere. What mattered was the approach and the attitude of mind. I instinctively followed her. When she asked god to forgive her sins, I too did the same though I was not quite sure what a sin was and what needed to be forgiven. I have since become wiser and learnt more about sin, though I have not asked god to forgive my sins for a long time.

In our village community prayer was of two kinds. One was just prayer, either daily or weekly, undertaken for the sake of one's spiritual welfare and ultimate salvation. The other was a specific request that god had to grant, such as good crops, cure from a serious illness, or some other domestic or financial problem. Or we asked god to take a decision for us, such as whether to buy a farm or not, or whether to choose a particular bride. On such occasions, two lots of flowers-one red and the other white-were put in packets by the priest and the worshipper was asked to pick one. If he got the colour he had thought of, he could go ahead with whatever enterprise he had in view. If not, then he was on his own, because god would not help him. While one prayed according to the family tradition for normal

prayers, the intervention of other gods was sought for particular objectives. This was because certain gods were supposed to have special powers in granting a particular type of request.

We realized of course that the second sort of prayer was purely selfish and that god would not grant it unless we were prepared to sacrifice something towards it. So when people prayed for a good crop, for example, they would undertake to make a pilgrimage to a particular temple. If a child was cured of illness, the parents vowed that it would be taken to the temple and have its hair shaved there, or they would vow to undertake a fast once a week, say, every Saturday. But being sensible people who did not believe in unnecessary sacrifices or self-torture their vows seldom involved a more serious penance.

And then, grandmother told me stories, fascinating stories of gods and monsters and how the gods slew the monsters in order to preserve mankind from degenerating. By the time I was five or six years old, I knew the stories of *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. I learnt about saints like Mira Bai and Ram Das and Kabir from my aunt who read about them in the books from the library. She told me of their sufferings and tribulations and their steadfast faith and final salvation. Heaven and hell became as real to me as going to the religious festival in the nearest town. The abodes of the various gods, such as Kailas for Shiva and the milky sea for Vishnu which was churned by the Devas and the Rakshasas and from which good and evil flowed in equal measure, were not mere abstractions or symbols of poetic or religious fancy, but real places that one could reach if only one was sufficiently good and austere, observed the various fasts, went to the temple as often as possible and prayed and meditated. My family was rather proud of my interest in religion at such a tender age.

There were a number of temples and little shrines in the village devoted to various gods, but there was no regular worship in most of these places and they were used only for particular occasions during the year. There was the *Vinayaka* temple in the village square next to the *choultry*; the *Mariamman* temple was next door to it. The *Natrayan* temple was for the lower castes, where they made their animal sacrifices once a year. And then there were some snakes on a platform under a neem tree next to the school. Our own family deity-common to the fifteen families-was kept in the big house. But the main temple in the village was Vaishnavite and the presiding deity was Lord Krishna, playing the flute. The Naidus were Vaishnavites and this temple was constructed and patronized by them, though the Gounders also came occasionally. It was the only temple in the village which had a full-time Brahmin priest and puja was performed twice a day. Every Saturday night people congregated in the temple to sing *bhajans* in praise of the Lord. On Vaishnavite festivals, such as *Ekadesi* or the birthday of Sri Krishna, the deity was taken out in procession to the singing of devotional songs. For each festival, one of the fifteen families was responsible for the expenses and for the distribution of *prasadam* at the end.

My grandfather and father were not great temple-goers, though they did pay visits during festivals. Grandfather always considered too much holiness a sign of hypocrisy. But every morning, after the usual bath, the *namam* box would be brought out and father and grandfather would paint *namams* on their foreheads, the sign of a true Vaishnavite. Initially father would paint the *namam* on my forehead, but soon I learnt to do it myself in front a small mirror perched precariously on a wooden stand. I felt proud of this mark and hoped that the gods would notice it.

But I did not share grandfather's pessimism about too much temple-going and was sure he would go to hell for uttering such blasphemies against holy men. When I saw the singers at the temple on a festival morning with freshly painted *namams* not only on their foreheads but on their bare chests and arms as well, with holy beads and flower garlands round their necks, marching through the narrow streets singing in full-throated voices oblivious of all else, my spirit leapt with joy and I instinctively joined them. The Awkward Uncle was one of the leaders of this group. He had the harmonium strung across his shoulders, working the bellows with one hand while he manipulated the keys with the other, singing loudly at the same time. Such devotion and holiness could not hide mundane interests such as getting the better of their neighbours, I thought. Yet, grandfather said it did. He also said if only the Awkward Uncle devoted as much time to his farms as to his singing, he wouldn't have so many financial problems.

As the procession moved slowly along, someone would pick me up and start dancing to whatever tune they happened to be singing in religious ecstasy. Women would often come out of their houses as the procession passed their doorsteps and offer flowers and fruits. The priest would receive them and bless the ladies, sprinkling some holy water from the copper jug with the aid of a mango leaf. 'May you for ever be blessed with your husband,' he said, '*Dheerga Sumangali Bhava*'. That is, she should predecease her husband and not be a widow. This was considered the best blessing a woman could have in those days when the advantages of alimony or a second marriage was unknown.

The atmosphere of music and religion drew me to the temple like a magnet and I started going there every Saturday night. There were usually a few children there, but they were from the poorer families and came to the temple not in the hope of gaining salvation for their souls but in the expectation of nutrition for their bodies, for the *prasadam* that was distributed at the end was tasty and substantial. It usually consisted of *abheshagam*, a mixture of bananas and sugar, nuts and raisins, and *sundal*, fried gram spiced with coconut and mustard seeds. But my presence was wholly unconnected with the distribution of *prasadam*.

In view of my father's status in the village, I did not sit in a corner with the other children but was asked to sit along with the singers. Gradually, I learnt the songs-the repertoire of village talent was somewhat limited and the same songs were sung every week-and joined in the chorus.

The temple consisted of three rooms, one leading into the other. The innermost as well as the smallest was the *sanctum sanctorum* where there was the stone image of Krishna playing the flute. Having been anointed with the sacred oil for years, it was black and could hardly be seen since there were no windows or doors in that room. In front of the statue were three bronze idols about two feet in height representing Krishna and his two consorts. The images were clothed in multi-coloured silk brocade inlaid with gold thread and shone brilliantly in the dim light. Only the priest was allowed into this room. The outer room to which all but untouchables had access was large and airy and was used for prayers and *bhajans*. In between the two was a medium-sized room in which the priest kept the paraphernalia required for festivals, processions, ceremonies, the musical instruments for *bhajans*, etc. There were three instruments in the orchestra, a drum, a harmonium whose bellows were in a sad state of repair and a stringed instrument which provided the background note. There were also some cymbals which anyone could pick up and use during the singing to keep time.

On Saturday nights, people started to arrive in ones and twos and sat in two rows. They were mostly Naidus, but other communities were not barred and occasionally we had a Gounder coming to sing. The drummer was a silversmith. Though socially he was below the Naidus and the Gounders, he was tolerated because no one else knew how to play the drum. As soon as about six people were assembled, the tuning of the instruments began and the singing commenced.

'Won't you hear my call, O Krishna;
Won't you hear my call?'

At first the tempo of singing was slow and measured, but as it progressed the rhythm became faster and faster. The drummer shook his head more violently than before and his tuft of hair became loose and fell majestically on both sides of his shoulders and kept time with the rhythm as his head shook. The harmonium wailed more piteously and the singers were transported to greater heights of ecstasy until, with a final crash on the drum and an impassioned plea to Krishna to hear their call, the music came to a halt. With one voice, the whole congregation shouted an invocation to their favourite god.

'Narayana! Govinda! Goooooovinda!'

They wiped the sweat from their bare bodies and faces, the drummer tied his hair again into a tuft, made adjustments to the drum, changed his position to loosen his limbs, cracked his finger joints in order to make them more supple and was ready for the next song.

There was one man in the temple whose job was to gather flowers for the deity and do odd jobs around the temple and help the priest in general. He not only attended the *bhajan* on Saturday nights but would sing and dance when religious fervour overtook him. Later I learnt that he was usually in this state after visiting the arrack shop. This misdemeanour on his part was condoned because he was a good singer and often amused the audience with his antics while dancing. I was so moved by his dancing that, instinctively, I would join him and we often danced together-I in all my tender innocence and he, carried away by the power of alcohol as well as the atmosphere of devotion. But I could see divine light shining in his eyes as, with outstretched arms; he pleaded and cajoled Krishna to shower his divine light on a misguided soul. I tried to imitate him in everything, in the facial expressions, in the outstretched arms and in keeping time to the music with my feet. Later, when this man's alcoholic antics became excessive and he was forbidden from attending the *bhajans*, my dancing nevertheless continued.

Naga, grandfather's mistress, who must have been about seventy by now, heard of my devotion and my dancing and was very pleased. The next time she came, she brought me her anklet bells which she had not used for fifty years. She told me they were not like ordinary bells one got in shops but made of special metal at the time of her inaugural performance. They must have been of great sentimental value to her since she had preserved them so carefully all these years. I was very proud indeed when I presented myself at the temple the next Saturday with those bells.

On special festival occasions, there was an added enthusiasm partly because of the bigger crowd and partly because the duration of the *bhajan* was longer. Often, a singer from one of the neighbouring villages was invited to join the local talent and there was a certain amount of competition. On such occasions, the *Garuda vahana*, the flying transport of Vishnu, was brought out. It was decorated with draperies and flowers. Made of plaster and studded with a large number of mirrors, it dazzled in the dull light of the oil lamps. Additional illumination in the street was provided by the washerman who made a torch out of old rags soaked in oil. It was their traditional duty to provide illumination for all important occasions such as festivals, weddings, etc. The bronze statues of Krishna and his consorts were cleaned by the priest and dressed in the new clothes that had been bought for the occasion by my father. The idols were placed on the *Garuda vahana* which had been mounted on bamboos. Puja was performed and eight men, whose traditional right it was to carry the idols, lifted the whole thing on to their shoulders and the procession started.

The *bhajan* singers went first. I followed, dancing after them. I was specially dressed for the occasion in a red silk dhoti tied in the orthodox style. There were beads round my neck and the *namam* shown prominently on my forehead. My hair, which had not been cropped in the European style – it was considered sacrilegious in the village – was long and fell over my face as I shook my head to the tunes and rhythms of various songs. Immediately behind me were the men carrying the deities. The washermen with the torches walked on either side so that the light fell on the idols. All others followed behind.

The procession did the rounds of all the fifteen houses. Before each house, it stopped and the bamboo poles were put on special rests while the carriers relaxed. The lady of the house brought flowers, bananas and coconuts with camphor on a tray. The priest lit the camphor, rang his bell and intoned some mantras. The music went on and my dancing did not stop. Often, the ladies affectionately patted my cheek, smiled and said, 'Isn't he clever for his age?' and I felt pleased. And the procession moved on.

When the round of the fifteen houses was completed, the deities were placed in a central spot so that other families in the village could also offer their homage. Now, the singers and the dancer could rest and tamarind juice with sugar and water was distributed while the pujas went on. Finally, the procession wended its way back to the temple. The final song 'Mangalam' was sung, *prasadam* was distributed and I returned home exhausted and slept the uninterrupted sleep of the virtuous and the innocent.

As I grew older, religion took stronger roots. My widowed aunt who stayed with us and looked after us was very devout and read a lot of religious books. As I learnt to read, I would pore over her books. Children's books and comics were not a part of village life and I read, instead, the *prabandams* of the Alwars, the Vaishnavite saints. It was not exactly digestible food for a youngster and I did not understand much of what I read, but that they were religious was enough. I learned some of the more popular poems and would recite them at the slightest provocation. I observed all the fasts like *Vaikunta Ekadesi*. On the Holy Saturday in the month of *Purattasi* (September-October) I would go round to seven houses with a begging bowl and collect rice which was afterwards distributed to a few Brahmins. This was intended to be a sign of humility as well as a holy penance. But an artificial or assumed humility can be a form of inverted arrogance and I think I felt elated and proud and somewhat superior to others because of my religious fervour and the supposed humility that went with it. On Krishna Jayanthi I was dressed as Krishna, my long hair tied into a knot at the top as I participated in all the divine pranks that Krishna was said to have indulged in as a child. I stole butter from the pots hung from a rafter in the courtyard of the temple, while everyone pretended to catch me without success. I pretended to play the flute and stole the clothes of the women supposed to be bathing in the river. It was all make-believe, like acting in a play, but to me and to the others who participated, it was real because it was backed by ardent belief.

I was much applauded for my enthusiastic participation in religious activities. When visitors from outside-particularly religious people-came to our village, I was shown as a prize exhibit and asked to recite some *prabandams*, which I did without much persuasion. Some of them tested my knowledge of mythology or asked questions about ceremonials. If I was able to answer them, they were naturally very pleased and complimented my precocious knowledge. Occasionally, I indulged in repartee that amused the audience and silenced the questioner. People would indulgently say, 'he is very clever for his age,' or, 'fancy knowing so much about religion at such a tender age!' or 'he will go far,' – but in which direction, they did not fortunately specify.

My religious fervour lasted till I was about twelve, though I gave up dancing at the temple even earlier, when I started feeling very self-conscious. And then, I seemed to outgrow it just as I outgrew my shirts. There was no sudden upheaval, no emotional disillusionment or a rending of the heart at losing one's faith. All of a sudden, it seemed rather pointless and absurd. The idols in the temple became mere idols and not consecrations of divinity. The glass mirrors studded in the wings of *Garuda vahana* no longer reflected the power and the glory of god. They were mere bits of broken glass and tinsel. The magic had gone out of it all, never to return.

Perhaps a number of factors contributed to this development, apart from the mere fact of growing up. As a voracious reader, I found that novels dealt with real people while mythologies portrayed idealized versions. The contemporary characters could often be recognized and they behaved like human beings, unlike the gods whose behaviour was often unpredictable and difficult to justify on the basis of logic or reason. Perhaps, subconsciously, it was literature, not religion that I was seeking and as soon as I found it, my needs were satisfied.

One book in particular impressed me very much. It was the first novel ever written in Tamil, *Prathapa Mudaliar Charitram*. Apart from its wit and wisdom, there was an incident in that book about how a play based on the story of the *Ramayana* was changed by a youthful but enraged audience because of the injustice of it all. When Kaikeye had got her two wishes from her husband Dasaratha and Rama was about to depart to the forest, the audience took the matter in hand. They marched on to the stage and threatened the actor who was playing the part of Kaikeye and made him go back to Dasaratha and withdraw her demands. They then told a protesting Rama that he should not go to the forest in view of the fact that it was no longer necessary to fulfil his father's vows. When Rama pleaded that he had to carry out his promise to the *devas* of destroying Ravana, a half made-up Ravana was brought before the stage and was forced to vow that he would never again ill-treat the hermits or the *devas*. Having settled everything according to their sense of fairness and justice, they proceeded to celebrate Rama's coronation. Ravana remained unslain and Sita

did not have to undergo the rigours of imprisonment or the ordeal by fire to prove her virtue, and the story came to a premature if abrupt and happy ending. That someone could take such liberties with the gods amazed me at first, and then it proved to my satisfaction that the gods could not be as powerful as was claimed if people could make fun of them.

Another factor that perhaps contributed to my turning away from religion was an arrogant yogi who spent some time in our village. When he performed some puja and offered holy water to those present, he demanded that people should prostrate themselves before him. This I refused to do, saying that the scriptures intended prostration only for the gods and not human beings, however holy and virtuous they might be. But when my father asked me to obey the yogi I had no alternative.

'You had to do it in the end, you bad boy,' said the yogi.

'I did not prostrate at your feet but at those of my father,' I replied with tears in my eyes.

It was also about this time that I listened to a lecture by E.V. Ramaswamy Periar, the rationalist politician of the south. I had gone on one of my rare visits to Coimbatore with an uncle who was somewhat unorthodox and, when he saw this lecture advertised, he thought it would be a good thing for me to hear the lecture. Periar spoke about the tyranny of the Brahmins throughout the ages and how they had kept the entire population in ignorance and superstition in order to exploit them. He was a powerful speaker and it was my first experience of listening to such a persuasive speech. His arguments seemed to me unassailable. 'If there was a god in this universe, the men who invented the electricity and the radio would have discovered him by now,' he thundered. 'No, there is no god. It is a superstition invented by the brahmins to keep us down. If I am uttering a blasphemy, let them put a curse on me and see what happens. No curse can ever touch me for I have no blind faith', he paused and added, 'Which fool with a *namam* on his forehead dare accept my challenge?' I had to bow my head in shame, for I had a *namam* on my forehead.

I was greatly impressed by his arguments which seemed perfectly logical. I did not yet know what a radio was and had only a vague notion of electricity, but I knew that they were the products of western civilization. As we were walking away, my uncle commented, 'He is a crazy fellow, but he has some very clever arguments, don't you think?'

'I think he is right', I said.

My uncle was a bit alarmed lest I should go from one extreme to the other. 'Everything he says is not gospel truth', he said. 'I just wanted you to hear the other side.'

I did not reply. But E.V.R. had made a deep and permanent impression on me.

Perhaps the fundamental reason for my giving up religion was an unconscious search for spiritual support that was based on logic and reason rather than on faith and belief. The religion that I had been practicing was almost exclusively concerned with ritual and ceremonials. No doubt there was an element of devotion as well as some ethics, but what mattered was conformity and not a search for truth. The faith as well as the colour and the magic that it provided was adequate for the mind of a child, but woefully inadequate for an inquiring mind. Without knowing anything about science or a rational philosophy of life. I was nevertheless groping towards it. The first step in such a search was atheism.

So I stopped going to the temple, stopped putting on a *namam* on my forehead in the mornings and gave up all my fasts on religious days. I repeated the statements of E.V.R. to whoever cared to listen, but these were not enough. As a demonstration of my mental and spiritual liberation, I started eating meat which I hated. That was the only way in which I could assert my new-found freedom. Fortunately, this was not a very difficult thing since vegetarianism in our family was by option and not a result of religious considerations. My grandfather and my brother were non-vegetarians while the rest of the family was not. Meat was cooked about once a week not in the regular kitchen, but in the outhouse where the bath water was heated, and I joined my grandfather and brother for meals on those days.

One of the supposedly clever remarks that I had made in the days of my religious fervour and for which I had been complimented by many people was to say (without knowing that Shaw had said something similar!), 'If human beings die, they are buried in the burning ghat, but if animals die, they are buried in my brother's tummy.' This remark was now unkindly thrown at me and my sister now said, 'The animals have found an additional burial ground.' But I resigned myself to such criticism for the sake of my new-found convictions. In any case, the criticism was good-humoured. My family was most understanding and did not take my defection any more seriously than my religion earlier. As my mother, who was as deeply religious as she was tolerant, put it, 'If atheism is your way of achieving salvation, why should we object to it?'

Belief in the supernatural is closely related to the fear of the unknown. To me, the gods and *devas* of mythology were not mere symbolic abstractions of ideas but real beings who peopled this universe and wandered about it in an eternity of time. Heaven and hell were real places somewhere above or below the earth, among the stars or in the nether regions. Gods and demons emerged from these abodes to establish their sway over earthly mortals. Similarly, the spirits of people who were dead were also free to roam about. I thought of

this world not as the exclusive preserve of human beings and animals, but essentially as an area in which supernatural and superhuman beings wandered at will and mankind was largely at their mercy. I thought of these creatures as being able to pass through closed doors, to see in the dark and to harm without themselves being harmed. One could not predict their behaviour and it seemed to me that I was completely at their mercy and mere human beings were no help in such a situation.

This struck terror into my heart but it was an unspoken, unadmitted and even unrecognized terror. The rationalization is a subsequent phenomenon. It's very vagueness made it more powerful, and me, more helpless. I dreamed of these creatures in my sleep and woke up crying in the middle of the night. When my mother asked what the matter was, I was unable to explain it except to say that I had been dreaming. But the contents of the dream were too confusing, too indefinite for me to explain. Sometimes, I lay awake at night, clutching at my bedclothes and thinking that any moment one of those creatures might come and snatch me away. Proximity to my mother was no help, for they could come without warning and act instantaneously. Not only the darkness, but even more the silence of the night made it more fearful. Somehow I felt that if I could make a noise, it would drive away the spirit, and' so I would go on talking to my mother about nothing in particular. 'Go to sleep,' she would say and turn over and I lay in bed wondering what was going to happen, until tiredness and sheer exhaustion overtook me and I fell into a deep, if disturbed, sleep.

During the day, things did not bother me and I would wonder sometimes how I could be so frightened. In the light of day it all seemed so unreal, but in the dark, the unreal became real. I was afraid to go out into the backyard at night which I had to do before retiring since we did not have a bathroom in the house. So I waited and watched until someone went and I followed them. On those rare occasions when I was forced to go out on my own, I would sing to myself in the hope that the spirits would hear the noise and keep away.

Sometimes, I tried to pray in the hope that the spirits might leave me alone. But prayer seemed to have no effect at all and I myself was not convinced of the efficacy of prayer in this particular case since I felt that the spirits, good and bad, might conspire together to terrorize me.

Perhaps something had happened when I was very young to give me this fear of spirits in the dark. It might have stayed in my subconscious and was the cause of all my terrors. I have also wondered whether my early religious fervour was partly a defence against this fear. It was also strange that I was not afraid of evil spirits only. For I did not think that the benign ones would protect me. It was just that I was afraid of all spirits. It was the fear of the unknown, and perhaps of death.

