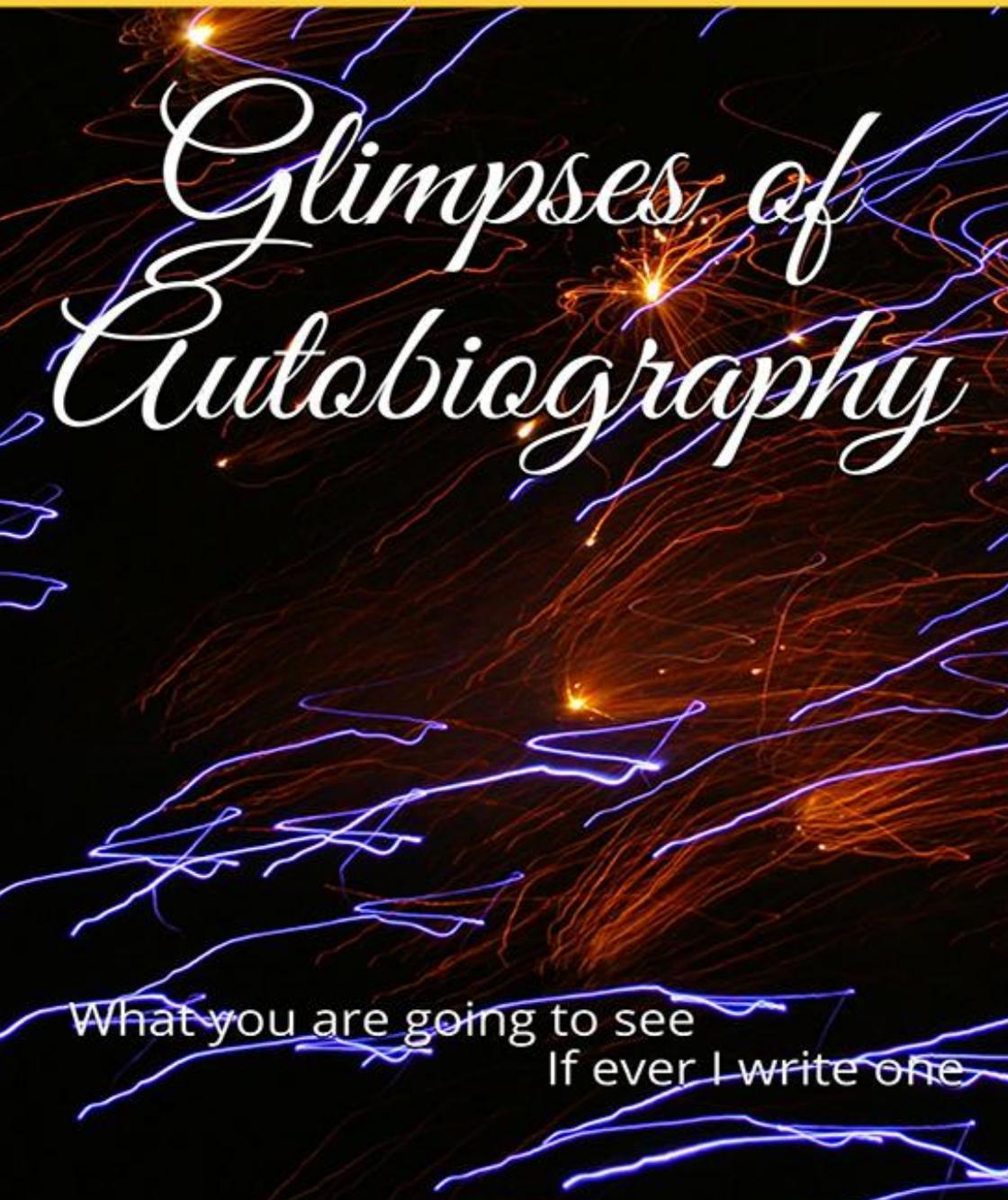


ROY T JAMES



*Glimpses of
Autobiography*

What you are going to see
If ever I write one

Glimpses of Autobiography

Roy T James

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I know, autobiography cannot be a natural destination for me, having neither been a rare specimen of my generation nor a captivating figure to make my story worthy of recall, let alone a life replete with achievements where reminiscences flourish. But I find myself singularly lucky to have had the association, be it as parents, relatives or elders, or allies, enemies, or peers, with greatly remarkable and distinctive personalities, each of them, an epic in one's own right. Rather than meeting the main character of a telling story, I offer you all a unique opportunity of listening to the uncommon anecdotes hoarded by a common man, who, as that label would suggest, likes to remain faceless.