A possible explanation for this could be my attendance at the festival of *Natrayan*, a minor local god, worshipped mostly by the masons, potters and other lower-caste people. There was no temple for this god, but his idol was perched precariously on a small platform under the shade of a margosa tree on the outskirts of the village. Once a year, he came into his own and was the ruling deity for a period of forty-eight hours.

Two major events marked the celebration of this festival. One was the sacrifice of a large number of goats. There was a feeling against animal sacrifice even in those days, but very few low caste people took any notice of it. Even a few Naidus and Gounders participated, particularly if they had made a vow to that god and it was fulfilled. As a vegetarian, I looked upon this particular festival with some horror. One could smell blood and incense in the open space near the temple for days later and normally I would have avoided it. But there was another aspect of the festival which drew me to it like a magnet.

This was the mass exorcism that was practiced there. In those days, there were many women in the villages who were said to be 'possessed' by the spirit of another dead individual. At certain times, under some emotional stress, these women would lose their consciousness and the spirit would take over. Their entire personalities would change. A shy, timid girl would laugh and shout, not recognize her friends and relations and be rude and uncouth. Or a quiet, laughing, good natured woman would shed tears over imaginary illnesses and death. Sometimes, they became violent, used language of which they would have been ashamed in normal times, and were often uncontrollable. Their hair dishevelled, eyes staring, they would shout or laugh or cry, sometimes pour sand over their bodies, or throw it at those who surrounded them. They totally lost their inhibitions and were no longer subject to the social and cultural norms of the community. Their relatives waited anxiously.

All such women, not only from Karadibavi but also from the neighbouring villages, came to this festival to be exorcized by the Pujari, the priest, who was well known for it. The priest himself was well lubricated with arrack, incense, blood and the atmosphere of religious fervour and was only too ready to drive the 'devils' out of the neighbourhood for ever. Each woman sat in the middle of a small knot of people-usually friends and relations-and behaved as 'the spirit' moved her. The priest would come with his whip and ask questions. The answer themselves did not matter.

'Who are you?'

'Where do you come from?'

'Why are you haunting this woman?'

Suddenly, the priest would shout, 'You think you are cunning. But I am cleverer than you. Here, take this!' and he would deliver a few lashes with his whip. The woman would cry out in pain and, at the same time, shout back challenges at the priest. She would get a few

more lashes of the whip and the priest would move on to another woman, muttering that he would soon be back, by which time the spirit should be ready to leave, or else.

And so it went on. The priest moved from one woman to the next, left the 'easier' ones to his assistant and tackled the more difficult himself. Sometimes, a woman hit him, or threw sand into his face, in which case she got a few more lashes of the whip. As the hot afternoon wore on, the smells and sounds of the festival mounted and people got more tired as well as more intoxicated. A few became god men temporarily, danced and sang and sometimes lashed themselves. Some told fortunes to those who cared to listen. But the possessed women went on and on until the priest came again and talked to the spirit.

'Look at me! look into my eyes!'

He would hold the woman's face in both his hands and make her look at him. If she out-stared him, she received a few more lashes of the whip. On the other hand, if she averted her eyes, she was whipped all the same.

'Are you willing to leave this body?' yelled the priest, and beat her at the same time until the woman shouted back, 'Yes! yes!'

'Now, I want you to get into this hair,' said the priest, as he got hold of the longest strand of hair on the woman's head.

'Will you do it?'

'Yes, yes,' wailed the woman.

'Are you in this strand of hair, or are you hiding elsewhere?'

'I am in the strand.'

'All right, come with me.'

The priest took that woman by the single strand to the tree under which the god Natrayan reposed. On reaching it, the assistant drove a nail into the tree and the priest tied the hair to the nail.

'You are now nailed to the tree of Natrayan. You can never escape; you can never again molest a woman. Do you understand?'

By now the woman was tired and whimpering. She was almost inaudible. 'I understand', she almost whispered.

Then, with a quick flick of the whip, he cut the strand of hair and the woman, cured of whatever it was that assailed her, walked away rather sheepishly, looking ashamed. But she did not seem to be aware of the punishment she had undergone.

I was nauseated by the smell of blood and revolted by the vulgar public exhibition of the women as well as by the cruelties of the priest. But I could not help but be impressed by the 'cure' that was achieved. The 'supernatural' element seemingly displayed by women and its exorcism 'proved' to me the existence of evil spirits and added to the terrors I already felt.

A number of deaths took place in my family before I was twelve. My grandfather's sister died when I was about six, my maternal grandmother when I was about eight and my paternal grandparents when I was about twelve. On all these occasions, I had to pay my respects to the dead body by prostrating myself before it, accompany the cortege to the burning ghat, walk round it on the pyre and throw some rice before the pyre was lit. I did all these things more or less mechanically. The grief as well as the solemnity of the occasion and the crowds present overwhelmed me and I did not think of the problems of life after death. But later, when the mourners had all departed and the family drifted back to normal routine, these things bothered me. I wondered anxiously if the departed had gone to heaven or hell and was afraid they might want to communicate with me in some way. This anxiety became a reality when I dreamt of my grandmother one night soon after her death. If the dead spirits wanted to communicate with the living, what better means was there except the dream-world? While it was true that grandmother had loved me and petted and spoiled me while she was living, who knew what her attitude would be after death? These apprehensions and vague fears haunted me for a long time.

I remember coming into the central hall of our house one morning and finding my grandmother standing there, smiling at me. It was exactly two weeks after she had died. She stood near the door, smiled and beckoned to me to come to her, but I stood rooted to the spot, unable to move or to speak, and staring at her with wide open eyes. Was she really there? Could I have touched her if I had gone near her? Or was it all a product of my imagination? I bothered about this for a long time afterwards.

But the greatest fear I experienced in childhood followed a violent death that took place very near our house. I was playing with some children in the backyard of our neighbour's house when a woman came out. She was the daughter of one of the fifteen uncles and was living with her parents because she had quarrelled with her husband. She told us to run away and we moved off as she walked towards the well. Something made me turn round and I saw her standing on the parapet wall of the well, ready to jump. I screamed. She turned, stared at me with those dark, piercing eyes for a second, and then jumped. Was it fear, grief, desolation I saw in those eyes? They haunted me for a long time afterwards.

There was a splash. The other boys too turned round, but they did not know what had happened. Instinctively, we ran to the well and peeped over the parapet. We could only see the dark red of the sari floating like a tent on the water. We all started crying at once, for we did not know what to do. Fortunately, one of the ladies of the house heard our cries and

came running. Help was summoned. A crowd of people had gathered quickly, talking in whispers, asking each other what had happened, who it was and so on. I was the centre of attention for a little while when everyone questioned me, and then I was forgotten. People told me to go home, but I stood rooted to the spot, unable to move. There seemed to be a horrible, fascinating need for me to see that woman once more, the terror and the torment in her face.

Half a dozen men went down the well and brought out the inert body. Four of them carried her, two holding her by the shoulders and two by her legs. Water dripped from the red sari and I wondered if it was blood. Her head hung back with water trickling from her long, black, matted hair which almost touched the ground. Her mouth was open, her eyes staring. Her dark form seemed to me to be the personification of a *Rakshasi* about whom I had learnt from the *Ramayana*. She could not be Thadaka, for Thadaka was old and toothless and this one was young. She must be Surpanaka. From then on, I thought of her as Surpanaka who was cruel and vicious, for a streak of cruelty is necessary even for self-destruction.

It was then I remembered the child. As she walked towards the well, I remembered her carrying her child in her arms. She must have had the little girl in her arms when she jumped. With my incoherence and fear, it took me some time to explain to people that the body of the child was also in the well. People were busy and would not listen and kept telling me to go home. At last, when I was able to explain it, the men went down the well again and, after a search, brought up the body of the little girl.

The police had to be sent for and an inquiry held. The police station was six miles away and it all took time. Meanwhile, the body lay on a couple of benches hastily put together outside the house, covered by a sheet. The lifeless form of the little girl was next to her mother. Women wailed and the men stood around and the police inquiry went on interminably. Fortunately, I was considered too young to be able to give a coherent account of what happened and the woman who came first and raised the alarm and the men who brought the bodies up were considered sufficient. I was taken home and told to stay in until it was all over.

It was not uncommon in villages for women to commit suicide by jumping into a well. To be discarded by her husband and to have to come back to her parents was the greatest humiliation for a woman. If in addition to that, she quarrelled with her mother-as had happened in this case-there was nowhere a woman could go. It was also natural for her to take the child away with her to wherever she was going.

When I went to bed that night and all the lights were extinguished my terror began. I had a vivid imagination and I could see this *Rakshasi* pleading her case before god and calling me as a witness in justification of her act. I could see her staring eyes and open mouth as she was brought out of the well and her tormented eyes as she jumped into the

well. Suddenly, I screamed and my mother came to me. I told her I was frightened. This time she knew the cause of my fear and she spoke to me soothingly, moved her bed next to mine and told me there was no need to be frightened. After this, my mother slept next to me every night for about a month until I got over the worst of my fears.

The morning after all this happened, a sudden thought struck me. If the woman was going to draw water, she would have had a pot on her head or on her hip. No one went near a well without a pot. Instead, she had her child. Therefore, I should have suspected something. If I had thought of it when I saw her, perhaps I could have prevented her jumping into the well. The more I thought about it, the more I felt I had somehow failed and remorse was added to the fear I already felt. Unable to keep this to myself, I mentioned it to my mother. Evidently no one had thought of the pot, not even the police who were interested in finding out if it was suicide or if there was any foul play.

My mother consoled me. 'You couldn't have thought of it', she said. 'No one could. Even if you had thought of it, you couldn't have done anything for she would have jumped in before you could raise an alarm'. But I worried for many days.

My fear of the unknown continued even after I ceased to believe in life after death. While I abandoned religion on the basis of a crude and elementary logic, subconscious anxieties and fears did not respond to such reasoning. I was able to get over them only gradually, as a result of growing up and changes in my environment.

I had reached the age of ten and completed the fifth class in school, which was as far as anyone could go in the village. My school certificate had been duly presented to me. About a generation earlier, I would have been sent to the farm along with my father, learnt the various agricultural operations such as ploughing, sowing, irrigating with the bullocks, and so on. The rudiments of farm management as well as what crops to sow at different seasons and for different types of land would have been a part of my subsequent education and knowledge. But thanks to the efforts of grandfather, my family had been able to save money, buy more land and have a number of tenants to cultivate it. Grandfather had also been lending money to other farmers in our village as well as in the neighbourhood, so that financially we had acquired a certain status. It was no longer considered necessary for me to start learning about the family tradition of agriculture so early in life.

Physically also, I was rather thin weak for my age. I had suffered from asthma almost since birth and it had not yet left me. I was not considered strong enough for farm work. In fact, my grandfather, who had been tall and robust in his time, said I would be an invalid all

my life because I was born at an inauspicious time-grandmother not being there to contradict it.

Apart from all these factors, the benefits of education were beginning to be recognized even in the villages. My brother had already been to study in a high school, thought his education was somewhat sporadic and he soon gave it up. Increasing contacts with the town and with various professions were making the villages realize that agriculture was not the only way of life for a young man. A few textile mills had been started in Coimbatore and the shortage of goods from Europe had enabled these mills to make lots of money, much to the envy of farmers. English, as the language of the ruling power, was accepted as an asset to a young man even if he did not have to make his living by it. It was therefore decided that I should be educated further.

I was also considered desirable that I should learn some English before being sent to a high school in Coimbatore so that I need not start at a lower class. Fortunately for me, the new headmaster who had succeeded Mr Iyengar, while not so dynamic with regard to introducing new ideas into the village, was nevertheless quite capable of teaching elementary English. His services were engaged. I spent two hours with him every day outside hours learning English. He also set me some exercises as homework to keep me further occupied.

I was fascinated with the books he got me. They were printed in England and seemed to be of very high quality. There were beautiful coloured pictures of grass-covered playing fields on which fair-haired boys in uniforms with shoes and stockings played football. This was my first view of England. It seemed such a glorious place compared to the drab and arid surroundings in which I lived. I had already absorbed the attitudes of the time about England, about its wealth and greatness and how the English had 'conferred' various 'blessings' such as railways, telegraphs, etc. on India. These pictures confirmed whatever ideas I already had about our rulers and I thought of England as being second only to heaven, at least while I still believed in a heaven. After that, England came first.

But all my time was not taken up learning English. I had many hours on my hands during the day when the teacher was attending to the school. This gave me plenty of opportunity to indulge in my favourite hobby of reading. I was fast exhausting all the books from the erstwhile library started by the previous headmaster. Having finished the novels, I went on to books of poetry and philosophy. I devoured them all without discrimination and without criticism, like a thirsty man before a fountain of clear, cold water. Interested as I was in reading, my thoughts also strayed towards writing. I deliberated over this for a considerable time without doing anything about it. I thought of the kind of book I was going to write, about the characters in it and about the names of people and places. But it never struck me that it had to have a date-a place in the time span-for I was, as yet, ignorant of history. I knew a few stories from Indian history through one of the books prescribed for the

fifth class, but these stories were not connected in my mind to any period. My story had therefore to be timeless and it would have a moral.

Having got thus far, I acquired a large notebook of about two hundred pages. I did not want anyone to know that I was writing a novel. It was to be a closely guarded secret between myself and the notebook. That books were written to be published and read by a large number of people did not strike me as being very relevant at that time. I was going to confide my innermost thoughts and feelings in the form of a story and it had to be highly confidential. The writing had to be done without anyone else being aware of it, and this, in the conditions in which we lived, was an extremely difficult thing to achieve.

I would pretend that I was doing my homework while writing my book. My brother complained that I was taking longer and longer to complete the homework and that I was probably getting dull. I ignored these remarks and persisted. I must have composed the title about twenty times over and decomposed it again before I was satisfied with the final result. Similarly, the first sentence was written and rewritten with minor variations. Fortunately, I had taken the precaution of writing them on my slate, and only when I was satisfied did I copy them in a neat, laborious handwriting on to the notebook. After a week of agony and heart-searching, I wrote the following:

'The Story of Kamalapuri'

The first sentence was quite conventional and according to the Tamil literary traditions of the time. 'Once upon a time, there lived a young and beautiful princess on the island of Kamalapuri'.

The questions of hiding my notebook from the prying eyes of others were a problem. I had no desk in which to lock my books, and they were usually piled on a wooden bench in the room in which the beds were stored. Anyone, brother or sister, could walk into the room and come across it. But there was no easy alternative. While I placed my other books in the usual place, I pushed my *magnum* opus under the mattresses that were stored neatly in a pile, in the hope that no one would discover it.

The story made slow and painful progress. The princess was really a prisoner of her wicked uncle who had usurped the throne when her father died. He kept her on the island like a bird in a gilded cage and without the knowledge that she was the true heiress. She was given every freedom except to leave the island. And no one was allowed to visit her except those who lived on the island and who were all in her uncle's pay. But before a wandering prince in search of fame and fortune could discover the truth, kill the wicked uncle, restore the princess to the throne and finally marry her and live happily ever afterwards, my notebook was discovered by my brother.

Evidently, the servant who was spreading the beds for the night had moved my notebook inadvertently and it had fallen to the floor, where my brother found it. His first

reaction was the natural one. 'Mother, we have a budding author in the family!' and he started reading it out aloud.

I was angry, ashamed and miserable. 'Give me back my notebook,' I cried with tears in my eyes.

But he only laughed and went on reading. I snatched the notebook from his hands and was about to tear it up when my mother got hold of me. 'Your brother didn't mean any harm,' she said. 'You can read it to me yourself when you have completed it. Don't tear it up.'

But I could not continue with the book after that. As far as I was concerned, the romance was over. The princess remained unrescued and the wicked uncle continued to rule over the country. My effort at writing came to an abrupt end.

After I had studied English for about two years the teacher thought I was ready to be admitted to the high school in a class suitable for my age. In those days there were practically no hostels and, in any case, I was considered too delicate to be left without someone to look after me. My brother was now twenty-four and he had returned to the village at the end of his high school education. Fortunately, my aunt, mother's sister, had a house in Coimbatore left to her by her husband, and it was decided that I should live in that house and go to school. My aunt would come and look after me with a servant to manage the cooking, shopping, etc.

Ever since I started to learn English, I had known that I would have to go to school in Coimbatore. It had never struck me to question that decision. I was not trained to question things, but merely to accept them as they were. Coimbatore was only twenty miles away. My father would be coming at least once a month and I would spend the holidays in the village. And my aunt would be there to look after me. Yet I was miserable. My whole world was circumscribed within the limits of the village. The occasional forays into the outer world were excursions into the unknown. I was glad to return to the safety and security of my own world. To leave such a world was a great sorrow, to leave all my friends and my old haunts behind. I wondered if they would still be the same when I came back. I remember thinking that even the trees would have grown taller by the time I returned (it never struck me that I too would grow taller or change). I remember breaking the branches of a tree and thinking to myself, 'at least this stump will remain a stump until I come back.' I went round the village looking at things, trying to memorize them, to fix them in my heart so that at least in my memory they would remain constant, without change. I hid little useless objects in various unlikely corners in the hope that they would still be there when I came back. If these remained undisturbed in my absence, it was a source of elation. My mother was my only informant on these matters and when I asked her once about an old note book, she replied without understanding, 'It must have been thrown away when we did the annual cleaning a few months ago.' 'How callous could people be?

But I was even more anxious about the future. Mr Iyengar had given a glowing account of high school life, but he had also made it clear that boys from villages were often the victims of practical jokes by the sophisticated town boys. How would I fare in the new situation? As I slowly accepted the inevitability of change from village to town life, and as the day of departure neared, this worried me all the more. I was obviously not adventurous, at least over physical matters. I did not relish the idea of the strange and the unknown. I looked forward to my departure as unenthusiastically as a condemned prisoner contemplates the gallows.

In the days of my religious fervour prayer came to me naturally. I had already learnt that the highest form of prayer was worship as an end in itself and not as a means to an end. But I knew that most people asked god for mundane things, favours in which he could not possibly be interested. There was the popular saying, 'Turn to god in moments of trouble and he will show you the way'. And the Awkward Uncle would add, 'When once the trouble is over, you can afford to forget him.' I too could not resist the temptation of asking god for favours that I considered long overdue, even though my earlier faith had gone. I still found myself turning to him more or less unconsciously in moments of trouble, and as the strain of having to leave the village grew, I attempted to pray even while remembering E.V.R. saying, 'It is difficult to go through life without god, but it is brave.' I tried to be brave, but found it impossible. On the other hand, I could not pray without misgivings. Further, I did not know what to pray for. Should I ask god not to send me to Coimbatore? That was not exactly what I wanted. Had I greater clarity, I would probably have prayed for the courage to face Coimbatore and all its suspected problems. But my ultimate prayer had neither conviction nor a specific object and went something like this: 'Oh, god! (if there is a god!) Please help me (if you have the power to help) and I shall thank you wholeheartedly (if only you can make me believe).'

An auspicious day was chosen for my departure and during the last few days, everything naturally revolved round me. My mother made favourite dishes, almost everybody talked about the promised high school career, friends came to say good-bye, the few clothes I had were put together and I was assured I would have new ones as soon as I got to Coimbatore. I hoped that these would be suitable to my status as a high school student. My aunt and the servant had already left to get the house ready for my arrival.

On the morning of my departure, a few of the uncles came to see me off. The horse cart was got ready and I touched grandfather's feet to say good-bye to him. I had always thought of him as an eternal fixture in the house. Little did I realize that I would not see him alive again. He was now eighty-five, very frail and totally blind. But he got to his feet, shuffled slowly to the room where his safe was kept, opened it, took out a currency note and asked me, 'What is it?'

'A hundred- rupee note grandfather,' I replied.

'It is too much,' he said and put it back. He got out a ten-rupee note and handed it to me. 'I want you to be a four-sleeved lawyer when you grow up,' he blessed me.

'Grandfather is careful with money as usual,' the family members sniggered, and we set off.

8

For as long as I had known him, grandfather had intended to spend some money on charity. 'God has been good to me,' he would say to whoever cared to listen. 'My children are well off in life. So why shouldn't I give away something to a highly deserving charity?'

But grandmother, who knew, was highly sceptical of his intentions. 'He has never given anything away in his life and I don't think he will start now,' she said.

If one of the fifteen uncles happened to be listening, he would say, 'Yes, you can certainly afford to do it.'

'The only question is, which charity?' grandfather would ask. 'Or even more important, to whom? It is difficult to give to a charity without benefiting someone else at the same time.'

Education, medical relief, building a *choultry*, building a new *gopuram* to our temple, was all suggested to him at various times by different people. But he had objections to each suggestion on the ground that it might help someone undeserving of his munificence! School teachers would merely hoodwink him and spend the money on something else; so education was out. He had lived without taking any medicine in his whole life, and why should other people not do the same? So medical relief could not be considered. Temple priests attracted his wrath more than anyone else, so the temple had to get on without a new *gopuram*. A *choultry* was a place where a whole lot of lazy, good-for-nothing people got together to gossip and perhaps smoke opium! Innocent and unsuspecting people having heard of his intention, approached grandfather, hoping that perhaps they might be the lucky ones to get a large donation out of him for some worthy cause. But they soon learnt how unworthy their causes were, how selfish they were in approaching him and how dull to imagine him a fool!

But as grandfather became increasingly feeble and as the end undeniably approached, my father took the matter in hand. He told the old gentleman that he should make up his mind soon, and that any charity was better than no charity. Grandfather confessed, 'I have never hesitated to take decisions in my life; but this decision I find impossible. You had better do something after I am gone.'