1. My Father

The persona of my father was in fact a conglomeration of dormant traits, unseen skills and hidden talents, each of them more notable than all the others for its uniqueness. He was very popular with many among the ‘who is who’ of our small town and was in the habit of spending his spare time (he was accustomed to having that in great abundance, as you are going to agree!) with those gentlemen. For some reason, if he is not able to keep up with an appointment, we at home used to get reminders from almost every passerby walking along the road in front of our house that “such and such dignitary is waiting for him with many of his companions, why he hasn’t been able to join them?” If we happen to share the reason (generally some household chore, like felling a tree, clearing certain hedge or moving some heavy objects) for his delay, they were more than eager to provide us with all possible help in finishing that job such that my father could release those gentlemen from their inactive and dull reverie by kick starting some enthralling discussions!

My father cultivated a taste for dreaming big, becoming a successful businessman one day being only one of his fantasies. May be constant interactions with his associates, many of who were from fairly wealthy background, kept this dream alive. He always could be seen with a few notebooks full of project implementation details, financial calculations, other necessities and apparent profits of many novel ideas, ready to give

valuable input to deliberations on any topic among these budding businessmen. Discussions of such nature being a prerequisite of any gathering among these gentlemen, it is no wonder that my father came to be instituted as an indispensable part of their group! My father also was a devoted parent, wholeheartedly involving in all the activities of his children, which on many instances and to our chagrin, went to the extent of imposing himself on us.

A few of his ideas, some that managed to take off from a rather conceptual stage and break into the foray of business, and a few others that took a significant part in forming what I am, I remember, each one of them, as you shall notice, adding one more shade to his many colored character.

Maker of Ferment

In the late sixties and early seventies, prohibition was alive in Tamil Nadu and being close to the border between the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, our small town had good market for anything which can act as a substitute for alcoholic drinks. My father proposed an ingenious scheme. Identify an expert to produce certain types of ayurvedic preparations and market the concoction as Kerala Arishtam, (a type of medicine prepared following ayurveda, the ancient Indian healing science) which is in good demand across the state border due to its not so negligible intoxicant value. This idea was well received by all, many of them agreeing to contribute monetarily,

leaving the professional management with a few, of course, including my father. And they started in good earnest.

That the bottles of this item should be well shaped reminding one of some costly and well known liquor brand in addition to having sufficient strength to withstand rough handling, was something that was instantly acknowledged. Further discussions brought another important aspect of marketing to fore – the need to have rich, attractive and colorful label, to which also, everyone agreed. Out goes the purchase order for approximately five thousand bottles and an equivalent amount of labels! (That the design of these labels had my artistic contribution, I proudly recollect!) This was followed by orders related to other requirements, like the paraphernalia of packaging and other needs at various links of the supply chain, ending of course, in the search for a suitable ayurvedic physician to make the concoction.

The search for a ‘vaidyan’, the name such physicians are known by, could not produce any successful result. Most of those located were found to be already engaged with some other relatively better established organizations or factories. The remaining few demanded unaffordable compensation, justifiably so; this was an area of fierce competition, thanks to its profitability. After relentless search, my father managed to locate an old colleague of his younger days (who used to tell us stories of deer hunting, I remember) as a professional consultant, a jack of all trades who presently was leading a retired life.

Not only that this gentleman agreed to start production of the ‘medicine’ but also convinced the manufacturing team that the secret formula will eventually be taught to some of them, enabling smooth continuation of the production process even in his absence.