One of the things that were obligatory for a prosperous Hindu was *godhan*, the gift of a cow to a holy Brahmin before his final departure from this world. It was supposed to ensure smooth passage into heaven for the donor and grandfather was persuaded somewhat reluctantly to perform at least this charity. On the day of the ceremony, when all the preliminaries were completed, he wanted to know how much milk the cow was likely to give. On being told, he said, 'That is too much. I don't need that much milk, neither does this Brahmin. Couldn't you find something a little less expensive?'

When, finally, he agreed to give away the cow, instead of meekly receiving the blessing from the Brahmin, he admonished him. 'Look after the cow properly, swami. Don't forget that cow has to take care of you in this world and me in the next.'

When he died, there was a large amount of money in the safe as well as a note asking my father to spend it on charity, 'which I have been unable to do.'

9

Our house in Coimbatore was in Raja Street, in the old part of the town. In those days it was largely a residential area. I arrived three days before school was due to reopen and the time was made use of to get some new clothes. My mother had packed all the old dhotis and shirts neatly into a small steel trunk. The shirts were all round-necked with half sleeves. My brother, who knew the kind of clothes that boys in the high school wore, did not consider them suitable and ordered half a dozen shirts with open neck and collar, and two jackets.

Those shirts were known as 'Prince of Wales' shirts. The Prince represented everything that was modern and fashionable. There were tailors and hair-dressing saloons named after him. In many shops, his picture adorned walls along with those of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, and Saraswathi, the goddess of wisdom. But his popularity was on the wane even then, and his picture in shops was soon to be replaced by that of Jawaharlal Nehru.

I also had my hair cropped in the European style. As a child, my hair was kept long and my sister plaited it as if I were a girl. Later, it was cut short, but of equal length both at the front and the back, and a little half-moon was shaved off in the front. This was the fashion with all the village boys. It had been one of my ambitions even when in the village to modernize my hair style, but my temple-going uncles persuaded me not to, saying it was against the tenets of our tradition and would make me look like one of the untouchable servants employed by Europeans. Coming to Coimbatore gave me a chance to get away from this tradition.

The third thing we did was to buy a Blackbird fountain pen. It cost the princely sum of three and a half rupees and was one of my prized possessions for some years. In the village I had used only pencils which often broke and had to be sharpened frequently. As soon as we got home with the pen I filled it with ink and practiced writing with it. The smooth flow of ink seemed to improve even my handwriting, which was very poor, and I was immensely

pleased. Later, when I passed my examination-not brilliantly, but with reasonable success-my brother would say that it was because the pen he bought me was 'lucky'. If only he had had a pen as 'lucky', he too would have passed the S.S.L.C. public examination! In our village, personal achievement was very often attributed to 'luck', or to the stars, or to a chance occurrence such as having a 'lucky' fountain pen. Similarly, misfortunes, or even deliberate carelessness were blamed on 'fate', or god's will.

Thus equipped with collared shirts, a cropped head and a fountain pen in my pocket, my brother felt I was more or less ready to face the hazards of high school life in the town. I hoped the hazards would not be too many.

My brother had been to the London Mission High School. It was one of the oldest in Coimbatore, having been in existence for more than fifty years. It also had-I learnt later -the best football team among the various high schools in the district. But my brother did not want me to go there because, he said, all the teachers he knew were leaving and joining the newly-started Municipal High school and that it would thus be easy to get admission there.

The school reopened after the summer holidays for admissions on the third of June and classes were to commence on the fifth. My brother and I went to the school on the morning of the third and, thanks to his acquaintance with the headmaster; we were immediately given an interview. I must have been very nervous for I do not remember anything of the details of that meeting. I was given a test that afternoon in English and mathematics. Fortunately, I had to answer questions on paper and not orally and I was alone in a room with no one to distract me. I must have answered them reasonably well, for I was told the next morning that I would be admitted to the third form which was supposed right for my age. The admission fees and other dues were paid and I was placed in the 'B' division.

My brother introduced me to the teacher who would be in charge of that division for a whole year. Mr Padmanabha Iyer was a tall man with very thick glasses and an impressive figure. His hands were covered with chalk dust and his coat was somewhat frayed, but he had a dignity that was unmistakable. I was to learn later that though we had different teachers for different subjects, the class teacher was responsible for our overall progress, discipline, etc, and we had to go to him with our problems and difficulties. He promised my brother to look after me and suggested that I should go to the drawing master and buy the necessary books and notebooks. The drawing master was probably the most poorly paid individual in the school, for he was selling all the students' requirements so as to augment his income.

Then there was the problem of my lunch. We had one hour's recess, but our house was about a mile from the school and it would be difficult to go home and return after lunch within that time. There was no lunch room or any such facility in the school, so my brother arranged for my lunch to be brought by the servant to a coffee club nearby, where I would

be allowed to eat in a private room. When all these arrangements were complete and brother was ready to leave, he said, 'Well, I have done all I can. From now on, whether you study or spend your time grazing donkeys is your own responsibility.'

10

I was rather disappointed with the school, I had looked forward to huge buildings, long corridors and winding staircases, thanks to the description Mr. Krishnaswamy Iyengar had given me. In the Municipal High School, however, the higher classes were held in a rented building while the lower classes were conducted in a large shed with walls of bamboo matting and a tiled roof. The rooms for different classes were also partitioned with matting and the noises from one class could easily be heard in the others. Holes had been made in the partitions by a previous generation of pupils so that we could watch what was happening in the next class when the teacher's back was turned. It seemed hardly better than the village elementary school. Nor did we have any playing fields. Drill was conducted in the grounds of the local YMCA and the football team was just being formed!

On the first day I took all my books and notebooks to the school. They were rather heavy, but as I did not yet know which subject would be taught when, I wanted to be on the safe side. One of the boys in the class looked at me and laughed. 'What are you carrying that load of books for?' he asked. 'Are you coming from the drawing master's house?'

'Yes', I lied in order to hide my ignorance.

Most of the boys in the class had been promoted from the second form and knew each other well. They had already made their friendships and their groups. The routine of the class room, the idiosyncrasies of the various teachers, and little tricks needed to avoid punishment were all known to them. They knew when to take advantage of the teachers and when to behave themselves, and they had nicknames for the teachers. A few other new students and I were ignorant of these things, and we were treated like interlopers by the others. Then, there were the boys who had failed in their examinations the previous year. They tended to look down on all the others and adopted a somewhat superior attitude. They seemed undaunted by their failure, attributing it to the vindictiveness of teachers. They couldn't care either way, they said, for they were like true Karma Yogis, following the path of duty and supremely indifferent to be ultimate result.

It was inevitable that the new boys should make friends with each other, tend to sit together in the class and be the butt of jokes by others whose secret language we did not yet know. But there was no ragging or ill-treatment of the new boys and, after some time, these differences tended to disappear. Class loyalty, at least 'B' division loyalty, was established, thanks to the 'Mahatma'.

Our class teacher Mr. Padmanabha Iyer was known as the 'Mahatma' among the boys as he was a follower of Mahatma Gandhi and was never known to have used a harsh word or the cane against anyone. I was completely ignorant of Indian politics and did not understand the implications of the title until sometime later. He always wore khaddar and praised Gandhiji whenever he had an opportunity to do so in the class room. Though Gandhiji's policies were disliked by the school authorities, the teacher was allowed to continue, first because he kept within the rules and secondly because he was good in his work.

The bell rang at 10 a.m. and the boys who had been scattered around in the room sat at their desks. Mr. Padmanabha Iyer walked in and we all stood up. He first marked our attendance in the register and then gazed at us for a few seconds in silence while we fidgeted. Next he said, 'You are all in the "B" division because you were not considered good enough to be assigned to "A", which is supposed to contain all the best brains in the third form. I hope you will disprove it. Of course, I can't expect Kalyanaswamy or Raghavan (two boys detained the previous year) to do it. But perhaps, some of the others might have a little hidden talent which I shall try to unearth.'

He paused for this to sink in, and then continued. 'I have been made the class teacher of "B" division because I have a reputation for getting the best out of mediocre minds. If you co-operate with me, you will do well. If you don't, I will have the misfortune of having to put up with you for another year, possibly two. Is that understood?'

I did not know if the question was merely rhetorical or whether we were supposed to respond, but everyone kept quiet. So did I.

'How far can you support a man climbing a coconut tree?' he asked suddenly and waited. None of us ventured an answer. Later, I learnt that this was one of his mannerisms, whenever he wanted to say something important, to ask a question and pause for an answer.

The teacher repeated the question once more for it to sink into our unreceptive heads and then answered it himself. 'Only as far as your hand can reach, after that, he has to do the climbing himself. No one can help him.' He paused again and then continued. 'You are all climbing your coconut trees. Teachers, parents and others can help you only up to a point. But after that, you have to make the effort. You alone can climb your coconut tree.'

'Same speech as last year, word for word,' muttered Kalyanaswamy under his breath.

'If you have got all that into your heads, we can perhaps start on the first lesson.' Then he gave us our timetable which indicated the subjects for each day-Monday to Friday. And he went on to teach us the intricacies of English grammar. 'English grammar is just like this world,' he said by way of introduction. 'We have some laws that we are expected to follow, but there are exceptions like Mahatma Gandhi who breaks the laws which he considers

wrong. Similarly, there are exceptions in English grammar also. Therefore, it is not only important to learn the rules; it is even more important to learn the exceptions.' He breathed life even into such a dry subject as English grammar.

The teachers were all more formally dressed than they are today. Usually closed coats, buttoned up to the neck, turbans, and dhotis tied in the orthodox manner. Some of them wore socks and shoes. We thought nothing of exposed suspenders in blue or red showing through the thin muslin of the dhotis. The drawing master wore a cap and the boys referred to him as 'Jintan' because he looked exactly like a picture we used to see on the Jintan bottles imported from Japan. Many of the teachers for the higher classes wore suits.

But the Tamil pundit was the butt of most of our jokes. The study of English and mastery of it was considered very important, for it was the language of the rulers and finding employment was largely dependent on knowledge of English. It conferred modernity and sophistication. Tamil was old-fashioned and learning it was of no particular advantage. Anxious parents would tell their children, 'You must improve your English.' So we studied Tamil as a boring duty and because it was included as one of the subjects for the examination.

Our Tamil pundit was elderly and easy-going. He did not know how to maintain discipline and he was lenient to a fault. His knowledge of English was very poor but he had a disastrous habit of lapsing into that language on those rare occasions when he was really annoyed. Once, when he was particularly angry with Kalyanaswamy, he asked him to get out of the class. But Kalyanaswamy replied coolly, 'Sir, I have paid my school fees to attend this class. It is not fair to ask me to get out'. And he sat where he was. The pundit stood up, pointed his finger at the culprit, and shouted in English, 'If you don't get out of this class, I will ask the headmaster to get out!'

The Tamil pundit was always very pleased if the class asked him to explain an English word or phrase. We took advantage of this asking him the meanings of phrases we knew would confuse him. Once, we had just learnt the expression 'Kicked the bucket' and I remember Kalyanaswamy asking him in all seriousness. 'Sir, I want to know the meaning of the expression "kicked the bucket".'

'Why don't you ask your English teacher?'

'I am afraid to ask him, sir, he is no strict.'

Nothing could have pleased the pundit more. He thought for a little while and explained. 'You play football, don't you?'

'Yes sir.'

'Well, if instead of a football you were foolish enough to use a bucket, it would be kicking the bucket.'

The laughter in the class was lost on the teacher. 'It is simply a matter of logic and reasoning,' he explained.

While the teachers were all dignified in dress and behaviour, the same could not be said of the boys. They were not smart, as I had imagined them to be from the description given to me by my headmaster in the village. Most wore collarless shirts and dhotis and only a few had sandals. Their pockets were generally smudged with ink from leaking fountain pens. Quite a few had long hair tied into a knot at the back and almost all had religious marks on their foreheads. To me, the ultimate in civilization and modernism consisted of a cropped head, an open-necked shirt and a forehead without a mark.

Most of the boys had small brass tiffin-carriers in which they brought their lunch. During the interval, they also went to the coffee club where I had my lunch. But, since they had to order something there, they usually asked for a *vadai* and *sambar*, which used to cost half an anna. They would keep the *vadai* till the end but add the *sambar* to the plain rice they had brought and, when it was finished, ask for more *sambar*. However, the owner of the coffee club was equal to the occasion. Each time a ladleful of *sambar* was taken out of the pot, he added a ladleful of hot water to it so that, as the lunch hour wore on, the *sambar* became more and more watery. But the boys managed a reasonably satisfactory lunch for the cost of half an anna. That a servant brought mine every day in a big carrier and I had lentils and vegetables and curds made me important in the eyes of the boys. As I got to know them I shared my lunch with one or two each day.

In the village, economic affluence did not confer any special social advantage. Status was determined largely by caste considerations. The school teacher and the temple priest, being brahmins, were always treated with respect by my father and addressed in the plural. But in my new school I found that wealth had its own subtle influence, and caste, except in purely personal matters, did not play an important part. Because of my special lunch, the other boys showed me a consideration I might not otherwise have received. The teachers too noticed this and asked about the family, where I lived, and so on. The fact that my father had set up an establishment purely to facilitate my education was also noticed by all. I think these factors enabled me to overcome my feelings of anxiety, to enjoy school life and make friends among the boys.

On the other hand, any show of condescension by the wealthy was quickly resented. While a voluntary consideration was shown towards wealth, one was not expected to demand it. The boys were fiercely democratic in some ways and soon exhibited their antagonism towards anyone who tried to impress them. In another case, a wealthy boy who wore only silk shirts and came to school in a motor car was proud and arrogant and he soon became unpopular. Not being very bright himself, he would tell the boys who got good marks, 'When you have passed your examination in the first class, come and see me; I will give you a clerk's job.' He was immediately nicknamed 'Nizam', after the ruler who was reputed to be the wealthiest man in the world at that time. The boys pulled his leg so much

that 'Nizam' was soon isolated, and, having failed in the first year, he left the school in disgust.

The Municipal High School had no traditions to speak of, being only three years old. A school's reputation among the boys was based largely on the football heroes it had produced in the past and on the number of victories it had won over its rivals. But our football team was still being formed and trained. We had as yet no playing fields of our own and the ground belonging to the YMCA was used for whatever games we played. Other schools had imposing buildings, their own grounds for games and sports as well as a tradition. Other boys referred to our school as the 'dustbin' high school'- a dual reference both to the state of our buildings and to the other function of the municipality, that of cleaning the streets. We smarted under such references, but humiliation made us more determined to perform well.

It was surprising how quickly new loyalties were created in place of old ones. In the atmosphere of the classroom, my inner world was encompassed by the 'B' division and the outer world by the school. The loyalties of the village went into the back ground and stayed there, particularly as there was no clash between my old and new commitments. My first contact with other schools and consequently my first opportunity to exhibit my loyalties was during the Grieg Memorial Sports meet held once a year for all the educational institutions in the district. There were only five high schools in the town but other schools in the district sent small contingents. In addition, the Police Recruit School as well as the European High School participated. The latter consisted almost entirely of European or Anglo-Indian children and a few wealthy and westernized Indian boys who managed to get into it. Those boys stood out not only in sports but also in their dress. They wore smart uniforms-khaki shorts and shirts with brown shoes and stockings and topis-while we were in rags by comparison. They had their own tent near the sports field and could get tea or coffee or cold drinks while we depended on the vendors plying their trade. They cheered their athletes with confidence and restraint while we tended to be noisy. Though pretending to ignore them, we envied them and booed them if we got a chance. In return, they treated us with condescension or even contempt. But generally, we kept out of each other's way.

Our school did not win many trophies in that first year though it did quite well in subsequent years. Boys who were good in sports were generally poor in their studies and there was a certain amount of rivalry between schools in luring such boys with promises of easy promotions. The competition was particularly intense between our school and the London Mission High School, because many of our teachers had left that school when ours was started. Our games master was a keen sportsman but did not believe in taking boys from other schools. Instead, he started intensive coaching sessions for a handful of boys who showed promise. Every evening, he made them run and jump or play football and was able within the short space of a year to create a competent football team. The day our team beat the London Mission High School was a great day in the history of our school. We went

in a procession to our headmaster's house and were given a holiday. The fact that we lost in the finals to the Government Arts College was a matter of minor importance.

I remember taking one of my uncles who had come to Coimbatore on some business to watch a football match once. It was an exciting match which ultimately ended in a draw, two goals having been scored by either side. There were shouts and counter-shouts and cheers throughout the match from the large crowd present. The uncle watched with grim determination, without making a single comment. At the end, when I asked him how he had enjoyed it, he said, 'I can understand twenty-two donkeys kicking a ball about because they have nothing better to do. But I cannot understand thousands of donkeys watching it and shouting hoarse for an hour.' It showed me the gulf that existed between the traditional values of the village and the new values I was fast acquiring.

The modest success that our school achieved in sports and games did not extend to the education field. In spite of the best efforts of the teachers, the results in the S.S.L.C. public examination were generally poor, mainly because not only the Municipal chairman, but all the councilors, took a hand in the admissions of students as well as in promotions from one class to another. The attitude of many parents seemed to be, 'How can my son fail in the Municipal High School when I am a friend or relation of a councilor?' The result was that most of the boys managed to reach the sixth form. There they faced the formidable barrier of the public examination for which they were ill-prepared.

My own experience will perhaps illustrate the point. The year after I joined college in Madras, I went back to the school to have a young cousin admitted. The boy's father wanted him to be admitted in the third form because I had started in that class. But after giving him a test, the headmaster said that he was not fit for the third form and that even in the second he would find it difficult unless he worked hard. While we were discussing the issue, the chairman of the municipality, who was a friend of my family, happened to drop in.

'Hello! What are you doing here?' he asked me.

When I explained the reason for my visit and told him who the boy was, his response was amazing. 'Why don't you admit him in the fourth form and have some private tuition so that he can make up for any deficiencies?' he asked. It was all I could do to persuade the chairman to allow the boy be admitted into the third form!

While the teachers made every effort to teach us all the subjects according to the syllabus so that we could pass the examination without any difficulty, there was no opportunity for us to improve our general knowledge. There was no library to speak of and whatever books were available were intended as reference books for the staff than to improve the knowledge of the students. There were no galleries or museums which we could visit, no excursions to places of historic, archaeological or scientific interest. No lectures on current topics were organized in order to expand our knowledge of the outside world. The only places we visited were the Agricultural College and the Forest College which

were both situated about three miles away from the town. There we could see some skeletons of animals, stuffed birds and forest produce of various kinds. Whenever we felt like it, a group of us would walk all the way there and back just to look at these seemingly unusual exhibits.

During my first year in the third form, the medium of instruction was Tamil. But from the fourth form onwards, everything was taught in English. While this helped us to improve our knowledge of that language, it was difficult at first to follow our teachers. The subjects also seemed somewhat strange in a foreign language. This was particularly so with science subjects, not only because of the language problem but also because most of us were unfamiliar with the products of science. The scientific knowledge that we acquired in school had no relation to the realities of our existence. Even the simple experiments that the teachers performed conveyed no meaning and we watched them with a somewhat indifferent curiosity. Science was something to be learnt in order to pass an examination, and then mercifully forgotten.

For example, I was inevitably taught in physics that 'heat expands bodies.' I could not make head or tail of this statement. To me, 'heat' meant the open fire in the kitchen and 'bodies' referred to human bodies. I could not see how heat could expand bodies without burning them. The experiments with a copper rod that the teacher conducted did not carry much conviction. While I learnt it, I was not sure if I believed in it, certainly not with the same passion with which I had once believed in the hereafter. It remained 'dead' knowledge till I went to my village during the subsequent holidays.

When I got there, an argument was going on between my father and the village coppersmith about the size of a large, cylindrical drum he had made for heating water in our bathroom. The instructions were that the drum should be as large as possible but should be capable of going through the doorway of the bathroom. Accordingly, the drum was made so that its diameter was a fraction of an inch smaller than the width of the doorway, and duly installed. But, for some reason, the drum had been brought out afterwards, left in the hot sun for a few days and now it would not go in. So my father shouted at the coppersmith and he, poor man, pleaded that he had made it the right size that the drum had in fact 'gone in' earlier and if something had happened afterwards, it was not his fault. There seemed to be no end to the discussion since there was apparently no solution to the problem short of remaking the drum or knocking the doorway.

Listening to them both and seeing the drum waiting in the hot sun for its fate to be decided, I remembered that 'heat expands bodies'. So I suggested that the drum should be moved to the shade, filled with cold water for some time and then, taken in. I was considered foolish for making such a preposterous suggestion but since there was no other alternative, it was carried out. When after a few hours the drum was taken into the bathroom without any difficulty, I felt all the elation of an original discoverer. I did not go round the village shouting 'Eureka!' only because I would have been considered mad if I had

gone so. But from that day onwards, I knew that science was not some abstruse knowledge but closely related to the problems of everyday life. My interest in science, a passion for knowledge and the objective method of experimentation and deduction can be traced to that fortuitous incident.

Leaving the village and going to a high school had temporarily put a stop to my reading habits. In Karadibavi, I had more time. But going to Coimbatore meant that I was busy during the day and had to do my lessons in the evenings. It left me very little time for reading other books. But after I had been there for about a year, I found that I did not need to devote much time at home to my lessons. Gradually, as my knowledge of English improved, I found myself reading more and more English books. This was encouraged in the family as well as by my teachers, since it was considered desirable to possess a mastery of the language. But there was no one to advise on which books to choose and my reading varied from Edgar Wallace to Addison and Goldsmith.