The appointed day came and the process of preparing the blend began with much fanfare, but to everyone’s agony, what turned out was only a tasteless liquid without having the potential to produce any alcohol like sensation. The main ‘physician’ had an immediate answer; some of the constituents used must have been fake or spurious! All were heartbroken except my father, who, rather than sharing the somber mood, exclaimed aloud “Good that it is proven worthless now itself rather than afterwards, in which case we would have invited the wrath of all those who bought our product as well as that of the government”

By this time, all the business associates who had supplied items like bottles, labels and other paraphernalia started losing their patience. With no sight of any income to enable repayment of their dues, my father and his colleagues took the last option by disposing off all those items and using the sale proceeds in settling the account, at least in part, that too to avoid an imminent legal dispute. This effectively brought the curtains down to one more project which promised great returns!

Maker of Lamps

This in fact is the very first business venture of my father and perhaps needs to be acknowledged as the event that made him very comfortable with failures.

In those days bicycle was the main mode of personal transport and the inconvenience of cycling, especially at night, was felt by all. A small dynamo attachment taking drive from the cycle wheels (the wheel tyre, really) was in use but was not very popular as it could maintain a reasonably good level of illumination only during high speed cycling. In short, this drive considerably increased the pedaling effort required, especially in hilly terrains that too in some cases much beyond a man's strength. Not only that people were forced to walk with their cycles while on the up-slope, the additional wear and tear caused by the dynamo ended up necessitating more frequent replacement of wheel tyres.

Another device in use was a kerosene lamp which had the inconvenience of not having a beam bright enough to light up ones path well, though it was considerably more economical and effortless.

My father proposed a kerosene lamp with focused light, where the main lobe of the light beam is formed using a set of concave-convex lenses and its alignment, similar to the ones used in the popular cycle of Malaysia – Singapore, Silverking. To demonstrate the optics of beam

generation, he procured few lenses (Good quality ones from Coimbatore, I remember) and one set of ‘dies’ for the lamp. Though the actual lamp could not be shown, he demonstrated (I was his eager apprentice) the possibility of producing many different beams using the lenses and variations in focusing. Imbibing my father’s rudimentary knowledge of optics, I too (I was studying in school, third or fourth standard), joined him in successfully dispelling the doubts of many a colleague.

Finally, the design of the lamp was accepted by all (the earlier mentioned optical demonstrations standing to good stead!) and the proposal took off, all the promoters agreeing on the name ‘Silverqueen’, obviously paying obeisance to the original source of the idea, the Silverking.

To meet the financial demands, all share holders, my father and two of his cousins, agreed to put in equally. My father resigned from his job and invested in full, whatever was his terminal benefits, just about meeting his share of the project. Of the other two partners, one disposed off his business, a training institute for teaching typewriting and short hand, together with all its machinery assets. The other one had a functioning flour mill, the sale proceeds of which met his share of the capital comfortably.

All of us, about nine children, six parents, four grandparents and two great grandparents were thrilled as the procurement department (Of course, my father!) went to many places near and far to fetch the necessary

hardware. For days together, much of the machinery spares and other articles lying around in our place, and we children could do experimenting to our heart's content. And I was in great demand, both at school and at home, to show optical experiments to a substantial gathering of our home folk and neighbors, utilizing the collection of lenses and colored (red and green) glasses. I even managed to assemble a rudimentary projection system to show film bits, discarded pieces of which could be fetched from the waste dump of a local movie theatre.

All the machinery ordered having arrived and found in good condition; a small manufacturing unit was being established in a nearby industrial estate. We all were eagerly awaiting its successful completion and sadly, one of the cousins (The one who had a typing institute) succumbed to a heart attack and collapsed. Money was needed immediately and they took the only available option – scrapping their venture.

To our relief, one gentleman sprang up from nowhere and promised to buy the venture in 'as is where is' condition, that too offering a good price. Most of us could not believe our luck, may be our project was very well planned, my father exclaimed aloud. (He did the planning!) We agreed to sell, the buyer offering some money to the deceased partner's widow and promissory notes to the other two partners.

We children grew up dreaming about the maturity of those promissory notes (This had to be very much with us, any demand, like a new watch or a good pair of shoes, used to elicit a standard reply, “Let the promissory notes mature!”) till one day that good gentleman was arrested along with few others for running a counterfeit currency racket.