My efforts at creativity – which had lain dormant since my first attempt at novel writing- blossomed for a brief moment, to be effectively squashed by my English teacher. I had started writing poetry in English and read the verses out to myself. I dared not show them to anyone. After a few months, I wrote a long poem of about a hundred lines on Vasco Da Gama's voyage to India. I had read an account of his sailing in a borrowed book and was greatly moved by his hardships. The poem was not very good but it gave me so much satisfaction that I thought it must be good enough for someone else to read as well. After much hesitation, I took it to my English teacher.

He glanced at it for a minute and shouted at me. 'Why do you waste my time bringing me such rubbish?'

'But sir, I wrote it myself!' I pleaded.

'I can see that!' he cried. 'No one else could have made so many mistakes in grammar and punctuation. It doesn't rhyme and it doesn't scan.' Perhaps he then thought he had been too harsh; he looked at me more benevolently and added: 'Stick to your school books, my boy. And leave such things until you have mastered the art of prosody, which will be, let me see, in your sixth form.'

I left him with tears in my eyes, dejected and with no further interest in literature or in life. The experience stopped me from writing anything else for nearly a decade.

Compared to the kind of life I led in the village, I was somewhat lonely in Coimbatore, particularly in the beginning. In Karadibavi people were always walking in and out of the house and there were many boys of my own age. But in Coimbatore, my aunt and I were the

only people at home, apart from the servant. My father or brother or brother-in-law would pay an occasional visit, but otherwise we were on our own. My school friends lived in different parts of the town and, once I left school, I did not see them. Our neighbours were friendly but they were not like the uncles and cousins in the village and we did not treat them as part of the family. Unlike the village, there were no clear lines of social or caste homogeneity between people living in the same street.

On one side of our house lived an elderly brahmin lady with a widowed daughter. The mother had had her hair shaved, and wore only widow's clothes and had her head covered; but the daughter had long black hair and wore ordinary saris but no jewellery. As widows, they led a quiet retired life on the little money they had. But as two religious-minded widows, my aunt and the mother got on very well and had long discussions on religious topics.

A young brahmin clerk, a distant relation of theirs, would visit them, do odd jobs and help them in various ways. The old lady was full of praise for this young man who did so much for her and her daughter while her wealthier and closer relations were neglecting them when once her husband had died. After we had lived in Raja Street for about two and half years, it was therefore surprising to learn one morning that the young man had eloped with the widowed daughter. He had resigned from his job and the two of them had gone away, no one knew where. It was the greatest possible humiliation and tragedy that could have befallen the mother and she was totally helpless. 'I wish I had had her hair shaved,' she lamented to my aunt. 'Then this would not have happened. But she was so young and had such lovely hair that I let her keep it, against the advice of all my relations. Now everyone will blame me for it.' As expected, her relations instead of helping her to find her daughter or at least sympathizing with her in her loss and 'disgrace' merely criticized and said that they knew something like this would happen sooner or later.

After a few weeks, the mother got a postcard from her daughter giving an address in Madras and asking her to join them. But the poor woman was broken in body and in spirit and died a few months afterwards.

On the other side lived a large family of Naidus, but of a different variety from our caste. The father was a school teacher who had five sons by his first wife and nine daughters by his second. The objectives of the second wife seemed to be to have a son at all costs. Having failed nine times, she succeeded on the tenth occasion. Some of the boys in the area joked about the daughters and said, if only she had another daughter, they could have a women's football team within the family.

In addition to his large family, this neighbour had his widowed sister-in-law and her two sons living with them. In order not to be a burden on her hosts, whose financial resources were very slender, the lady made a living by serving breakfast – iddies and dosais – to the people in the neighbourhood. Having no overheads and doing all the work herself,

she was able to sell them at a cheaper price than the coffee clubs. A number of early morning workers, like *jutka* drivers, patronized her on a regular basis. This was particularly because the eldest son of the school teacher was himself a *jutka* driver and many of his colleagues patronized his aunt's shop as a result.

Venkattamma, the sister-in-law, was a talkative lady who had lost most of her teeth. Betel-nut juice dripped out of her mouth. Her shop was hardly three feet from our front door, as the houses were all in a row and she was always to be seen there making and serving breakfast in the mornings till about 10 a.m., cleaning up in the afternoons and grinding the dough in the evenings. And she would talk all the time to whoever happened to be passing, or even just to herself. Mostly she talked about her sister and her family, who were her only interest outside her two sons. 'Nine daughters!' she would say. 'And one on the way. They are like the nine planets! Everything in the horoscope on your plate! How is she to clothe them, feed them, get jewellery for them, and find husbands and dowries, all on thirty-five rupees a month? All he does is, well you know what he does!' and she would give a sly wink. 'Every summer holiday, it happens without fail. I don't know why they have summer holidays in the first place. And he just smiles at everything and says, "God will provide." It is a good thing I am able to earn something. I help her out though I am only a widow with no support.' I got to know her quite well because I used to sit on the parapet wall on the side of our front steps and watch her and listen to her while she worked.

There was uniformity about the sights and sounds of Raja Street that did not change from day to day. At five forty-five in the mornings we heard the siren from the Kaleeswarar Mills. Though it was more than two miles away, it was audible all over the town, and people started their mornings according to that siren. At about the same time, one heard the *jutkas* iron wheels as they ground against the macadam road, and the noise of the *jutka* drivers as they shouted for customers or at pedestrians to get out of their way. They would ring their bells or rattle their whips against the spokes of the cart wheels, which made a deafening noise.

I normally got up about 6 a.m studied for about an hour while our servant heated the bath water. As I sat near the window and the light, I could see what was going on in the street. That was far more interesting than learning about vulgar fractions or the conjugating of irregular verbs in English. About the time I woke up, the women would come out of their houses, sweep the area in front of their steps, sprinkle water mixed with cow dung and decorate the area with a *kolum*. The more orthodox ladies even put a small idol made of cow dung and some yellow flowers. This mixture of holiness and hygiene existed side by side with a lot of dirt and filth. A ditch ran right along the length of the street under the front steps. The waste water as well as waste products such as used banana leaves found their way into the ditch and one could see the ditch-cleaner, with a long-handled ladle, remove the rubbish from the dark slimy liquid and dump it in a heap in the corner to be carried away by a bullock cart later in the day. The road-sweeper was also at his job by this

time, moving the horse dung, bits of paper and grass and hay with his broom and leaving another heap in another corner. Then, there was the scavenger with his bucket and brush who went from house to house in his discreet manner, nevertheless attracting attention because of the smell. Women would come round selling curds and buttermilk, carrying one pot on their heads and another on their hip. And the procession of women with pots for collecting water from the only well in the street started. For those who could afford it- as in our house—the cowman brought his cow along to milk it in the presence of the servant, so that there was no possibility of adding water.

Next door, Venkattamma took down her shutters, set up her frying pan and the *idly* pan on open fires. The smell of frying *dosais* wafted across the narrow space between where she sat and where I was supposed to be studying. Men of all sorts came, bought their breakfast, sat on the narrow *payal* between her kitchen and the ditch and ate with relish while Venkattamma entertained them with her spicy conversation about the events of the previous day. It was surprising how she fried the *dosais*, served and talked at the same time and kept her customers satisfied. Having finished their breakfast, they threw the leaves in the ditch, rinsed their hands with water from a drum kept at one end of the *payal* and made way for others who were waiting. I longed to eat Venkattamma's *dosais* in preference to my cook's, but two things made it impossible. One was that she wouldn't accept any money from me, and second, my aunt's sense of hygiene would not permit me to eat along with the other customers, standing by the roadside, in front of the ditch.

At 8 a.m I had my bath and breakfast but school did not start till ten and I would watch the people coming and going next door where there was always something happening. The sons of the school teachers set off to work, the girls after eating their fill of *iddlies* and *dosais* got ready for school. The mother, harassed beyond endurance, shouted and cajoled the children; and the master of the house, unperturbed and jovial, patted everyone on the cheek and had a good word for all and sundry. The cycles shop two doors away opened for business and the coppersmith opposite the cycle shop started banging away at the pots and pans he was repairing or making. There was a registry office in front of our house for the registration of documents. The scribes who wrote them, and the vendors who sold the stamp papers on which the documents had to be written, sat under the tamarind tree in front of the office. The people who bought and sold property started arriving at about 8.30 a.m to have the documents ready for registration by the time the officials arrived. My aunt finished her ablutions and prayers and came and told me to get ready for school. I would collect my books and set off.

When I returned from school at about 5 p.m the scene changed completely. The streets were again getting dirty. The tidiness in front of doorsteps had given way to faded flowers and squashed cow dung. Horse manure, bits of straw and paper from the registry office were lying about the road. Women with bundles of grass on their heads walked towards the *jutka* stand and waited. The drivers argued bargained and cracked jokes with

them about the price of grass and finally paid about the same price as they did every day. The school teacher's numerous daughters were plying and quarrelling in front of our house. And Venkattamma was grinding her *idly* dough and shouting at her nieces at the same time. The girls' high school closed and pupils and teachers returned in their bullock carts and *jutkas*. The farmers and the scribes and the vendors were returning after their work was over. Some went into the neighbouring coffee club to eat.

After my coffee, I would wander about the neighbourhood watching the sights which were still new to me, and being fascinated by the vast difference in life between the village and the town. Or I would sit on the little parapet wall above the ditch and watch life go by. Sometimes, one of the children of the school teacher would come and talk to me or Venkattamma would say, 'what a good boy you are! Just look at my nieces creating a racket and making life impossible.' I would sit and dream of the village and create mental pictures of what I wanted to be. To be the best in the 'B' division and for my class teacher to say to the others, 'Here is a shining example of what an ideal student ought to be. You should all follow in his footsteps,' which, in my saner moments, I knew I would never achieve. Or to play football with the 'heroes' of the school, for which I was not physically fit; even to write something which my teacher would approve and compliment, perhaps even read out to the whole class. I found that dreaming was a pleasant and harmless occupation, and certainly less strenuous than attempting to make it a reality. As it grew dark, the lamp-lighter would come round with a long pole to light the street lamps (electric street lighting was installed after I had been in Coimbatore for about two years) and my aunt would shout, 'Come and do your lessons now'. I would go in, study a bit, have supper, and then to bed.

My greatest ambition in those days was to own a bicycle and, like most great ambitions; it was fulfilled after it ceased to be an emotional need. Among the schoolboys, owners of cycles were the aristocracy. Apart from the comfort and convenience of travel, it conferred a status. It was something personal, unlike the horse cart or even the motor car which belonged to the family and which one used on sufferance. The boys who had cycles were very proud of them, spent a long time cleaning them and making the handle bars shine. They would talk with each other about trips and excursions on Sundays and other holidays, about the problems of mending punctures, about fixing a new saddle or a lamp, about how long it took them to go from the school to the playing fields and so on. They became a sort of informal club from which we pedestrians were excluded.

And I did not even know how to ride a cycle! The first thing to do was to remedy this defect. In the cycle shop that was two doors away from our house, one could rent a vehicle for an hour for the price of three annas. After I had been in Coimbatore for about six months, my aunt agreed to my learning to ride on condition that I had someone to see that I didn't fall down and break my limbs. Venkattamma's sons, Krishnan and Balan, came to my rescue. They said they would look after me and see that I didn't come to grief. Balan, who was only nine years old and hardly as tall as the cycle, could still ride it which one leg

between the bars, pedaling away for all he was worth. But Krishnan, older and more responsible, acted as my coach. After about 7 p.m., when the traffic on the road had thinned considerably, Krishnan would put me on the saddle and hold the cycle while I attempted to press the pedals. He ran holding the vehicle and this went on for some days until one day he let go without my knowledge. After a couple of minutes I realized I was riding without any support. The feeling of sailing through the air filled me with a rapture that I had never experienced before.

But my father said I should not have a cycle until I was older and that was that. They were dangerous contraptions and I might fall down or have an accident. But he did permit me to ride a cycle as I had been doing hitherto-after 7 p.m., when there was no traffic and provided I did not go too far from the house. This did not satisfy me. What I wanted was a vehicle on which to go to school, and to show it off to my friends in the 'B' division. This had to wait for three years until I was in the sixth form, by which time the magic had gone out of cycling and it became purely a means of transport.

One of the first things I did after coming to Coimbatore was to see a cinema, known in those days as bioscope. A *jutka* with posters on both side and a small band inside playing loud music would go round the town advertising the film and distributing notices. Those were the days of silent movies in which the heroes performed impossible feats of valour while the heroines wrung their hands helplessly. A man on the floor of the hall shouted the story at the top of his voice as the action proceeded on the screen. In spite of its novelty, I was not very taken with the films and I saw only two during any my four years' stay in Coimbatore. The only thing I remember on the first occasion were a number of Englishmen in the back row in evening dress standing to attention at the end of the performance when 'God Save the King' was played and the rest of the audience walking out in an unconcerned manner. The second occasion was the first Tamil talkie, 'Kalidas'. Needless to say, there were no Englishmen present. But I longed to go to Tamil dramas, which were mainly mythological stories, because of the music and the costumes. Names like Subbiah Bhagavatar, S.G. Kittappa and K.B Sundarambal stand out in my memory from those days.

When I had been in Coimbatore for a year, two things happened which made a big difference to our family. One was the purchase of a motor car. I do not remember the make of the car, but it was a tourer and we could have the hood down when it was cool and had to put the side screens up when it rained. As soon as the car arrived, the entire family took a trip to Sri Rangam temple to offer puja for the car and to ask for Lord Ranganatha's blessings. I was torn between the excitement and the thrill of travelling more than a hundred miles by car or sticking to my principles of not going to a temple. I am afraid the pleasures of travel won the day, but I told myself that I would not worship when I got there. Whenever my father came to Coimbatore, I was allowed to go to school in the car. My classmates—even those who had bicycles—looked at me with envy, but I would rather have arrived on a brand-new cycle.

The second event was even more important. My father started a textile mill in partnership with some friends. There were five textile mills in Coimbatore at that time. During the First World War when there were no imports of cloth from England these mills had made enormous profits. The freedom movement and Mahatma Gandhi's insistence on swadesi and self-reliance on the one hand and the boycott of British goods on the other helped the Indian textile industry in general and the handloom weaver who had been languishing, in particular. As a result, there was an expansion of the spinning mills to cater to the needs of handlooms. Further, the prices of textile machinery had come down sharply in the twenties and a spinning mill of twelve thousand spindles could be started with a capital of about six lakh rupees. Though the mill was a limited company, there were six main partners, each responsible for contributing one lakh in the form of shares. This did not affect the family immediately, but we sensed that when once the mill was started, it was only a matter of time before the family left the village and moved to Coimbatore—a move that was taking place in all societies engaged in industrialization.

The entrepreneurs responsible for starting and running industrial organizations were known as managing agents, and to be known as one became a sort of status symbol. It denoted power, wealth and a certain standing in society. The criticisms about the managing agency system that came to be voiced in the post-Independence era were still a long way off and, at this stage; they stood for progress, particularly in the industrial and commercial field. All this meant that our family had very definitely changed, from being farmers in the village to becoming industrialists in the town.

12

It was also during my first year at Coimbatore that I became interested and to a small extent involved in what may be called public issues. Mahatma Gandhi had started his salt Satyagraha in order to press his demand for independence. Every day there were processions of Congressmen, carrying flags, shouting slogans, facing arrest and lathi charges. There was a feeling of elation in the atmosphere; talk of freedom was to be heard almost everywhere, as if it was round the corner. Those who faced the lathis and went to gaol became martyrs overnight. Section 144 banning meetings and processions had been imposed in most cities, but in spite of that, meetings were held and dispersed by the police, and processions formed only to be disbanded.

In this emotion-charged atmosphere, it was inevitable that students should become involved sooner or later. The occasion was provided by the execution of Bhagat Singh and his colleagues for allegedly terrorist activity. Bhagat Singh had been a great hero in the eyes of all young men and there was a spontaneous response to the call of *hartal* in protest against his execution. The students of all high schools and colleges abstained from classes for the day. The boys of our school, including myself, gathered in the open space in front of

the school building and started shouting slogans such as 'Victory to Bhagat Singh!', 'Victory to Mahatma Gandhi!'. 'Down with the British!' and so on. The teachers stood on the verandah and watched. There were a few policemen on the road outside, ready to take away the ring-leaders if we were to attempt to take out a procession.

After about half an hour of slogan shouting, we got tired and there was a discussion among the senior boys as to what we should do. Some were for quietly dispersing now that we had registered our protest and demonstrated our solidarity with the national movement. But some others wanted to take out a procession. While the leaders were talking and arguing, the boys were gradually leaving and the crowd was getting thinner. To prevent this and to force the issue, the boys who wanted to take out a procession started raising slogans again and urged others to follow them. The moment the procession went outside the school gates; the police rounded up the leaders, put them in a van and took them away. The rest of us scattered and our attempt to register our protest came to an end. We understood later that the boys who were taken were let off about ten miles away from the town and had to find their own way back. No charges were preferred against them.

We also thought that some kind of disciplinary action might be taken by the school authorities at least against the boys who had initiated the whole thing. But the headmaster very wisely decided to ignore the incident. On the other hand, our class teacher Mr. Padmanabha Iyer was in raptures over the courage and patriotism of the boys in walking out of their classes in protest against foreign repression. To hear him talk, one would have imagined that one of the boys of the 'B' division had been responsible for throwing a bomb at the Viceroy. 'If I did not have to support a wife and three children,' he told us somewhat pathetically, 'I would have been on the battlefield of satyagraha resisting the tyranny of a foreign power. I cannot afford the luxury of following my conscience. But if I can inspire at least a few of you to follow in the footsteps of the Mahatma, I will have done my duty.'

At every conceivable opportunity, our teacher talked to us about *ahimsa*, wearing khaddar, about spinning and about boycotting British goods. I listened to him spellbound, for there was sincerity in what he said and only the fear of losing his job prevented him from participating in the salt Satyagraha movement. His very helplessness was eloquent in converting me to be sympathetic towards the national movement. The men and women who went to gaol, who picketed foreign cloth shops and liquor shops, even those who just wore khaddar were people who proclaimed their faith and, in my eyes, were martyrs in the cause of freedom.

Most of the other boys had been moved momentarily, affected by sentiment and a temporary feeling of outrage at the execution of Bhagat Singh. After a few days, they forgot all about it and the national movement was something with which they were vaguely in sympathy, but no more. In my case, it seemed to fill a vacuum that had been created after the loss of religious fervour. From then on, I only wore khaddar, became a vocal supporter

of the civil disobedience movement and refused to let off fireworks during Deepavali. I had so far not bothered to read newspapers but now I bought the nationalist papers and read them avidly. I followed the progress of the movement with the same eagerness with which others followed a serial novel in their favourite magazine. As the gaols overflowed with Congress volunteers, my heart swelled with pride. Perhaps, had I been older-I was only thirteen at that time-I might have joined the movement too and gone to gaol. As it was, I had neither the courage nor the will power to take any active part. But the very fact that I was not physically involved meant that my emotional involvement was all the greater.

The release of the leaders, the signing of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, Mahatma Gandhi's trip to the Round Table Conference, the appointment of Lord Willington as the Viceroy of India and the severe repressive measures that were taken to crush the movement are matters of history. But I followed these events with the same eagerness with which other boys were following the fortunes of their football teams-film stars not being known to us in those days.

My family was completely non-political. They took the view that governments did not matter if agriculture thrived and business was prosperous, that officials had to be propitiated and so long as one did not come into conflict with them, it was all right. Some of my father's friends and acquaintances belonged to the Justice Party which was in power in Madras Presidency at that time. But even with them, he kept his distance. My patriotic enthusiasm was not taken seriously by anyone and the general attitude was that I would get over it in the same way as I had got over my religious fervour a few years ago.

But when I became critical in my attitude towards the other members of the family for their indifference to the national movement, they teased me and pricked the bubble of my self-esteem. 'If you are so patriotic as to wear khaddar', they would ask, 'why do you ride in a motor car which is imported? Why do you use a Blackbird fountain pen instead of a quill as grandfather did? Why are you hankering after a bicycle which is imported?' I had no answer to these questions, though I considered them most unfair. Jawaharlal Nehru was often referred to in glowing terms by speakers. They called him 'jewel of India' or 'embodiment of sacrifice'. My family started calling me by expressions, much to my embarrassment and chagrin.

Another aspect of Indian politics with which I became acquainted about this time was what might be called the 'philosophy' of the Justice Party. It was a regional party confined mainly to the Madras Presidency of those days-in particular to Tamil Nadu and Andhra. The reason for its regionalism was that it was a 'non - brahmin' party opposed to the monopoly of brahmins in the services and in government. The party was composed mainly of agriculturists and a few professionals of the non-brahmin communities. It was the party in power in Madras at that time and wielded a certain amount of influence in official circles, and, as my family was related to or was on friendly terms with some of its members, I became familiar with its principles and policies, and developed sympathy towards its

objectives. In school, out of a total of about thirty teachers, twenty-five were brahmins. Rightly or wrongly, there was a feeling that Brahmin teachers favoured Brahmin boys and Brahmin officials liked to have Brahmin subordinates. If you employed a Brahmin clerk in your business, he could go and get things done more easily in any of the government offices because everyone there tried to help him. But I also realized the inherent limitations of the approach of the Justice Party. When the whole nation was agitating for freedom from foreign domination, the attitude of the Justice Party seemed irrelevant. It was like asking a man whose beard was on fire, to light your cigarette with it.

I also found that there was an element of hypocrisy in the approach of the leaders of the Justice Party. While they were closely associated with E.V.R politically and socially, most of them faithfully followed all the rituals and customs associated with their family functions. When the daughter of one of the leaders of the party got married, the priests were consulted, horoscopes were matched, an auspicious time was chosen and the wedding celebrated with all due ceremony to the chanting of mantras and the holy fire. But a few hours later, E.V.R turned up, talked about the tyranny of the Brahmins to such of the guests who were still there, made the bride and bridegroom exchange garlands, presented them with a set of his books and departed. This was rather like an important guest we once had. He was supposed to be on a very strict diet and things had been prepared specially. But after he had had his special food, he announced, 'Now that I have had my diet, I will have some of the other things.'

Another aspect that was perhaps completely ignored by the Justice Party was that according to the ethics of the caste system, to help members of one's community has been generally considered a social virtue in India. A man who had done well for himself, but does not help members of his community to come up was considered selfish. The loyalties and obligations of traditional society demand that in economic matters as in everything else, he should help members of his own caste in preference to others. These obligations do not cease to exist because a person becomes a member of a government department or principal of a college. Under these circumstances, if people were selected solely on merit, the backward communities would never have a chance; on the other hand, if they were given certain concessions on the basis of caste – as has happened hitherto – then there is a desire to emphasize and exploit caste differences for personal benefit. Caste differences are thus exaggerated rather than eliminated. The only solution to this dilemma was the complete elimination of the caste system by a consistent propagation of inter-caste marriages between higher and lower castes. Though E.V.R. advocated it, the Justice Party was not willing to follow that advice.

Gandhiji spoke fervently about the abolition of untouchability and the uplift of the harijians, but he was silent on the elimination of the caste system. I was somewhat disappointed about this but Congressmen explained it away by saying that when once

political freedom was won, social reforms could be brought about easily and smoothly. I accepted this somewhat sceptically.

The development of these ideas-both with regard to Gandhism and the Justice Party-was a slow process stretching over almost the entire period of my stay in Coimbatore. It was the result of a broadening of my horizons through reading, listening to the discussions of other people and growing up. It may be that some of my rationalizations with regard to both these aspects came from a later date, but I had absorbed their basic tenets during my school years. My respect for truth and non-violence was total. It was an emotional and spiritual commitment, perhaps in response to an inner need.

It may be asked how I reconciled my atheistic principles with those of Gandhism, for Gandhiji's creed was essentially based on a belief in god. My answer is that the human mind is quite capable of holding contradictory beliefs simultaneously, particularly at the age of thirteen or fourteen. Further, I was dimly conscious of the fact that one could believe in an ethical philosophy which appeals to one's sense of fairness and justice without necessarily contributing to its beliefs.

I remember at a much later date telling a leading Gandhian that I believed in the brotherhood of man but not in the fatherhood of god. He retorted, 'I cannot say whether your philosophy is right, but you have got your biology hopelessly mixed up'.

13

The new building for our school was completed when I was in the fourth form and the opening ceremony was performed by the minister for education in the government of Madras. I was one of the seven boys chosen to welcome him. All the seven of us were dressed alike, a novelty in those days. As soon as the minister arrived, the chairman of the municipality received him and took him to the dais. Immediately, each of us came forward, recited a poem in English which ended, 'My name is letter W', and then, 'My name is letter E' and held up a placard with that letter. When all the seven of us had completed our recitation, we made the word 'WELCOME'. Weeks before the function were due to take place, we had to get the poems by heart and have rehearsals. This was my first public appearance at an important occasion and I worried for days as to how I would fare. In those days, I was unduly anxious over such minor problems and it took many years of sustained effort on my part to overcome it. In this respect, I was like my father while my grandfather was the very opposite. When he faced a serious problem, he would say, 'Is there anything we can do about it? If so, let us do it; if not let us forget it till such time as we can do something,' and within five minutes he would be snoring. Anyhow, things went off without a hitch. We moved into the new building, the bamboo shed was pulled down and a pleasant garden took its place. But the school could not live down its original title of a 'dustbin', at least not in my time.

From the fourth form onwards, the medium of instruction was English. There was a completely new set of teachers and Tamil as a medium of communication in the classroom disappeared completely. Subjects like history, geography and science were all taught in English. We also started to learn English history. One of the sentences I still remember from Tout's history for schools was, 'The blood of Alfred the Great flows in the veins of George the Fifth'. That single sentence conveyed a sense of continuity in history. Whatever the merits and demerits of that system, it helped to improve our English as well as our ability to converse in that language.

It also meant that my English was good enough to read books in English. I had read some poems in the English language such as 'We Are Seven' and 'A Boy Stood on the Burning Deck'. These had not created in me a love of English literature, but when in the fifth form I read the 'Elegy written in a Country Churchyard', I was terribly impressed with its majesty and dignity as well as pathos. I had always been haunted by the past, remembered it vividly and had parted from it reluctantly. The present was merely the connecting link between the dead past and the unborn future. 'The paths of glory lead but to the grave' seemed to me to enunciate a tragic but inevitable and eternal truth.

I started to read other poems-by Longfellow and Goldsmith-recommended by my teacher. By now the school had a library and I could borrow books from it. Strangely enough, the first English novel I read was *The Four Just Men* by Edgar Wallace. One of my relatives who had come on a visit had left the book in our house and I started to read it. Though it was enjoyable, it was not the kind of book I was looking for. There was a literary and philosophical society in Raja Street at that time. It was patronized by elderly Brahmin lawyers who discussed seriously such subjects as 'the relevance of the Gita to modern life' or the 'principles of theosophy as propounded by Annie Besant'. But the society had a good library and, thanks to my father's lawyer. I was allowed to borrow books. While the class teacher recommended books like *The children of the New Forest* and *Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare*, I borrowed the novels of Scott and Dickens and was soon immersed in English literature.

A result of this development was that I gave up reading Tamil books. In spite of the patriotic fervour and my own interest, the glamour of English was still strong. British rule was denounced in chaste English by our leaders, many of whom had been to British universities. It was being increasingly recognized that apart from being the language of the rulers, it was the gateway to all modern knowledge and a study of English was almost universally encouraged. Indian languages tended to suffer as a result. My giving up reading Tamil books was a small example of this neglect.

One major decision I had to take when I reached the fifth form was to choose an optional subject for specialization. The choice decided whether I was to specialize in arts subjects or in science. My interest was in literature and history but I was persuaded by my brother as well as other people that I should not take history. History had been very popular

earlier when the profession of law was lucrative as well as highly respectable. But during the last decade, the number of lawyers had increased so considerably that many were briefless. The profession had lost the glamour that it once possessed. Medicine was coming into prominence and even engineering was being talked about as a good way of earning a living. With the starting of a textile mill, my family was thinking of getting me trained in that field so that the total dependence on outside managers might be avoided.

So when I said I would like to take history, my brother replied. 'What is the use of studying history? You can only teach history. You don't want to be a school teacher, so you?' Everyone I spoke to said more or less the same thing and I was finally persuaded to take physics instead. So grandfather's blessing about my becoming a four-sleeved lawyer never materialized.

It was when I was in the final year at school that we moved from our house in Raja Street to a rented bungalow in Avanashi Road, a smart area of the town. It was all right for the son of an agriculturist to live in Raja Street and go to a school on Variety Hall Road, but it was not a suitable residence for the family of the 'managing agent' of a textile mill. My brother had come to live in Coimbatore in order to run the mill along with another partner and the old house was not adequate. The bungalow we rented had modern sanitation and electric lighting and was furnished with cushion chairs in the front room. There was an acre of garden and a gardener to look after it. It was peaceful and quiet and dignified but I missed the noise and confusion of Raja Street. I could no longer listen to the spicy conversation of Venkattamma or go for cycle rides with her sons. But the old lady assured me with her toothless smile, 'There will always be a crisp *dosai* waiting for you if you should pass along here at seven in the morning.' Viswanatha Iyer's coffee club was nearly three miles away and I would not be able to borrow books from the literary and philosophical society or listen to the erudite discussion of lawyers about Karma and Dharma.

It was also in my final year at school that I became friendly with a group of boys known to everyone as 'back-benchers'. They always sat in the last row of the class, rarely paid any attention to the lessons, dressed very fashionably in silk shirts with gold buttons and white satin trousers and were only interested in games and sports. I associated with the group because, in the fifth form, I had begun to play badminton and table tennis which were made available in the school and which were more suitable to my physique than football. I had also acquired a bicycle and the consequent freedom to go about, particularly after we moved to Avanashi Road. I, as a 'front-bencher' and the youngest, became a favourite with the rest, particularly as I became a reasonable table tennis player in a very short time.

There were about eight of us in the group. We rented a small room at the back of a cycle repair shop near the school and it became our 'chummery' during the lunch hour and on many evenings after our game of badminton or table tennis. Some of many new friends were Brahmin boys who were strict vegetarians at home, and they looked forward to meat dishes from our home during lunch. While most of them ate it without any fuss,

Ramachandran, who was the joker in our group, would utter a prayer in Sanskrit, remove the holy thread he wore across his shoulders ceremoniously and hang it on a nail on the wall and then announce solemnly in English, 'Witness my friends, as of this moment, I have ceased to be a brahmin and can enjoy the delights of the flesh-eater!' and then add as an afterthought, 'temporarily of course'. Then he would start eating. He did the most preposterous things with such a serious face that we were not sure whether to laugh or not. And after washing his hands, he would repeat another prayer just as seriously before donning the thread again. 'Behold my friends; I have resumed my status as a true and worthy Brahmin!' And we would all shout, temporarily of course'. The room was very sparsely furnished. I only remember a frayed cotton carpet on the floor, a gramophone with a horn and some records in one corner, two packs of cards and a calendar on the wall. The boy in the cycle shop kept the place tidy for us for two rupees a month and also brought cups of coffee from the restaurant opposite whenever we wanted it. In that small stuffy room we would lounge about, play cards or play the gramophone, and smoke cigarettes though I could never stand them. We also talked a lot about girls but it never went beyond talking. At about eight 'o clock, when the cycle shop closed, we too went home.

All of us were also interested in music and drama and some had real talent in singing. So we decided to produce a play and started rehearsals, but the question was, where were we going to stage it? The others had no standing with the school authorities who would not countenance anything suggested by them. So I was made the emissary to the headmaster and, after a lot of cross-examination, he agreed to permit us the use of the school hall. It proved to be a great success, particularly as one member of our group was a nephew of the chairman of the municipality and he was able to persuade his uncle to attend the performance. The chief guest complimented us for taking the initiative in such extra-curricular activities and the headmaster for encouraging us. The back-benchers came into the limelight for an all too brief but glorious moment.

We considered ourselves the aristocracy among the students; an aristocracy in revolt against the establishment, for the teachers did not like us very much. One or two warned me that by becoming friendly with such a group I was losing my reputation as a well-behaved and hard-working student, but I ignored such warnings. We felt we had reached the height of sophistication, and other boys treated us with reluctant respect.

All this necessarily meant neglecting my studies to some extent; but fortunately, I had always been attentive in the classroom and also had the knack of making the examiner believe I knew more than I had written in the answer paper. Once I had to write an essay on one of Akbar's campaigns in Rajputana where mines were used for the first time. I only knew about coal mines and gold mines, but not about the explosive variety used in warfare. I thought Akbar had dug a 'mine' in the ground to get into the fort and subdue it. In spite of this misunderstanding, I wrote the essay, was complimented by my teacher and continued in my ignorance until a chance remark by one of the boys who had failed in the examination

told me what a mine was! Perhaps the teacher too was under the same misapprehension as myself!

On those rare occasions when we had an attack of conscience, we would get out little back room thoroughly cleaned of all cigarette butts and start 'studying'. But I am afraid our consciences were very easily satisfied and we soon relapsed into our usual habits. As the examination neared, I found myself acting as a coach to the rest of the group. They depended on me not only for the notes dictated by the various teachers – none of the other members of our group demeaned themselves by taking notes in the class-but also for explanation of difficult passages. I solved their mathematical equations, explained the Principle of Archimedes to a bewildered group and gave the dates of demise of the various kings and queens of England. The kind of problems they had about English history amused me. Ramachandran wanted to know quite seriously who came first, Henry the Seventh or the Eighth. This was perhaps not as absurd as it sounded since there has seldom been more than one king of the same name in Indian history. But in the end, it was given up as a hopeless job until one of them found what he thought was a short cut.

My friendship with this group nearly resulted in a minor disaster as far as I was concerned. In those days, we used to have a selection examination conducted by the school to determine which of the boys were eligible to write the S.S.L.C. public examination. The question papers for the tests were always printed in the same press and one member of our group found a way of getting the proofs of the question papers, presumably by bribing the proof-reader. He brought them to me and asked if I would write the answers to the questions. Without thinking very much about it, I wrote out the answers which were passed on to the others. They were supposed to get them by heart and repeat them in the examination. At least they would be sure of passing the 'selection' examination even if they failed in the finals.

On the first day, about ten minutes before the examination began, the class teacher walked in jauntily with the question papers in an envelope. He chatted with us while waiting for the bell before distributing the papers and asked jokingly, 'Can you guess what the first question is in this paper?'

The temptation was too great for me to resist, so I said, 'Yes sir, I can,' and repeated the question word for word.

His jovial face suddenly became dark and grim. 'Don't any of you leave your seats till I come back!' he shouted, and went to the headmaster to report. It was perhaps too late either to change the question paper or to postpone the examinations, for the test continued, but there was a summons waiting for me from the headmaster as I handed in my answer paper.

For the next few hours, I went through what I came to know later as the 'third degree'. There were threats of expulsion, refusal to allow me to sit for the public

examination and inducements and cajoling to make me reveal the manner in which I got to know the questions. 'You are a bright boy,' the headmaster said. 'You would not have gone to the trouble of getting the question papers for your own benefit. But you must confess who was responsible so that I can punish the guilty. If not...' and so it went on. I stood the ordeal pretty well, did not let my friends down and merely said, 'Our class teacher had told us it was one of the questions we could expect in the public examination, so I thought it might come in the selection examination as well.'

Finally, the headmaster said, 'I can assure you none of your gang is going to get through the selection examination. And if I can possibly detain you, I will. Now go back to your class.'

With this incident I discovered that a little indiscretion goes a long way.

Seventeen boys failed to qualify in the selection examination, including the entire badminton team. I was the only one who was selected in our group. But unfortunately for the reputation of the headmaster, one of the seventeen happened to be the nephew of the municipal chairman. That young man, who had already distinguished himself as a consummate actor in our play, went to his aunt and said what a shame it was that he, the nephew of the chairman, the first citizen of the town and a respected politician, should be detained in the selection examination because of the vindictiveness of the headmaster towards the badminton team. It was nothing but sheer partiality when the entire football team had been selected. And all because the headmaster did not even know how to score in badminton game, never mind play it. If only his father had not died so inconsiderately and left him to the tender mercies of his uncle and aunt, he would have been subjected to such an indignity. The good lady could not resist such unassailable arguments from her favourite nephew and the final reference to her head brother decided the issue. The chairman, who was just as interested in domestic peace as any normal married man, had to interfere and all the seventeen were finally selected. Needless to say, none of them passed the public examination.

As a result of the 'question paper incident' as it came to be known, I acquired an underserved notoriety among the boys for being a dare-devil, not only for allegedly getting the question papers from the press, but for flaunting that knowledge before the authorities, and getting away with it! Unfortunately, I did not stay in the school long enough to enjoy the somewhat evil reputation. Besides, as the episode had given me a bit of a fright, between the selection examination and the public examination, I worked hard and passed the public examination with very high marks. When I went to say goodbye to the headmaster and the other teachers, I was glad to find I was forgiven my past sins because of these marks.

Though I could have studied for two more years in the local arts college, I was determined to go to Madras and my family agreed. Presidency College had a reputation not

only for the quality of its education, but even more for the status and glamour it provided. It was like going to Oxford or Cambridge in England. I applied and thanks to the marks I had got, I was accepted. The boy who at the age of twelve was so upset at leaving the village to go twenty miles away was eager at sixteen to travel three hundred miles to start his college education.

14

Looking back on the sixteen years of my life in Karadibavi and in Coimbatore, I am amazed at how narrow, insulated and yet real and meaningful it was.

Narrow and insulated because in Karadibavi we lived in more or less the same way as my seventh grandfather had done. There was very little difference. In our houses, in our food, in our life habits and in our relationships, we followed a tradition that seemed permanent and unalterable. Things remained the same-perhaps a little better, perhaps a little worse.

We knew of course there was a British government in India and there were officials who came to us occasionally. But this did not seem to affect the even tenor of life in the village. We knew there had been a great war which Britain had nearly lost and, as a result of that war, the prices had gone up violently and come down equally rapidly when once it was over. They were far-off events that might have happened in another world, even another planet. The arrival of the 'Ruston' oil engine as a result of which my uncle nearly lost his farm was a misguided idiosyncrasy from which we thought we would soon recover.

And yet, there were portents of change if only we could have seen them. My father never considered learning English. Yet, here was I, going to college, if not to become a four sleeved lawyer as my grandfather hoped, at least to make something of myself, something other than a village farmer. The football and the badminton and the library that Mr. Iyengar had brought into the village seemed isolated events and not the signs of things to come. Some people had started factories and mills in Coimbatore, but to us they were not yet real. The name of the Mahatma was known in Karadibavi as well as his demand for independence. But no one took it seriously – at least not then. If the mighty Kaiser and his 'Emden' could be beaten by the British, who was Gandhi to challenge their supremacy? It was not ignorance so much as a simple innocence that prevented us from seeing the implications of change. Things would always remain the same because they had always been so.

And yet, how real life was in Karadibavi! The heroes of my childhood were real flesh and blood heroes. Subban who was so adept at catching birds and who could produce a beautiful little bullock-cart out of a few stalks and bits of coloured paper, Murugan who could make a pair of bullocks move faster than anyone I knew, these people were real and

substantial. Poor, misguided, friendless, but nevertheless good-hearted, Gengan, who bought me sweets, had died a hero's death in my eyes. No one seemed as brave or as warm-hearted as he was. Even his cruelties, if cruelties they were, merely added a dimension to the fascination I felt for him. And Naga, the vivacious and affectionate Naga, who would hug and pamper me and who gave me the anklet bells that she had preserved for fifty years, would I find anyone to compare with her in the outside world?

Looking back on those experiences after a lapse of fifty years, they might easily be scenes from another world with which I have no connection at present. I have of course been in the habit of visiting Karadibavi in later life. But each time a little bit of what I had loved and cherished has disappeared-not in physical terms, for everything is almost as it was fifty years ago, but in the emotional, spiritual sense. The unalterable faith that people had, the social cohesion that existed, the sense of community feeling, the free and easy mingling of the fifteen families, the social equilibrium between the castes – all these have gone. The old value-system had gone too, with nothing to take its place. God no longer resides in the temple, because there is no positive faith, only a fear of disbelief.

Life in Coimbatore, while vastly different from that of the village in many ways, was still only an extension of my life in Karadibavi. I could easily have gone back and become a farmer as many of my contemporaries in school did. But this did not occur, and the town itself has changed beyond recognition-again not so much in physical terms as in attitudes, values and relationships. The leisurely, easy-going and socially rewarding life has been replaced by a busy, individualistic and competitive existence. Like most thriving cities, it has become the Indian equivalent of the concrete jungle.

In life one passes imperceptibly from scene to scene, from incident to incident. Without being aware of it, the present becomes the past and the future creeps slowly on us. And one fine morning, we suddenly realize that a change has taken place that time has flown. Sometimes events seem to repeat themselves and we come back to the same spot from where we started. We think we are going round in circles. But it is not a circle; it is in fact a spiral, for each incident adds something to the sum total of our subconscious and we are never quite the same after the experience. To relate each event and each scene to change is not possible to most of us-at least not until long afterwards. We hold on to something that we think is constant and, inevitably, it slips from our hands. To hold on to the past in spite of all this is futile and frustrating. But occasionally, something happens, a single incident that unmistakably sets the seal on change. My going to Madras to join Presidency College was one such incident. There could be no going back.

Epilogue

1

All sixty-year-olds anywhere in the world have of course witnessed and experienced enormous changes during their lives, and the tendency to dwell on the transitions that occur in a life-span has given rise to many banal volumes of autobiography. But the twentieth century has brought about very special changes in India (and no doubt in other ancient but recently modernizing countries); these are reflected in the lives of innumerable individuals and still need to be recounted, perhaps because of the comparative paucity of written literature in such societies. Not only has there been a movement from the village to the town, from a pastoral society to an urban; but the grafting of modernity on an ancient, traditional world-view unfolds a fascinating and rich tale. In my own life, my origins and childhood in Karadibavi provide a wholly improbable background to the career in modern technology and contemporary ways that I adopted after my twentieth year.

What happened to the boy who was born into a traditional Indian village, and spent his childhood in a predominantly medieval environment? The story of change up to his schooling in Coimbatore has been recounted, but it is hoped that the reader is sufficiently interested to follow a brief telescoping of some of the highlights and developments during the rest of his life. For the boy from Karadibavi went on from Coimbatore to study in Madras, then to Manchester to come to terms with modern technology. From origins that could have belonged to the sixteenth century, we have the development of a person who, after the age of sixteen, rapidly came to feel at home in modernity and the main impulses behind it.