Though my mother was inconsolable to find all of us in varying stages of misery with our dreams shattered, my father was having a hearty laugh, “Thank god he was arrested before he paid us our due”

That he lost all his earnings made no dent in his ebullient nature and the belief that huge profits lie hidden with every project that is on the drawing board.

The Rational

My father was a firm believer that in all circumstances and at all times, whatever we do should be consistent with or based on good reason. He perhaps stretched this a little too far, as the following incidents show.

We (My elder brother and I) were in school, studying in seventh and sixth classes respectively. Normally we used to carry our lunch, packed in a banana

leaf appropriated as a container, the best, for use and throw. For some reason, my father decided to procure a lunch box (tiffin carrier, in popular parlance) and after much calculation and critical comparison between the costs of buying two separate ones (one for each son) and a big one for both the sons, he reached the conclusion that one big lunch carrier for both the boys is economically more meaningful. Accordingly he procured one big tiffin carrier (with five partitions!) for me and my brother.

The novelty of handling such an extraordinary and big artifact made it an instant hit, leading to celebrations, revelry and feelings of possessiveness. The excitement of using the partitions selectively to carry different menu items, along with the opportunities that arose for showing off the newly acquired possession, only reinforced it. But all this vanished into thin air when the burden of handling this object with care and safety started to make its appearance. This was compounded by the looming threat of a decree by the father, specifying the need to certify to its good condition at regular intervals. Added to that were the frequent taunts from classmates, which we could easily stand, and the curious, sometimes sympathetic, look from a few elders we used to come across on the way to school, which we couldn't easily stand.

Out comes a mountain of issues – Who will carry? Who will clean? Who will ensure safekeeping? And a horde of other questions that called for a meeting of elderly minds to settle the issue once for all. I remember, my

excuse for avoiding any responsibility was that being a small boy, carrying this heavy weight shall interfere with my studies, whereas, my brother's argument was that this shall interfere with his sports routine. Also, borrowing from father he pointed out, as his younger brother does not take part in regular sports activities, carrying the tiffin carrier will greatly benefit him in physical development.

We brothers were finally made to accept a compromise; whoever finishes his meals last shall take charge of the tiffin carrier in its return journey from school, the forward journey when the vessel is heavier will be under the charge of the elder one. My habit of finishing off with meals in a flash might have had its origin in those lunch breaks, for, I used to complete my part of lunch before my brother could even begin his share, thus successfully passing on to him, the responsibility of looking after the tiffin carrier in its return trip as well. This little trouble remained with us (My father in his wisdom had dictated, "This should be used for at least three years to justify the investment!") causing hot tempers, fist fights and many other unpleasant exchanges between the brothers till we finished schooling and the tiffin carrier was laid to rest.

My father was of the considered opinion that young age generally sport a high rate of growth and if dresses are not stitched taking this fact into account, children shall very soon overgrow the dresses, necessitating replacements to be provided for, before the

earlier one can complete its service life. Adding to this was another favorite dictum of his, making two dresses from a single cloth piece of suitable size is economically more beneficial compared to stitching two dresses from two separate cloth pieces. These might have been based on sound reasoning, but both the brothers going to school and back dressed in shorts and shirt of same cloth material and of identical (family signature!) design that too, stitched in the same oversized pattern, certainly gave rise to many comments and giggles en route. When reported to him, his answer was another one of his favorite refrains “No one will dare to continue laughing at you, if you also join the laughter!”

Robert the Bruce

That his very first attempt ended in dismal failure, instead of causing discouragement, made my father’s resolve to excel in business, even greater. Total lack of monetary support (all his savings, by then, completely spent) could not be a deterrent, he, as his earlier partners (cousins) were averse to jumping into further ventures especially without solid financial support, found new collaborators who would never be held back by such monetary preconditions. These new entrepreneurs were in possession of even greater ideas than those of my father but they needed to be fine tuned by adding certain numerical

calculations of income and expenditure to make them look feasible, which of course, was my father's forte.

Though he had resigned from his job as I had mentioned elsewhere, many of his old colleagues were in constant touch with him, some of them making frequent visits to our home. During such visits, which we children always used to long for, they used to make kind enquiries about our welfare, studies and other generalities while gifting us with clothes, books and toys, but mainly discussing business ideas with my father. Each of them had their own style; one preferred large scale enterprises while another one was contented with a comparatively humbler venture and a third friend could be at ease only with a plan of magnificent proportions.

Depending on whose visit triggered its formulation, the next business proposal of my father could be seen varying between the establishment of a major industry, organizing a medium scale distribution business or starting a small venture. Some of his proposals were further acted upon by his co-entrepreneurs, though none of these ideas ever fructified.

Throughout my school years, or rather till I joined college, my father was busy with some ideas like these and every day was an exciting day as far as we children were concerned. There were many occasions when such business meetings were held at home with at least one among the group happening to be a well known figure. And as a

result, we happened to be acknowledged in those days as the sons of a businessman who is on the way to great times!

Man of Many Seasons

Though the picture emerging out of all these stories is one of a rather quixotic entrepreneur, I am still left with a few more shades of his character to paint, many of them, more than worth the effort.

He was a firm believer that children should get accustomed to good things early in life and that will make them feel responsible later, as young adults. That this was the guiding principle based on which he took decisions concerning our childhood can be seen, in all that happened with us during our school years.

For example, in 1973 national football championship for Santosh trophy was being held at Cochin, quite at a distance from our town. My father took both his sons to watch the finals. This adventure made immediate heroes of us, we brothers remaining as ‘talk of the school’ for many days to come. (That after this trip, most of the items from our frugal menu went missing for many weeks to come and any expression of resentment on that count used to be countered by a rather philosophical reply that ‘every

enjoyment has a price', were the other consequences of this adventure!)

My father was a good communicator, smooth-spoken and a first-rate listener. Wherever he went, there always used to be a small audience around him, eagerly listening to the animated briefs on what is happening in the world. He was also abreast of political and social developments and changes in day to day procedures of governance, like, filling up various declaration formats like the application form for the ubiquitous ration card, and other stuff of concern to average citizens, being an avid reader of many a newspaper. This also added to his audience, almost every one among them with at least one troubling question or a lingering doubt each to clarify during this brief visit. Added to this of course was the role played by government by changing the nature and contents of these forms at the drop of a hat calling for fresh clarifications at each and every visit. Though it was not intended to be thus, most of our friends and relatives were unaware of the actual, broken condition of our life (especially after the Silverqueen fiasco!), we children always found well dressed and head of the family, an expert on international affairs.

Our relatives facing difficulties in life, especially of financial nature, used to approach my father for some favors and his reply always was, rather than pointing to the present dismal state of business for citing inability to offer any immediate assistance, replete with magnanimity in

promising much greater help than whatever was requested, when his ongoing business fructifies. (This of course did lead to the inclusion of ‘granting success’ to my father’s ‘endeavors’, as one of the blessings to be sought in the daily prayers of many a family!)

Lover of Books

My father started his working career as small time official in a plantation company owned by the British (Malayalam Plantations Ltd), almost all higher level officers being Europeans, many of them from England. This was so for many years, until it was nationalized completely. These officers used to be appointed for tenure of three to five years after which they go back to their original place. Some time before they depart, they used to collect all their personal belongings together and invite all the staff members home. There, after announcing their departure plan, they will exhort everybody to inspect and take whatever they find useful, before disposing off the rest of the stuff, normally to someone dealing with scrap.

So it happened, my father and his mother, who joined the plantation company much earlier as a nurse, had amassed a good gathering of oddities, like woolen sewing kit or crotchet, over many such events of distribution of personal possessions by departing officers. These collections were adorning our house, prominently

displayed as trophies and anyone visiting us could see cute vessels of varying shapes and sizes originally meant for making cakes and preparing confectionery, stylish crockery, cutlery and other novelties of bungalow life. All the visiting relatives and friends used to find our home even more amusing, when contrasting the aristocratic ambience and serving style with, the not so impressive menu. This was a blessing in disguise; I can recollect many of the, comparatively aristocratic and wealthy, helpful connections spending their time more at ease in our little comforts and open to considerations of mutual benefit.