The truth of the schoolmaster's statement about the coconut tree was revealed to me almost as soon as I left Coimbatore. So long as I was there, my parents or the other older members of the family took all the decisions concerning my life. And there were servants for the other jobs which I should normally have done. It was surprising that during my four years in Coimbatore, I had never bought a bus or a train or even a cinema ticket, never cashed a cheque, never mended a puncture on my bicycle and never carried a suitcase. There were always people to 'look after' me. Nothing that I did was private. Even on those rare occasions when I took the initiative, there were people to comment, modify or just to debate the matter, as though it was a family problem and not a personal one. My failures and successes were not mine but belonged to the family.

But once I boarded the Blue Mountain Express on my way to Madras with my suitcase, things changed instantaneously. There was no one to advise, comment or criticize. From engaging a porter at the railway station to choosing a room-mate in the hostel, I had to decide. I was given a fixed amount of money every month and how I spent it was my own

affair. This change from total dependence to one of responsibility was rather sudden and I kept looking over my shoulders to see if anyone was watching. But fortunately, I did not have to take any major decisions until much later. However, I realized very soon that from now on, I had to climb the coconut tree without external assistance.

I went through four years of college without distinguishing myself in any way and took my degree. I played tennis, participated in amateur dramatics for which I discovered a passion and passed my examinations without any trouble. Perhaps, the only important thing that happened during those four years was that in the final year, I was selected as the secretary of the hostel students' union. It was the only time I ever contested an election and the experience cured me of ever wanting to repeat the performance.

From the day my family started a spinning mill, it was hoped that I would one day study textiles. When my feeble attempt to take history as my special subject failed, I resigned myself to my fate. But it was never explicitly discussed. Now that I had completed my graduation, the time had come to take a final decision. In spite of my grandfather's blessing that I should become a 'four-sleeved lawyer', no one had seriously considered the possibility of my going to England to study. From Karadibavi, England seemed a remote phantasy. In the village, it was said you lost caste if you went abroad, that you had to eat beef, that you would take to other undesirable and unmentionable vices and you were lost as far as your family was concerned. On my last visit to Karadibavi before leaving for England, one of my uncles asked me very confidentially, 'Is it true that white people do not wash themselves properly? I believe they use bits of paper instead.' When I answered in the affirmative, he remarked, 'No wonder our elders did not want us to cross the seas and prescribed certain purification ceremonies for those who did. I do hope you won't pick up any dirty habits while you are there.'

But during the last four years, things had changed considerably. Two or three boys of our own community had been to England and they had not noticeably changed for the worse. Astrologers were consulted and they also gave clearance. The family was now psychologically prepared to send me to England to study textiles.

I applied for and got admission at the College of Technology in Manchester. Since I already had a degree in physics, I would be exempt from the first year's course and my studies could be completed in two years. The course did not start till the beginning of October and I did not have to sail till the end of August. This gave me two months to get ready.

The preparations consisted of applying for a passport, booking a passage through Messrs Thomas Cook & Sons and ordering clothes more suitable for the English climate. I also added some new items to my wardrobe, such as pyjamas and a dressing-gown, which I had not possessed before, and the proper use of which I had to learn from an 'England-returned' gentleman. In those days, it was possible to book a passage for twenty-five

pounds because of the students' concession offered by most shipping companies. You were allowed to choose your cabin for that amount.

I also paid visits to the Bosotto Hotel in Madras to learn something about English food and the correct way of using the right knives and forks. I had been told that the inability to use the right implements at the dinner table would be a major social disaster in that country. In all these things, we tried to do everything as an Englishman would do not give room for criticism. The fact that most Englishmen in India-even after many years' residence-could not eat with their fingers off a banana leaf did not strike us as being relevant. We wanted independence for India but we did not want to be accused of bad manners-an attitude which is very different from that of the present generation who very rightly ask, 'What does it matter which knife you use?' We progress.

Everything was ready. My passage had been booked on the P&O boat S.S *Cathey* sailing from Bombay. And saying goodbye to family and friends, I set off to Bombay in company with another student who was also sailing by the same ship. There was perhaps safety in numbers.

It seemed to me that life so far had been a series of departures-from Karadibavi to Coimbatore, from Coimbatore to Madras and from Madras to Manchester. I supposed that that was what life was, until the final departure to which we are all subject. But where would this journey end? 'And to what end is all this? To what end?'

2

One of the first things I had to do in Manchester was to find permanent lodgings. Very few Indians stayed in the halls of residence. Apart from being more expensive, to stay with a family was supposed to give one a 'feel' of English life, and a reason for going to study in England was to learn something of the 'British way of life' which still had some magic left in India, even in patriotic Indian eyes. Thanks to the economic situation in England at that time, many lower middle-class families-often widows with children – supplemented their meagre income by taking in one or two lodgers on a long-term basis. They were not 'Professional' landladies. They became very fond of their lodgers in true North Country fashion, mothered them, called them 'luv', and often became very possessive. They wrote to their 'boys' even after they returned home. Thanks to the affluent society, I am told that such landladies have become a rarity today and the few who let rooms do it merely as a means of profit.

The university maintained a list of landladies. A few of them had mentioned 'British students only', but I was surprised to discover that a large number had said, 'Indian students

preferred'. We were supposed to be quiet and well-behaved and to pay our dues without default. These characteristics were a great asset where landladies were concerned. The 'digs' were located in areas which were all within easy reach of the university and the college of technology. Armed with a list of such addresses and with a more experienced friend as adviser, I visited a number of houses and finally settled on Mrs. Flomax in Victoria Park. I would have breakfast and dinner and also lunch at week-ends. I would eat with the family but had my own sitting room where I could study in the evenings. Mrs. Flomax assured me that her fires were nice and warm. I was rather surprised at this as I was under the mistaken impression that all fires were warm irrespective of their ownership. I was to pay thirty-five shillings a week. When everything was settled. Mrs. Flomax informed me, 'Mine is a respectable house and I don't want any "goings on" I hope that is understood.' I did not know what she meant, but my friend assured her on that point and explained it to me afterwards.

In fact, Mrs. Flomax set great store on respectability. It was the axis round which her entire life revolved. She would have nothing to do with the people next door because they did not measure up to her standards of respectability. She dismissed them as 'Oh, that lot! I have no time for them.' But she knew everything about them. Her knowledge was accumulated wisdom from gossip at the butcher's the grocer's the fish and chips shop round the corner and the lady living at the end of the row who was the only one in the neighbourhood with whom she was on reasonably friendly terms. Not that she quarrelled with the rest; she just couldn't be bothered. Because of her economic condition, I would have expected her to support the Labour Party. But she was a member of the local Conservative Club. When I asked her what she had to conserve, she did not get my meaning. But merely said, 'Oh, all the moneyed people are members there, you know!'

She had only had Indian students in the past and had nicknames for all of them. She was very proud of her 'boys' as she called them, showed me their photographs, the presents they had given her for Christmas and talked fondly of their achievements in the university. She found it difficult to pronounce my name and shortened it to Mr. Vasan and I was Vasan to most people during my stay in England. But she was not satisfied with it and wanted a name all her own. I resisted this attempt at familiarity on her part for some time. She would ask me about my family and my life in India and one evening I let it out that some people had called me 'Raju' in my village. From then on, I was Raju as far as she was concerned.

Mrs. Flomax had two sons, Gordon, aged twelve, and John, aged six. We all had our evening meal together. Though it was really high tea, she called it 'dinner' according to the best traditions of the Conservative Club. I learnt the finer points of English etiquette from her while she instilled them into her younger son. When he stretched his hand for a bottle of sauce, or salt, she would shout, 'John!' and his hand would stop midway. After a few seconds, she would ask graciously, 'John dear, would you like some sauce?'

'Yes, Mummy,' was the quiet response.

'You may have some,' and she would pass the bottle. Then, she would enunciate a general principle. 'You should never stretch for things; wait for them to be passed to you,' with a pointed look in my direction.

After a few seconds of silence, she would demand, 'What do you say now, John?'

'Thank you very much, Mummy'.

'You are welcome.'

John gulped his food and finished before any of us. He would sit fidgeting, wanting to leave the table but hesitant to ask.

'Do you want anything else, John?' was the peremptory demand.

'Mummy, please may I leave the table?'

'With pleasure,' and John would dash out like an arrow released from a bow.

In India we are accustomed to using our fingers to eat. It seemed strange to me that in England books should have been written on such a subject as table manners. The rules and regulations with regard to this went far beyond the requirements of cleanliness and convenience. They were difficult to acquire, especially for an easterner. But they were a passport to the higher strata of society when followed strictly and unhesitatingly. Failure to comply with them might at times involve a serious loss of social status for the individual. I was told that many Americans would not travel by the Queen Elizabeth or Queen Mary because they were put off by the number and variety of implements they had to contend with at the dining table.

To me, the worst method of eating peas appeared to be to squash them on the back of a fork. Besides being clumsy and inconvenient, it is not fair to the peas. The gravy is usually the tastiest as well as the most nourishing part of a dish. Yet, if one obeyed the manners and rules of good society, the best part of the dish had to be left on the plate to be wasted. Only in some working-class families was one allowed to clear the plate with a piece of bread, provided there were no visitors present. Roast chicken was very nice, but it lost half its taste when one was forbidden to pick up the bone at the end. There was something to be said for this prohibition in boarding houses, because some landladies might want the bones to prepare soup the next day, but still... Finally, at an English dinner table, everybody is so busy passing things round to everyone else that there is hardly any time for conversation. And of course, it was rude to ask for anything. One should rather do without it.

But after all the trouble of mastering the laborious art, to what use was it put? It was to eat unimaginative and rather stodgy food. Perhaps, indifference in cooking had

subconsciously led to a greater emphasis on the methods of eating, as a defence mechanism.

I was duly enrolled as a student in the Textile Technology department of the College.

I took my degree in June 1939. My family was anxious that I should return home immediately, but I was not. By that time, I was interested and involved in many things, socially, culturally and intellectually. But what clinched the issue was the offer of a scholarship by the Manchester Corporation on the recommendation of my professor who felt that I had some talent for research. I was happy that my efforts-for what they were worth-were recognized. This would enable me to live in England for a year without depending on my family and do post-graduate research. A combination of intellectual satisfaction and financial independence could not be lightly set aside, and my family reluctantly agreed to my remaining a little longer in England. However, as a result of this decision, I was stuck in England for the duration of the Second World War, and that single decision changed my life radically in many ways.

By the time I completed research, the war was in full swing with no sign of a passage to India. I therefore took a job in the laboratories of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce and, later, when those laboratories were bombed out, moved to the British Cotton Industries Research Association, working there till I returned to India in December 1944.

My life in England during the war was filled with intellectual stimulation, moral fervour and emotional conflicts. I went there as a youth of hardly twenty and returned as a mature, married man of twenty-seven. It was a period of widening horizons in every aspect of life, with all its attendant consequences. In this atmosphere of freedom and exchange of ideas, I turned my thoughts to writing again. I wrote poems and short stories, some of which were published in reputed journals like the *New Statesman and Nation* and the *Listener*, and one story appeared in the *Manchester Guardian*. I also wrote a one-act play, which was produced by an amateur dramatic group. But I was interested in too many things to devote enough sustained effort to writing.

I was still interested in politics and looked upon it essentially as an ethical concept, left over from the days when I had followed Mahatma Gandhi unhesitatingly. It was a long time before I realized that politics is mostly a manipulation of the power structure in society. I was subject to the passions and conflicts aroused by the Spanish civil war, the disillusionment and the confusion caused by the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the moral dilemma of the Second World War that every Indian had to face. While being sympathetic to the Allied cause, denial of freedom to India led to frustration and a contradictory relationship with the British. I became an active member of the Indian League- the organization founded in Britain by Krishna Menon to propagate the idea of Indian independence – and lectured to groups about the need to free India.

Most Indians in Britain at that time felt completely isolated from the prevailing mood, emotionally as well as psychologically. War tended to exaggerate friendships as well as differences. Almost overnight, the differences between the various Allied nations were forgotten; everyone was convinced that in the overthrow of Hitler lay the salvation of the world and of themselves. But we Indians did not feel part of this struggle. We felt we were helpless victims, standing in the no-man's land of the greatest war the world had ever experienced. The loneliness imposed by the war as well as the time and distance separating me from India and the uncertainty of return led to occasional introspection. I used to think of home, not Coimbatore or Madras, but Karadibavi, of the fifteen uncles and their families, of life in the village and how far I had travelled, not only in terms of time and distance, but in ideas, concepts and relationships.

It was also during this period that I fell in love and ultimately got married. I could quite well imagine what it would be like to take an English girl into our family and Society. I was aware of the problems and difficulties and we both hesitated a long time before making up our minds. Both our families were opposed to it. In fact, it was the one thing about which they were unanimous. But ultimately, they agreed and we were married in a registry office.

My family was very particular that I should return to India as soon as practicable and we had agreed to this. After a year of married life, we were offered passages on a ship going to India. Italy had been knocked out of the war and we were in the first convoy through the Mediterranean carrying women and children, albeit in rather Spartan accommodation.

3

On reaching Bombay in December 1944, perhaps the most interesting thing that happened was our meeting Dewan Bahadur C.S. Ratnasabapathy Mudaliar, to use almost his full name and title. He was an industrialist from Coimbatore, a gentleman of the old school who later became the president of the Federation of India Chambers of Commerce and Industry. He wore ruby ear-rings, a long white coat buttoned up to the neck and a turban that made him look very distinguished. Everyone called him 'Dewan Bahadur', the most recent title he had received from the British government. He called on us at the house of a friend where we were staying and greeted my wife with a bunch of roses. Offering flowers to ladies was not particularly popular among Indians in England; certainly, I had never bought any flowers for Jaya and she was immensely pleased that a gentleman of the old school should have thought of it. He invited us to have dinner with him at the Taj and said to our host, 'Mr Nair, please make all the arrangements for the dinner. We must make Mrs. Sreenivasan feel at home. So, please order everything as it would be in England.'

There were twelve of us for dinner. When the wine waiter came, one of the guests from Bombay – he did not know Coimbatore customs – said 'whiskey'. Mr. Nair kicked him under the table and hissed, 'We don't drink when Dewan Bahadur is present!' So, everyone

ordered soft drinks. But when soup arrived, the Dewan Bahadur, who had been asking Jaya after her family, suddenly turned round and said, 'Mr. Nair, I asked you to look after everything and you have not ordered any wine. Please order a suitable wine to go with the dinner. If you don't do it, I will be forced to ask Mrs. Sreenivasan.'

We all protested and said we didn't drink. But our host waved us aside. 'Normally, I don't drink,' he announced. 'But this is an important occasion. We have a newly married couple from England and we should treat them in the same manner as they would be treated there.'

I suggested that I had been married for more than a year.

'That may be so,' said the Dewan Bahadur. 'But to us in India you are newly married since you have only just arrived and we did not have the opportunity to attend your wedding. You should be prepared for a number of parties when you get to Coimbatore.'

This was the first of a series of experiences in the process of adjustment to India for both of us; for my wife, Jaya, because everything was new and strange and fascinating and frustrating alternately. She had formed a picture of India on the basis of what I had told her and now found it was not quite the same. But it was a process of adjustment for me also for I was not aware of the wartime changes that had radically altered Indian society at least in the towns.

My family had made very good arrangements for our stay in Coimbatore. Their attitude seemed to be, 'We were not able to prevent the marriage, therefore let us make a success of it.' Hundreds of visitors came to meet us talk to us, all of which was a bit bewildering for Jaya. But perhaps the most important event in those first few weeks in India was our visit to Karadibavi. It was a sentimental journey for me. I tried to evoke past memories, recapture feelings and emotions that had once been so strong and to revive relationships—in vain I 'am afraid. Some of my uncles who were such 'wonderful' characters in those early days died or were old and decrepit and confused by this 'chit of a boy' who had turned up with an English wife. The houses, the school and the temple where I used to dance as a little boy were still there, but their physical presence did not convey any emotional significance. On the other hand, a new generation was growing up in the village, a generation who understood me better perhaps, but with whom I had no emotional sympathy. The fact of growing up, knowledge, change, complexity, and above all, time—these were the factors that had brought about changes beyond recognition or understanding. We might try to cling to the past, but it slips slowly away from us, slowly but inevitably, until we seem to be aliens to our own past. We become different people at different times, each having no apparent connection with the other, yet linked together through memory and though our subconscious. I felt a little sad about it all.

But Jaya found the old, sprawling house with its carved pillars and doorways and three feet thick walls very fascinating. My mother showed her everything and explained the

purpose of various rooms and utensils, saying at the same time, 'In your country, everything must be so modern and up-to-date. But we don't even have electricity in our village.'

After the tour of inspection was over, Jaya tried to convey to her that in spite of the lack of modern conveniences, the house was wonderful and had a charm and dignity of its own. But my mother replied, 'It takes all my strength to shut one of these doors.' And then she asked with a grin, 'Jaya, how would you like to live here permanently?'

This was the first time my mother had smiled at us. Away from the atmosphere of the town and in her own natural environment, she was perhaps more free and easy. I felt we were making progress. The feeling of misfortune at having an unsuitable daughter-in-law was slowly giving place to a grudging pride in the uniqueness of the situation.

The entire village had been invited for lunch and we were treated as guests. Carpets had been spread in the main hall for people to sit on, but two chairs had been placed for us. Jaya did not want to be conspicuous, but she was overruled. 'People have come to see you and they can see you better this way,' said my mother. 'Further, Jaya, you are not used to sitting on the floor for a long time and I do not want you to get cramps in your feet.'

People started arriving in ones and twos as well as in groups, the men through the front entrance and the ladies through the back. They sat in the two halves of the hall and stared at us. Occasionally, someone would ask a question to which I replied and, at the same time, translated for Jaya's benefit. But a village gathering is rarely silent for long, and soon everyone was asking everyone else to speak to us.

'She doesn't understand us', they said. 'The young Naicker will have to translate everything.'

'Why don't you speak to her?' they asked a young man. 'You have been to a school in town and learnt English.'

'I don't know what to say', said the young man and everyone laughed.

'You can ask about her family,' someone suggested.

So, I told them about Jaya's family in England, about the war and the blackout and the bombing and the journey back to India. They told me about their crops, about the changes in the village and, in particular, about the young men who had left the village to get jobs at the nearby military station that had come up during the war. One old man who was grandfather's cart driver wanted to know if I had brought a lot of sovereigns from England. He had heard that a pound was only thirteen rupees there while it was about fifty rupees in India at that time. (They did not know about Britain going off the gold standard!)

'Would you like some sovereigns?' someone asked him.

'Yes, if the young master had brought a lot I am sure he would give me a few,' he said.

Carrying on a conversation, now in Tamil now in Telugu and translating it at the same time so that Jaya would know what was happening was a little difficult. But a diversion was provided by the village school teacher who brought all the children to file past us. They were astonished at the unusual spectacle of an English girl in a sari in their village. I had been to the same school about twenty years ago and the teacher made a little speech about the 'old boy' of the school who had brought 'name and fame'. I felt that the 'name and fame' were of a somewhat doubtful nature. Sitting among those people - many of whom I had known and played with as a boy - I wondered for a moment if it was all a dream, whether I was still the same old boy and whether all subsequent events existed only in my imagination.

Jaya was asked to go to the other side of the hall so that the women could have a closer look at her. They were more talkative than the men. They laughed and giggled and all talked at once so that it was not possible to translate anything. But soon, an elderly lady took hold of Jaya.

'Come with me Amma, I want to show you something,' she said slowly in Tamil so that my wife could understand. She took Jaya's arm and led her, shouting at the same time to the others not to follow them.

When they reached one of the outhouses, the old lady said, 'We don't have a proper bathroom in this house, so we have made some arrangements for you here. And you can smoke if you want. I shall stand guard and see no one comes here while you are in.'

When Jaya protested somewhat feebly that she did not smoke, the old lady waved her aside. 'I know you like to smoke cigarettes. For myself. I like a strong cigar early in the morning. But if you give me a cigarette, I will smoke.'

So Jaya made use of the 'bathroom' as well as the opportunity to have a cigarette.

'We know you smoke,' said the old lady when Jaya came out; 'even Paria Amma,' meaning my mother. 'But we appreciate that you observe our custom and do not smoke in public. So, Paria Amma told me to bring you here.'

There was no dining table in our house in the village in those days, but they managed to find a spoon and plate for Jaya. However, she waved them aside and we sat on the floor and ate off banana leaves while my mother herself served us. It was Jaya's first Indian meal eaten in the Indian style and she did not make a good job of it. But everyone was happy at her attempt. My mother's comment was, 'If Jaya eats with her fingers every day, she will go hungry.'

While almost everyone in the town, including the Dewan Bahadur, came to see us, it was suggested that we should call on Sir Shanmugham Chetty, a native of Coimbatore and a well-known figure in India's political life at that time. He was later to become the first Finance Minister of free India. But being fiercely democratic, I resented this assumption of

superiority as well as the fact that he had been presumptuous enough to advise me not to get married in England. My family was unhappy about my attitude and I did not want to upset them more than was necessary. So I went to call on him, but without my wife.

He was extremely amiable, was apologetic about having interfered in my matrimonial affairs and explained the circumstances under which he had to do it. He enquired after Jaya and invited us both for dinner.

No drinks were served during our visit. This was understandable since the host never drank. But after dinner, he lit a long cigar, the aroma from which was very tempting, but did not offer us even cigarettes. Jaya and I were both used to smoking, but refrained from doing so as a concession to Indian tradition by not smoking before elders. I could not help but compare him with Dewan Bahadur who was more considerate in such small matters. Anyhow, the next time he invited us for lunch - this was some months later in Ooty where we were spending a holiday - I regretted our inability to accept on some flimsy excuse. He was evidently puzzled as well as hurt by our refusal. Soon, a mutual friend arrived to 'probe' why I had refused. When I told him, he laughed and said, 'I will fix it.' Shortly, the invitation was renewed and accepted for a different date. When we got there, our host had three different brands of cigarettes waiting for us!