I believe, on being informed of such occasions by the outgoing officers, my father used to be one of the last, joining the crowd just in time to manage a few items still remaining to be appropriated, many of them pieces of crockery, cutlery and furnishings, that too of patterns unpopular in this part of the world, or books, most of which themed about British culture.

This left us with a good library (good books and an even better bookshelf) at home, with many well known books on poetry (Palgrave's golden treasury), history (Decline and fall of the Roman Empire), travelogues and many novels. And of course, some really aristocratic reclining chairs to devour those books!

This bookshelf and its contents do have its pride of place in our childhood memories. While we were very small, we children used to sleep on beds spread

adjacent to it, such that our father could select a book of his choice and read that to us while we fall asleep. His choice used to vary between somewhat serious books like autobiography of Nehru, interesting works by few well known authors like Pearl S Buck, detective fiction like the Perry Mason series or travel adventures depending on how our (read mine, my brother was not much keen on this) day went, as good children or ones needing lessons on good behavior, I suppose. Years later, when we were elevated to school going kids, we had to read a book of his choice and explain him the content or the story, in few cases studying it by heart and reproducing. (A few of his favorites, I still remember, like, “Build me a son, O Lord..Who is humble and gentle in victory...” by General McArthur, and “It’s solidity and imperturbability looked at me with the wisdom of a thousand years...” by Nehru)

Role Model

In one of his business trips, the ones anyway known to all in our family circle as highly non-productive, my father met my maternal grandfather (as mentioned elsewhere, we were not at all in contact with him) who happened to be holding some position of influence at that time with his political party in power, being a ‘panchayat’ president and a practicing trade union leader. The grand old man, taking note of the fact that there is plenty of room for improvement in our circumstances and using whatever

influence he could summon with those in power, helped my father in getting hired on contract basis by a newly established industry, an oil palm project, which was in the early stages of being set up.

Even now I can sense at close quarters, the excitement we boys used to feel those days, for, possessing an imaginative and lively disposition, my father was in the habit of making every event look like an occasion to cherish. For example, one day he would be announcing in the morning (with much fanfare, of course!) “Today is bonus payment day and in the evening, you boys meet me at the bus-stand. We will do some shopping”. We, my brother and I, will be waiting at the specified place with three shopping lists, one each for the brothers and one for the sister.

Pleasure of shopping was experienced in those outings. Generally we were permitted to choose on our own while selecting items of fashion like dress material or shoes, though with certain ‘strict’ tips for smart shopping. ‘Do not choose an item displayed right in front, also those totally at the back. While discarding the cheapest ones and avoiding those marked very costly, it is best to stick to those priced moderate. It may be foolish to choose the latest in fashion as what you buy may go out of fashion before it could be used to its full extent.’

Once we brothers were taken on a conducted (by my father of course!) tour of the area around the oil

palm farm under development and was introduced to the project head, an expert in plantation related affairs, having been in Malaysia for many years associated with holdings of oil palm. He was a kind, humorous gentleman who explained many ‘tricks of the trade’ in this industry and we had a good time, in enjoying the plantation then as well as bragging about the visit to our school mates later.

As the saying “good things rarely last”, that job became nonexistent in a few months time, with the completion of initial works of setting up the plantation followed by its merger with the industrial establishment of the state.

Ingenious par excellence

With three school-going children you can imagine the unforeseen expenses one should always be ready to meet. Without having any assured means to meet even the regular expenses of daily living, it is a miracle that he could bring us successfully to the present level. Thinking back, I now see the commendable ingenuity my father showed in stonewalling much of the ‘unforeseen’ financial needs.