After I had been in Coimbatore for about a week, I received an unusual telephone call. It was from the secretary of the Tamil Nadu Communist Party. He said he had heard from a friend about my work for the India League in Manchester and would like to meet me. I was impressed by such efficiency in their communication system and agreed to meet him.

We had a long chat at our first meeting. I think he was very delicately trying to cross-examine me on my future plans, whether I had any intention of entering politics and if so, what my views were on the Indian political situation. It was something of a verbal sparring match, but conducted in a very pleasant and adroit manner. He was also interested in my literary activities. Evidently, the 'friend' from the party had been very thorough in preparing my dossier and he offered to publish anything I wrote through the party press, provided of course it was not in direct conflict with party policy. I hedged and said that everything I wrote might not always fit the party policies of the moment. He laughed and said he was thinking of literature and not purely political writings.

Then he tried another line of approach. He realized he said that I would never be a member of the party but wondered how, with my socialist leanings, I could enter the family business and become a 'capitalist'. I replied that, after all, one of the saints of Marxism, Engels, had been the owner of a factory. But he pointed out that things had changed since the days of Engels and the proletarian movement had become an active and aggressive political force instead of being a theoretical concept. I agreed with him and remarked that even the theoretical concepts seemed to have changed since the time of Engels.

Through him, I met many members of the Communist Party such as P. Ramamurthy, N.K. Krishnan and Parvathi Krishnan who are now occupying very high positions in the hierarchy of both the C.P.M. and the C.P.I. Our relationships continued to be friendly until the Party went into the wilderness of underground opposition against the government of independent India. I met some of them even during their underground days in one way or another. Later, although I have had very little to do with politics – or perhaps because of that-they have always been friendly on those rare occasions when I come across them.

If I had got married in India in the traditional style to a bride selected by my parents we would have been invited to all my relatives' houses and been presented with dhotis and saris as well as jewellery and silver. The dinner would have been purely Indian, served on banana leaves. The men and women would have eaten separately. There would have been a lot of innocent joking and leg-pulling and laughter. It was a tradition that had been carried on for generations without much variation, except that lately the bridegroom was given a suit length instead of silk dhotis which less and less people seemed to wear. But when the prodigal son turned up with an English wife with fair skin and short hair, all the relations were in a quandary. Should they give a traditional Indian dinner to an 'English' wife? Or should they give a dinner at all? Their sense of propriety would not let them answer the second question in the negative. Most wanted to invite us, if only to show that they were not against the marriage now that it had happened. But the question was, how?

My maternal uncle solved the problem for everybody by announcing that he was going to give an 'English' dinner to welcome the newly married couple. Maternal uncles have an important role to play in Hindu tradition, particularly at the time of the weddings of their nieces and nephews. Nowadays, this role takes the form of trying the turban for nephews (as a sign of their attaining majority) and giving expensive presents both during the wedding and when they are invited to the post-wedding dinner. Now he said, 'If my nephew had got married in India, I would have had to perform the turban-tying ceremony and would have given presents when blessing the bride and groom, all of which would have cost me a lot of money. But Sreenivasan has been considerate in getting married in England and saving me all this expense. So, the least I can do in return is to give his wife the kind of food she is used to, at least for one evening.'

The date for the dinner was fixed. The uncle did not know the first thing about giving 'an English dinner'. Under normal circumstances, he would have consulted me, but as I happened to be the guest of honour, he could not very well ask me. His guide was the proprietor of the only 'English' hotel in the town. In my uncle's case, giving an English dinner meant that everything, including a dining table, had to be imported. The table cloth, crockery and cutlery and flower vases had to be brought from the hotel. The uncle and his wife were strict vegetarians, but they made an exception for our sake and served non-vegetarian food. The menu consisted of tomato soup, fried fish with beetroot, sliced tomatoes and raw onions, roast chicken and vegetables and caramel custard. The uncle was

also a strict teetotaler, but he produced a bottle of whiskey and a bottle of sherry for the occasion.

Waiters in white coats and turbans-an unusual sight in a traditional Indian home-served whiskey to gentlemen in dhotis and traditional Indian clothes. There were of course no ladies present. They were sitting in the back room and having a good gossip about all these new-fangled notions. Jaya was taken to the back room, introduced to the ladies and, after a polite interval, brought back to sip a glass of sherry ceremoniously with the gentlemen. Everybody was on their best behaviour and conversation was extremely polite, if somewhat dull. The dinner was eaten in silence except for odd remarks made to Jaya. Even the whiskey hadn't loosened the tongues of men. Some of them were not used to the food, but struggled through it valiantly, with grim determination not to let the side down.

After the dinner, we were presented with saris and dhotis as well as jewellery and a silver tea service. Taking everything together, I felt that my uncle had not saved as much as he said by our getting married abroad, and got far less fun out of it in the bargain.

Now that one important relative had set the fashion, these 'English' dinners were repeated in the houses of other relations with minor variations. Jaya remarked on the similarity of the menus to one of my relatives who was very friendly and jovial. 'Even the servants seem to be the same in all houses,' she said.

'They ARE the same,' he replied. 'Because, they all come from the same hotel. Your coming to Coimbatore has boosted that hotel's business considerably and you ought to charge him a commission.'

'You mean they have gone to all this trouble for my sake?'

'Yes, you have brought about a minor social revolution.'

'But they should not do it!' Jaya protested. 'I like Indian food and I don't mind sitting on the floor and eating. I am not very good at it yet, but I can manage.'

'Just as you want to show us that you can sit on the floor and eat with your fingers, we want to show you we can use knives and forks. And just as you don't want to give us any trouble, we don't want to give you any trouble either. You see, it is just a matter of mutual adjustment.'

We cannot say we felt at home or enjoyed these dinners, but Jaya was deeply touched by the kindness and consideration that prompted them. One of the minor results of these dinners was that the tradition of the younger generation not drinking in the presence of the old went completely overboard. I sat and drank with elderly and highly respected gentlemen of the town who usually kept their drinking habits a secret. But somehow, no one thought of offering us cigarettes and, in the absence of such an offer, we did not smoke. So, while I was on drinking terms with many, I was on smoking terms with only a few.

Adjustment to a strange and alien society-particularly when you have not been brought up in it-can be a very tricky business. When social norms and cultural values are different and even conflicting, there is a tendency on the part of the individual as well as society to stick to their own ways, justify them and criticize those of others. An ideological stand on such things can be the worst possible method for successful adjustment. There has to be a considerable amount of give and take, understanding and sympathy if harmony and equilibrium are to be achieved. Where there is affection and a willingness to please, it can be achieved quickly and easily. Discussions on the problems of social adjustment usually brought illustrations from other mixed marriages. During those early days, we heard a lot about other in a similar situation to ourselves and they were not very encouraging. There seemed to be far too many casualties among them; at least we only heard about the failures. There was one English woman who insisted on living in a hill station throughout the year, saying the climate of the plains did not suit her. But the real reason was that there was no golf course where her husband lived and worked and she was mad about golf. Then there was the wife of the professor who had left her with four children and taken a second wife. There was another lady who was living in Ooty, separated from her husband. Another English wife had left her husband and gone back to live in her home country. They all seemed to be not just mixed but mixed-up marriages. After a conversation about such a couple, Jaya asked me, 'How long do you give us?'

For the first six months of our life in India, we lived with my sister who converted the first floor of her spacious house into a flat for us. But as soon as we could rent a house we moved into it after getting some necessary furniture. This in wartime was not an easy matter. No furniture, except wooden chairs, was available in any of the local shops. To have things made would take months. On the other hand, we wanted to have at least the basic requirements. Fortunately (for us!) a well-known film star had recently been arrested for murder and his furniture was being sold to pay for his defence. We were able to get a few things, including a refrigerator – a luxury in those days.

Since the house did not have any modern sanitation, one of the first things we had to get were commodes. We could not buy any for love or money. So we went to the local furniture manufacturer to order them. Not knowing the Tamil word for what we were looking for, I tried to explain our requirement to the head carpenter in the most delicate way possible but without success. As was my custom on such occasions, I drew a diagram to show the man what I wanted.

'Ah! You mean a piss pot!' exclaimed the carpenter. 'Yes, we can make it within a week'.

Evidently, the shop had been making them for the British army stationed in the locality and that was the usual expression.

Having secured a commode, the next item on our list was a bath tub. The Indian method of bathing was very nice and hygienic, but Jaya wanted occasionally to wallow in a huge tub of water. But of course, it was impossible to buy one anywhere. Even the erstwhile film star did not possess one. But my sister offered one from her house. The house had belonged to a European company before my sister bought it and so it had bath tubs. One of them was dug out and installed in ours.

What with the contribution from the film star and the furniture shop, we had all the essential major items, but we still did not have any crockery or cutlery. Because of the war, there had been no imports of such items into India and none were manufactured locally at that time. On the other hand, many Indians-partly because of wartime prosperity and partly because of their greater contacts with the British forces-were beginning to take to western methods of eating, apart from the fact that banana leaves were becoming very expensive. Here again, my sister helped us out by letting us have what she had.

But ours was not an English home in India. We would have a lot of Indian visitors who would not know how to use a knife and fork who would be strict vegetarians. We needed arrangements for cooking and serving south Indian food in the traditional manner. If my tenants came from the villages, they had to be served coffee in brass tumblers. If any orthodox friends or relations came, they expected coffee in silver tumblers, and for the more cosmopolitan people cups and saucers were needed.

In most well-to-do Indian homes, bronze and silver utensils-nowadays stainless steel also-were needed for various occasions to cook for and serve either ten people or a hundred. When my sister showed Jaya what she had, Jaya was amazed. They had been acquired over a period of time. When newlyweds set up a home, it was the responsibility of the bride's mother to buy these for her daughter. The number and variety is inspected by all the lady visitors and compared and commented upon. And after that, the girls go on adding to their collection at every opportunity. To have a lot of such household articles was a matter of status as well as convenience. We were not interested in a huge collection of such things as a status symbol. In any case, the house we had rented did not have much storage space. But we did want to have the minimum necessary so that we could entertain people. However, we did not know what to get. Again, my sister came to our rescue.'

She said, 'Jaya, if your mother had been here, she would have bought all the household things for you. But she is not here and I have no daughter. I don't know anything about English things but I will buy all the Indian items for you just as if you were my daughter. I hope that is all right.'

We, particularly Jaya, were deeply touched, not so much because of the expenditure it would mean for her but because of the idea that she thought of my wife as being equivalent to a daughter. Less than two years ago, she had written to me, 'How can you marry a girl

with short hair and short skirts?’ Only six months ago, she had tears on our arrival. What had we done to deserve this change of heart?

The next problem was servants. What kind of servants were we going to have?

There were two sorts, those who worked for Indian families and those who worked for the British. The former had often been with a family for more than one generation, the son inheriting the father’s job. Indian ladies usually spent a lot of time at the ‘back’ of the house, issuing stores, supervising the cooking, looking after the servants, families and so on. Such servants were treated almost as members of the family and their loyalty was legendary. The European ladies, on the other hand, rarely paid a visit to the kitchen. They were fair but firm with the servants. They spent their mornings playing bridge or mah-jong or swimming (if there was a swimming pool at the club) and they had their siesta in the afternoon. They might occasionally suggest the menu, particularly if there were any important guests. The servants had far greater freedom in organizing their work and in marketing. Making a little money when marketing was permitted so long as it was not too much. This was particularly so when the wives were away in England and the men paid the cook so much per day and did not bother with the accounts. Many European cooks (meaning those who knew how to cook western food) did not know how to cook proper Indian food. They could of course produce a ‘curry and rice’ lunch, but it was as near to Indian food as the ‘English’ food produced by some restaurants in India was to real English food.

Our problem was that we needed a cook who could do both Indian and European food. If a cook claimed to do both, he usually did both badly. On the other hand, we couldn’t employ two cooks. Here again, my sister helped us out. Her cook could do south Indian cooking extremely well and he had been watching the ‘English cook’ when cooking for us and had picked up quite a lot of western dishes. She offered to let us have him. The arrangement was therefore very satisfactory as far as we were concerned.

When they first came to India, many European women started by wanting to do everything themselves. This was particularly so in the post-war period when a large number of people came not to spend their entire working life here but for much shorter periods of two or three years. They said to themselves and their friends, ‘I don’t see why we have to have servants. After all, we manage without them in England.’ They were appalled by the way some Europeans who had been in India a long time treated their servants by not addressing them by their name, by not saying ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, by not having regular hours for them and expecting them to stay till all hours of the night to serve dinner while the ‘masters’ sat drinking. Their democratic spirit revolted at such behaviour and they told themselves that they would not do it. But the climate, the conditions of cooking and marketing, the low wages they could pay and the social life they led, combined to force them to conform to the general patterns. While many accepted defeat, said they were mistaken, some made a virtue out of necessity. ‘There are so many unemployed in this country. If we did have some servants, it would help to ease the problem.’ But the servants

were no fools; they knew the newcomers and their attitudes and they took full advantage of them.

When you are living in two worlds-as we were-and need to have servants, adjustments to the servants can be just as difficult as to the rest of your environment. The snobbery of servants was often much worse than the snobbery of their masters, and even more, their mistresses. We had an 'English' cook who would not serve when we were eating off banana leaves! Having worked only in European houses and convinced of the superiority of the European system, it was demeaning for him to work in an Indian house. But he didn't mind so long as there was a 'mehsaheb' who was pukka British. But serving food on a banana leaf offended his sense of propriety and dignity of office! And once we had a house boy, brought up in the Indian tradition that would clean my shoes but not my wife's! There was another cook who walked out because my wife asked him to buy beef for the dog. He would not work in a house where beef was consumed even by animals!

But as time went on and more and more English people left India and more Indians wanted European food, these servants had to adjust to the new situation like a lot of other people. I remember asking one cook what his religion was. We generally found that if you had servants who belonged to different religions, it occasionally led to friction among them. The poor man looked at me who was wearing a dhoti and my wife who was wearing slacks and he could not make up his mind.

'I will be whatever you want me be', he said brightly.

Often, these cooks had names which could be Hinduized or Christianized according to the exigencies of service. If they were Christians, their first name would be Christian and often the second name would be Hindu. If they were Hindu, the first time they went to work for a European family, the lady would say, 'I can't pronounce your long name; I will call you Joseph,' and he remained Joseph ever afterwards. Occasionally, it so happened that the servant's name was the same as the master's, in which case it was changed and he got two names. In such a case, an interview for a new job would go something like this:

'What is your name?'

'Joseph Madam.'

'But all your chits say your name is Sam.'

'Yes, Madam.'

'But who are you, Joseph or Sam?'

'Both, Madam; I am Joseph or Sam as Madam wishes.'

Usually their English was not good enough to explain how they happened to have two names and we had to revert to Tamil in order to get an explanation. But in those days the

'British' influence was still strong and a 'memsahib' who spoke Tamil was not thought much of by servants who had worked in English homes! Occasionally, it so happened that they borrowed each others' chits for the purpose of getting a job, and hence acquired two names.

The chits waxed eloquent over their cooking of their house work, their honesty and competence. Often they were sentimental. 'We are sorry to lose John. The children in particular will miss him terribly, but we have been posted to Calcutta and John's family commitments do not permit him to go with us.' Or, 'I wish I could take Francis to England. He would be so useful there.' Occasionally, they were cruelly sarcastic. The recipient of course could not understand this and produced the chit proudly: 'Muthu is an excellent cook provided you imbibe sufficient alcohol for lunch and dinner and are oblivious to what you eat. He is also entitled to the order of integrity, third class.'

Of the various people who had served the British Raj in India faithfully, the servants are the one group who has been unhonoured and unsung, except rarely. The passing of the Raj was a cruel blow to them. During the Raj, they had a status as the servants of rulers. To polish cutlery and glass, to lay the table beautifully, to fold napkins into various complicated patterns, to bake a cake with no more facilities than an open fire and an old tin with a lid when the master went camping, were all matters of pride and joy for them. To serve dinner to people who behaved like demi-gods, who dressed for dinner and to put on their own uniform-often with a crest-and turbans, was a ritual as well as a way of living.

No doubt most got jobs with Indians or other Europeans who came to India after Independence. But it is not the same. From those old servants' point of view, this new generation has no sense of dignity and decorum. They serve buffet dinners and people turn up in all sorts of costumes, in fancy bush shirts and even in dhotis! They have fish and meat on the same plate, eat Indian food with relish instead of relegating it to Sunday lunch, and drink all kinds of improper brews instead of the normal 'chota peg'. While economic circumstances have forced them to adjust to these new-fangled ideas, some can still be heard talking nostalgically of the 'standards' of the old days which the new brown sahibs can never acquire. Their skills have become the skills of a past age, like those of coach builders after the automobile was invented.

It was of course inevitable that we should meet the members of the local British community sooner or later. Coimbatore had a small British population of perhaps twenty-five families, employed mostly in British firms. Often the Collector, the Superintendent of Police and the District Judge were also British. The proximity to Ooty as well as the climate of Coimbatore was great assets and British officers generally liked it here. While, normally, there was no army officers stationed in Coimbatore, the war had brought large numbers of British officers to camps nearby. There were a number of tea parties and other functions to which the British and Indians were invited and we met the local British community at these

functions. These parties gave an illusion of social mingling between the two communities, but they were sufficiently short for *faux pas* on either side to be minimized.

An English girl in a sari was an unusual attraction at these parties and people came and spoke to Jaya. The British ladies were seemingly kind but in fact condescending. After the first few introductions, each time we met one of these ladies either at a tea party or at Spencer's shop which sold English groceries, they were always gushing. 'And how are you, my dear? You must find things quite different here, after all the rationing and bombing at home. We have managed to do reasonably well for ourselves don't you think? Of course, imported things are difficult; we have to get used to consuming local gin. It is quite drinkable when once you get used to it. But you can't have everything, can you? We have to make some sacrifices I suppose. Of course, if you know any of the officers in the local military station, you can buy things from their canteen; and you do get almost everything you need. You eat mostly Indian food, you say? I do enjoy a curry now and then, but I am sure I couldn't live on it. But I suppose in your situation.... Oh, you can speak Tamil, can you? How clever of you my dear! And you have been here such a short time! I am sure I couldn't learn the local lingo in a hundred years. And there is really no need. But of course, married to an Indian, you really have no choice, have you? You mean, you actually enjoy speaking Tamil? It is most noble of you I am sure. I hope the Indians appreciate it. I mean, it is almost like being a missionary, isn't it?'

They usually went on and on without pausing for breath, and you were not really expected to answer their questions. They seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of small talk.

And if I happened to be with my wife, they would start, 'And how do you do Mr... Mr..'

'Sreenivasan,' I would prompt.

'Oh, yes, of course! How stupid of me! I have been in India for twenty years and still find it difficult to remember Indian names. I must be very dim I suppose.'

Inability to remember Indian names in such cases was probably a Freudian incapacity. People are unable to remember the things they don't subconsciously want to remember.

But the lady would go on undaunted. 'I must rush my dear. I am so busy I have no time to say "Hello" to a friend. Paddy is coming for the week-end. You know paddy? Oh! But you must know him! He is a scream! And John is having people in for lunch. And then, there is the Red Cross "do" this afternoon. I really have no time, but I suppose one must do one's bit, particularly in wartime. And then, there is the tailor to fit in. I think that is rather good, don't you? "Fit the tailor in" I mean. I do hope the men don't go on drinking. It will upset the entire afternoon's programme. Well, bye-bye, dear. I must really rush.'

One or two ladies became quite confidential, almost conspiratorial. 'I wish you could come to the club,' they would say to Jaya. 'It would be such change for you, considering... well, considering everything. Personally, I have no objection to your husband. But you know how it is...' and the sentence was left unfinished.

They were of course referring to the Coimbatore Club, the exclusive preserve of British social life in that area. Indians were not only admitted as members or even guests, but on those rare occasions when one of them had to call on a member, he was not admitted into the lounge but made to wait outside. For people who considered themselves exiles in an alien land - surrounded by a sea of indifferent if not hostile faces-the club was a haven of social security and cultural affinity to which they could turn after the labours of the day were mercifully over. Having behaved like demi-gods in their offices all day, in the seclusion and privacy of the club they could let their hair down, give in to their weaknesses and indulge in their foibles in the sure knowledge that there were no prying Indian eyes watching. As far as the outside world was concerned, they were still demi-gods. There were of course the servants, and no doubt they gossiped in the bazaar, but they did not count. Further, to many of the servants their masters could do no wrong and their antics in the club merely added a touch of glamour to their personalities.

The social exclusiveness of the British in their colonial territories was so different from that of other European nations, particularly the French and the Dutch. I have discussed this with a number of people in an attempt to understand it. As one old India hand put it. 'Social institutions in India have always been based on caste. Even today, there are Hindu sports clubs and Parsee gymkhanas. Until recently, there was a pentangular cricket tournament between the major communities of India. We did not invent the caste system. India had done that for us. But when we found it, we had to declare ourselves "super" Brahmins if we were to make a success of our jobs. Because of our social exclusiveness, we could take objective decisions without being influenced by the pressure of local social environment. If the British Raj was on the whole fair as between one Indian and another, it was the direct result of our exclusiveness.'

But one got the feeling that if there had been no caste system in India, the British would have invented one.

Anyhow, it was this club that the British ladies referred to when sympathizing with us for not being able to make use of it. It had a swimming pool, tennis and billiards and weekly dances. British officers of a regiment stationed in that area as well as the fleet air arm added a bit of excitement to the routine life. The other ranks were of course not admitted. But it was the free and easy life of the club, the drinking and the gossip and the mild flirtations that added spice to an otherwise dull and drab life. Talks about home leave, the latest London shows, about the old India hands coming and going, the occasional scandals in the small community-were looked forward to with eager anticipation. The strain of behaving like demi-gods in the presence of Indians was often compensated for by middle-aged men

acting like overgrown adolescents and indulging in practical jokes of various kinds. To the average Englishman in India at that time, his professional life was confined to his office or the factory and his social life to the club. The club represented an emotional sheet anchor in the stormy sea of India.

The then Collector of Coimbatore with whom I was fairly friendly thanks to a common interest in literature suggested that I should become a member of the club. As its president, he assured me that I would be elected. But we refused. We did not want to be members of an institution that barred people on the basis of caste, colour or creed. It was another ten years before I was invited to become a member, this time in order to help change the rules so that Indians could be admitted as members.

It was surprising how in India, different strata of society existed side by side and moved along parallel lines that never met. I suppose that is so in most societies, but the heterogeneity of society in India was – and still is to a large extent – so pronounced and distinct that one could almost peel them off layer after layer.

There was first the British community, the smallest as well as the most exalted, since they were still ruling India. It consisted of a few officials, some businessmen and a number of officers of the defence services temporarily posted in Coimbatore. They rarely mixed with anyone else and even at official functions – such as the visit of the governor – they were a separate and distinct entity occupying the most prominent seats. They were polite and condescending and their contact with the rest of the population was confined to official business though a few of the younger military officers tried to make friends with the Indians.

Then there were the Indian officials and other professional men such as doctors, lawyers and accountants who led a double life. Their working hours were spent in European clothes, in contact with science and technology, medicine or jurisprudence. They also had frequent contacts with the British by virtue of their work, but their home life was often spent in the traditional manner. They had their own club known as the Indian Officers Club where they met in the evening to play bridge.

The industrialists and businessmen, who had grown in importance during the previous decade, and particularly during the war, were probably the wealthiest. They had very modern houses with all conveniences, lived in the traditional manner, went to men's clubs only – if they went at all –, were socially conservative and had very few interests other than their business or their family.

The politicians were a class by themselves – particularly if they belonged to the Congress or to one of the left-wing parties. Many had just been let out of gaol and were still frowned upon by officialdom. As inheritors of Gandhian virtues, they tended to be condescending to everybody, including the British. They often forgot that one of the Gandhian virtues was humility.

Then there were the school teachers and lecturers in colleges who read Milton and Shakespeare and even T.S Eliot. They were interested in literature, philosophy and religion, read books other than novels and discussed them. But economically, they could not afford to mix with any of the other groups, nor had they anything in common with them.

These different groups rarely met each other and when they did, were formal and polite and went back to the safety of their own cocoons at the earliest possible opportunity. Sartorially, linguistically, and even gastronomically, their tastes were different and there was very little in common between them. The only times when one could meet them all together were at important weddings and funerals, which everyone was expected to attend as a matter of duty, and on the Ootacamund race course, testifying to the universality of the gambling habit. The only other place where one could come across any of these people was in our house. We had no inhibitions about being friendly with all of them.

Apart from my wife's adjustment to Indian society, I too found such adjustment difficult. I was entering a new phase of life after education and marriage. I had to decide what to do, how I was going to earn my living and what contribution I should make to the society in which I lived. Having been used to an easy-going life in England where, when once you get a job, everything was taken care of, I found that conditions of living and working in India were very different. There was nothing ready-made. Everything had to be planned, other people had to be consulted, forms had to be filled in and things seemed to take ages. The kind of public morality one came across often left something to be desired. Instead of intellectual ferment and passionate discussions, I usually came across a kind of blank wall. A combination of all these factors led not to youthful enthusiasm but to a kind of lethargy. It took me a long time to get over this feeling and to recover my spirits as well as my sense of humour.

After we had been in India for about two and a half years, we paid a visit to England, Jaya to see her family and me to renew old friendships. It was a pleasant visit, but we were eager to get back. This time, there were none of the anxieties that bothered us on the first trip. This time, it was a true homecoming.

At what point of time does an outsider get fully accepted by Hindu society without reservations? Co-operation, kindness, even affection – these are not necessarily signs of acceptance. Admissions to rituals or ceremonies or participation in social celebrations did not mean much as these were by custom and certain people had traditional responsibilities by virtue of having married someone. Jaya and I used to wonder about it for a long time. But when our close relations started consulting Jaya on the possible choice of brides and bridegrooms for their children, then we knew we were fully integrated into our society.

After we had been in Coimbatore for some weeks, the subject of what I was to do was raised by my family. They were keen that I should take over the management of the mill. It would ensure that I stayed at home. I had myself thought over the matter a great deal and had also discussed it with my wife. Having disappointed my family in the choice of a bride, I did not want to cause them a second disappointment by wanting to go and work elsewhere. This would also give me greater freedom in that I was my own master whereas, if I were to take a job, I would be subject to a degree of discipline.

As chief executive of a textile mill, I suppose I was reasonably competent. The mill was a small one to begin with having just been started before the war. But during the twelve years I spent in the mill its size increased threefold and this was achieved merely by reinvesting the profits of the company. My family wanted me to take the initiative in setting up another textile mill or diversify into other industries. My nephews were growing up and it would be necessary for them to have something useful to do. But somehow my heart was not in it. To my way of thinking, running or even starting a new business was not sufficiently challenging for the type of talents I possessed. I was not enamoured of financial risks and gains that starting a new business would have involved but was looking for intellectual and emotional satisfaction in my professional life.

In addition to my duties in the mill, I was elected in October 1947 as honorary secretary of the Southern India Mill Owners' Association (SIMA) which position I held for four years. This happened while I was away on holiday in England. When my name was proposed, one of the members was supposed to have exclaimed, 'But how can you have him? He is hobnobbing with all the communists!'

As secretary of SIMA, the first major problem I had to tackle was a general strike involving all the mills in Coimbatore district and a labour force of about forty thousand workers. It was a bitter and prolonged strike and for me it was a time of anguish and anxiety. Both managements and trade unionists learnt many lessons from that experience and there has not been a similar strike since in Coimbatore.

In this new capacity, I had to represent the south Indian textile industry on many government committees. It gave me an opportunity to understand the processes of policy formulation in government and to influence it to some extent. The south Indian mills were mostly spinning units supplying yarn to handloom weavers at that time. Many spinning mills hoped to install looms. But this was not permitted by the government as a measure of protection for handlooms. I therefore suggested to the spinning mills that they should not think of handlooms as a temporary inconvenience but as permanent customers of yarn and develop good relations with that industry. This in the prevailing atmosphere at that time was difficult, but time has shown there was justification for my approach.

I followed the normal routine of a businessman and became a member of clubs, participated in local social and cultural activities and became known as a popular speaker at meetings. With such diverse activities, there was very little time for introspection or for any creative activity but I did write and publish a number of poems as well as a novel in Tamil. I even wrote, directed and produced a full length play, called 'The Anklet', on behalf of the local Rotary Club to raise money for community services. This was considered somewhat eccentric by a few of my friends whose interests, apart from business, were confined to cards or games and sports.

The idea of setting up a co-operative research association to serve the needs of the south Indian textile industry was first suggested by Sir Shanmugham Chetty. While the matter was still under discussion among the managements of mills, a similar institute had been started in Ahmedabad on the initiative of Vikram Sarabhai. Shanmugham Chetty passed away before the idea took proper shape, but as one who had worked in a similar organization in England for a number of years, I took up the idea enthusiastically. Along with other progressive mill managements, we gave shape to the idea, collected money and were able to start the South India Textile Research Association (SITRA).

Initially, I was the honorary director, running my mill and devoting some time to the work of the laboratory. But as the work of SITRA increased and as it became evident that it would be extremely difficult to get a suitable director, the other managements suggested that I should now leave my mills and become a full time director of SITRA. Financially, I would be worse off, but it would be a challenging and creative job and I would have the satisfaction of contributing something to the growth and development of the textile industry and the country in however small a measure. But I hesitated to accept, for two reasons. One was that I was related or friendly with many of the managements of mills and did not want any appearance of nepotism. Secondly, I felt that having been associated with a mill as an employer might be a handicap in heading a non-partisan body, particularly when it came to dealing with trade unions. But the representatives of the government as well as mills were insistent and I finally accepted in April 1957. I was pleasantly surprised to find that even the trade unions welcomed my appointment. As one union leader put it, 'We would rather trust the devil we know than the devil we don't.

Now I had an opportunity to build an organization from practically nothing, to shape it and develop it according to my ideas of what the country needed. There were no precedents and no ground rules which one could follow. There were many constraints to the growth of creative organizations in a country like India, such as shortage of money, outmoded procedures, unsympathetic or indifferent membership, non-availability of equipment and trained staff. But on the other hand, in a country like India it is possible for an individual to build an organization that will endure. In more sophisticated or industrialized countries, such institutions already exist or, if they are to be built, they are the result of group effort. But in India it is still possible for an individual to achieve something

creative. In fact, organizations seem to thrive better when an individual has devoted his time and effort to its growth, rather than when a group is involved. Thus, one associates the Indian Statistical Institute with Mahalanobis, the Atomic Energy Commission with Bhabha, and so on.

The foundation stone for SITRA was laid by Jawaharlal Nehru in December 1955 and the laboratories declared open by the then Vice-President, Dr. Radhakrishnan, in October 1958. Thanks to the post-war boom and the sellers' market, the mills were doing well financially. The depression and the closures of the sixties and the seventies were still far off. Many managements were not interested in research though they felt that a research institute was a good thing. Under such circumstances, I felt that the only way of attracting the mills towards research was to concentrate on the solution of their immediate problems so that they could learn to appreciate the value of research and development. Further, there was no point in undertaking sophisticated research which might have no relevance to the problems that the industry was facing. For successful implementation of research, it should always be a few steps ahead of industrial production, but not so far ahead that industry would lose sight of it. I also felt that as a laboratory serving the needs of a large number of spinning mills supplying yarn to the decentralized sector, SITRA had a responsibility to help handlooms, power looms and the hosiery factories.

Taking all these factors into account, the work of SITRA was concentrated largely on operational problems in mills and their solution. Later, when mills had begun to take an interest in our work and when research had acquired a degree of maturity and momentum, basic research on products and processes was undertaken successfully.

I also realized at a fairly early stage that the technical, economic and human problems of an industry could not be treated in isolation. For successful transfer of technology, the economic and human implications had to be fully understood and taken into account. I was also able to build up a group of competent scientists and technologists who were objective in their approach, problem rather than discipline oriented, scrupulously honest in evaluating their own or other people's work and modest in their claims. They accepted my philosophy of research and set about implementing it, and this was a major factor in our modest success. The fact that SITRA has often been accepted by both management and trade unions to arbitrate over disputes are an indication of the objectivity we brought to bear on our work. This kind of integrated approach has been largely responsible for whatever reputation SITRA enjoys in industrial circles.

Membership of SITRA has grown steadily over the past twenty years. Starting with forty-five members in Coimbatore, it now has a membership of nearly two hundred throughout India as well as in Sri Lanka. Its income from consultancy is very high and income from royalties is also increasing very rapidly. I have been so closely associated with the growth and development of this organization that some people refer to me as SITRA Sreenivasan.

As director of a research laboratory closely associated with industry, I was involved with the work of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research and in discussions of the role of laboratories in relation to industrial development. I also became a member of a number of committees connected with the textile industry, not as an employers' representative, as in the past, but as a non-partisan scientist. This meant being away from Coimbatore and from SITRA. But the work of the laboratory was not in any way affected. On the other hand, people remarked that the place ran much better when I was away! One of my own colleagues once referred to my frequent absence and said they were always glad to see their director on one of his rare visits to Coimbatore!

My interest in management as a concept began because of the consultancy work undertaken by SITRA. We found that very often it was not only lack of knowledge that was an inhibitive factor, but, even, the attitudes and approach to problems of people in charge of organizations. I found that many of the concepts of modern management, developed as a result of European or American experience, were not equally successful in India, not only because of technological constraints, but even more because of socio-cultural traditions.

Helping needy members of one's family and relations, the ethics of the caste system, respect for seniority and age, the easy informality of decision-making in a joint family, are all values we have inherited from our past. They are still with us and influence our behaviour. They do not cease to exist just because an individual has become an industrialist or the principal of a college. But when these values are extended to an industrial society, they are not conducive to efficiency or to productivity. Thus, unless we take these factors into our thinking on management and its problems, the modern concepts of management as well as techniques and skills are not likely to be very valuable. The more I was concerned with top management in an advisory capacity, the more I became convinced of the influence of social environment on management behaviour.

Consequently, I began to investigate this problem in some depth not only by a study of literature, but, even more, by observation and discussion with those in charge of industries. I was fortunately placed to do this as I was closely associated with a large number of top managements both professionally and socially. The result was the publication of two books, *Productivity and Social Environment* and *Anatomy of Progress*. In the first I put forward the thesis that while economic progress brought about social changes in its wake, it was equally necessary to promote social change in order to accelerate economic progress. While the first book was concerned largely with industrial productivity, the second was concerned with economic and social progress as a whole. I also went deeper into the motivating factors in Hinduism that has prevented us in progressing faster.

I allowed these books to be published somewhat hesitantly. After all, I was not a trained social scientist and was not keen on rushing in where angels feared to tread. But I need not have worried, for the books were extremely well received and reviewed, even being hailed as a 'unique contribution to sociological thinking' by one reviewer.

On the strength of this somewhat doubtful reputation as a management expert, or perhaps in spite of it, I became a popular speaker at management seminars and conferences which were sprouting all over the country like mushrooms after the monsoon rain. I was also appointed by the government to the central board of the Reserve Bank of India and as a founder director of Bokaro Steel. In the Republic Day honours list in 1969, I was awarded the title of Padma Bhushan.

The publication of two books and their favourable reception rekindled my interest in writing and I then wrote two novels, *A Handful of Earth* and *Devadaasi*, in quick succession. They were by no means bestsellers and did not add to my financial security in any way, but they were appreciated by 'discriminating' readers. That I was able to publish a novel which had no sex and no violence, no political or topical international interest was of some satisfaction for me.

I had always been fascinated by the famous Tamil classic *Tirukkural*, not only because of its antiquity but also because of its humanity and wisdom. It has been translated into English by a very large number of people including Rajaji. But, whenever I read a translation, it seemed to be a very pale imitation of the original. One reason for this was that, while the original was in short, terse, epigrammatic couplets, most translations were in prose. On the other hand, the only verse translation was by a nineteenth-century missionary, Dr. Pope, in complicated language and involved metre. So I decided to attempt translating this great classic in the same metre as the original - a formidable task which took much time and effort. But since it was in couplet form, it could be attempted whenever I had a little time. If I could do five couplets on the plane from Madras to Delhi, I was happy. This work was accepted for publication by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, who had also published Rajaji's translation earlier, and has now gone into a second edition.

I also became greatly interested in ancient Indian classics. While I could study the Tamil classics in the original with some difficulty, I had to depend on translations as far as Sanskrit was concerned. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* fascinated me-not as divinely ordained writings of moral value, but as great masterpieces of ancient literature and life. I was particularly intrigued by the character of Vibhishana. Other characters in mythology fought for glory, or over women, or for wealth or power. They generally followed the values of their society without question. They were not torn by conflicting ideals. As far as I know, Vibhishana is the only character in the whole world of mythology who was torn between his loyalty and patriotism on the one hand and his feelings of justice and virtue on the other. Great poets like Valmiki and Kamban have disagreed about his character. I felt therefore that truth must lie elsewhere and wrote about his life in an effort to explain his dilemma. The book was written in the form of an autobiography, because Vibhishana was given life-everlasting and, according to mythology, is still alive. It was serialized in *Bhavan's Journal* and later published as a book and sells in such diverse places as the bookshop at the Taj hotel in Bombay and the Ayyappan temple in Sabari Malai.

To rapidly conclude my story in its barest details. In June 1974 I was appointed chairman of the National Textile Corporation (NTC). It was offered to me on a full time basis, but I preferred to work in an honorary capacity. The mills under the NTC had been closed by the previous managements because of heavy losses and had been taken over by the government in order to provide employment to the affected workers. I was not very happy running my own mill and gave up being a 'millowner' as soon as I possibly could. Now, my friends pulled my leg and said I was the biggest 'millowner' in the country since the NTC controlled and managed one hundred and five textile mills employing a total of 1,50,000 workers. Some people referred to me as 'Doctor' Sreenivasan since I had been engaged to look after sick mills.

Unfortunately for the NTC and the country, my assuming charge as chairman and the nationalization of these mills happened to coincide with the most serious depression that the textile industry had witnessed in recent years. The mills under the NTC were old, with outmoded machinery, low productivity and high cost. Nationalization and reorganization at such a time was like repairing the roof when the rains had set in. Out losses went on increasing. For the year 1975-6 I had the doubtful distinction of having lost more of the taxpayers' money than any other single individual. But I was glad to find that there was considerable sympathy and understanding both in government and in the press with regard to the difficulties faced by the NTC.

I set about analyzing the problems in a thorough and systematic manner and tackling them in order of priority. There was a gradual improvement in production and quality through better machine utilization and inspection. Purchase of cotton was streamlined and most of our requirements were obtained from public sector organizations. A network of shops was opened throughout the country to ease the marketing situation and to create a better public image of the organization. From the long-term point of view, plans of modernization were drawn up and implemented to the extent that finance was available. But more than all these things, a feeling of challenge and dedication was created in the minds of officers, executives and workers. As a result of all these steps, the losses began to come down and by 1978, nearly fifty mills out of a total of one hundred and five showed profit.

In May 1978, I was elected Vice-President of the Textile Institute, an apex international body of textile technologists whose membership extends to about thirty countries. People often compliment me on my contribution to the progress and development of the textile industry. But at this point, it is just as well to remember what one of my more candid friends said a little while ago-that since I started making a substantial contribution to the textile industry, its profitability has been steadily going down!

I have lived through the broad spectrum of Indian life-from the very backward and the feudal to the intellectual, the sophisticated and the progressive.

When I was born, the First World War was entering its most serious and final phase. Mahatma Gandhi had just returned to India from South Africa and was still tentatively conducting his experiments with truth. Mass production was yet an unborn idea in the mind of Henry Ford. Words like nuclear fission, atomic bomb, computer technology, which today are matters of everyday knowledge, were not known even to the best brains of the age. Space ships were still in the imagination of novelists like H.G. wells. The sun never set on the British Empire and the population of the world was less than half of what it is now. Women had not yet got the vote and promised without protest to love honour and obey their husbands. There was still a bridge across the generation gap though children were seen and not often heard.

But more than all these have been the changes that have taken place in the minds of men. Ethics and morals, ends and means, right and wrong, were taken seriously as if they meant something worthwhile. There were certain accepted standards about the basic virtues, even among those who violently disagreed. Most of these values have been blown to bits in the explosion that destroyed Hiroshima. The world today is floundering in a sea of spiritual despair matched only by the complexity of changes taking place in the physical environment in most countries.

If science is knowledge without wisdom and philosophy wisdom without knowledge, only when they are combined will it be possible to have social as well as spiritual progress. But in the last fifty years, there has been such an explosion of knowledge that it has completely outstripped all other kinds of activity. Mankind has not had adequate time to digest this knowledge and arrive at a wisdom that encompasses it.

Yes, I have travelled a long way from my boyhood days in Karadibavi, not only in time but in terms of knowledge, attitudes and relationships. Faith was the keynote of that world-faith, contentment and the joys of ignorance. But the modern world is a cruel governess; she hurls invisible things at us called ideas. They come in an avalanche in which contentment is drowned and happiness replaced by an uneasy restlessness. Questioning and doubt float in our minds and there is a ceaseless striving after the unknown and the unknowable. The world has given us wisdom without joy.

But I am not the only one who has changed. Karadibavi has changed too. In many ways it has changed for the better. There is electricity in the village for lighting and irrigation (though there are frequent power failures!). Children no longer have to strain their eyes in front of smoky oil lamps in order to do their lessons. There is a high school there – in addition to the elementary school- named after my cousin, a maternity centre with a well-qualified staff and a veterinary hospital, named after my father. Drinking water can now be

collected at the tap in the village square instead of women having to walk a mile! There has been all round progress in the material sense. But the old stability and permanence have gone-the social cohesion replaced by an uneasy democracy in the form of the panchayat, in which caste feelings and money exert their subtle influence. The old ties are gone; but the new have still to come.

The fifteen uncles are all dead. Many of their sons and most of their grandsons are dispersed, doing all kinds of things in towns and cities. The old quality-so carefully preserved by the Awkward Uncle who paid voluntary income-tax- has disappeared, since some have done well financially and others have not. They come to the village occasionally, usually for weddings or funerals – since we all prefer to be cremated in our ancestral soil. They talk nostalgically about the old times for a day or two and then disperse. Only my mother-aged ninety-five-still lives in the village, like a presiding angel over a vanishing past.

So, we have both changed, from the days I danced at the temple, from my first literary effort, 'The Story of Kamalapuri', even from the speech of Ramaswamy Periar that I heard. Perhaps the irony of life is not that the things you loved once have changed, but that you have also changed and are incapable of loving what you once cherished. Thus one becomes a stranger to one's own past.