Like this incident which happened during my seventh class at school, when a pleasure cum study trip was organized for all students. When the opportunity came, I

posed this question to my father, “Next month, our school is planning an excursion to Peechi dam (a picturesque spot), should I give my name?” He pondered for a while and said “Son, there is a dam nearby, let us first have a visit to that place before taking further decisions in this regard, say, this Sunday?” I was always charged up for such visits and come next Sunday, I and my father (my brother was not at all keen on such ‘timid’ activities, more at comfort with his rather tumultuous group) spent almost the full day at the nearby ‘dam’, which in fact was a barrage built to enhance water availability for a mill nearby. He explained the engineering marvel behind the adaptation of a natural feature of the sandy river bed into a permanent structure, which presently was being used, in addition to being a reservoir for the mill, for growing fish, boating and also for some other profitable ventures. While concluding the visit, he made many supportive comments on the barrage and its worth, especially the ease it could offer in grasping the many different features of a dam. It is impossible to derive any such educational value from the visit to Peechi, that too without elaborate planning, preparation and guidance, he observed.

Having compensated fully for the loss to the academic gain that would have resulted from a trip to Peechi Dam, many other forms of entertainments are easily available to balance the recreational benefits, if you are not able to be part of the trip, he cheered me up. And that was the final journey of ‘the proposed visit to Peechi dam’.

As a result of many such exploits, I grew up well acquainted with the local spots of interest though turned out to be a greenhorn, when it came to the farther, more popular ones.

Unfortunate Aristocrat

My father chose the shape and style of a modest businessman in all his appearances whether at home, where no one was in agreement, or with other people well known or unknown, where nobody was in disagreement. But there were a few occasions which used to bring another streak of his personality, that of an aristocrat, to fore.

He, during our initial days of schooling, made it a point to visit the school on selected occasions (once or twice a year) meeting the teachers or other authorities to enquire about the progress his children is showing. Showering the teaching staff with complimentary observations and picking keen, insightful words to show how worthy of admiration is the work done by them, he would be making solemn affirmations of the incalculable progress his children are making.

His visits invariably were followed by at least one extra review or home work from the teachers with a remark that ‘the additional questions are, as specifically demanded by your father’.

2. Some days of My Schooling

I have no memories of schooling till reaching second standard where I can faintly recollect going to school run by a popular convent at Kayamkulam, the place were our 'clan' hailed from, which permitted boys, though only up to standard IV. I believe, due to the absence of any type of educational facility in the place of his work (where he was living with his family) my father dispatched his three children with their mother to live with their paternal great grandmother, he having taken the decision to quit his job for starting some venture. (It is this venture and some of its aftereffects that we have saw in the earlier pages)

I studied in this school for only two years and the first stint of my academic life came to an end. I do not remember coming across any of my classmates of those years except two of them, one, as a well known advocate and political leader and the other, as a girlfriend of and later married to one of my best friends and classmate in engineering college.

We had to change our school as we were moving to another town. My father was transferred to another office located in an even remote village; I think Perengoda estate and my mother had to join him. He was to leave us with his mother, a woman notorious for her mercurial temperament, sharp tongued retorts and independent nature. (She by that

time had retired from her job and bought a new house for settling down, in a fairly big town, Punalur) I think this transfer was the last nail on the coffin; it reinforced his decision to leave his job and start whatever venture he was planning, come what may.

My studies in standard IV was in Punalur, in government LP school, in the local vernacular medium, much against the advices of everyone. None among the fellow church goers or relatives far and near had their children studying in the school chosen for me and I had to pick up fresh friends. Many of them were wage earners themselves, who could not afford to attend school regularly except making it in time for the mid day meal.

Before I could complete schooling, my father had quit from his job and all we children had to join our parents at Kayamkulam, where he started his new venture. My second stint of schooling happened to be here at Government Boys UPS Kayamkulam, which lasted for two years. None of my erstwhile classmates of standards II or III were in my class. (As can be expected, it was in vernacular medium)

Next two years were eventful. My father's new venture didn't take much time to collapse. The exact reasons for the failure is unimportant, the key result is that we had to once again shift our residence to Punalur, under the watchful eyes of our grandmother.

My father's relationship with his mother was not as affectionate as it should have been between a mother and her only child. Nor was there any lingering resentment affecting all expressions of warmth. The main factor which held back either side from a totally congenial path I think was the independent nature of my father. That he was not disciplining his wife, as she or any other mother in law would have liked her son to, became the main grouse of my grandmother. The dispute was always there, the more his mother insists on this, the more liberal or bighearted my father appears to his wife.

In her good mood which is not very often, the grand mother used to tell us bits and pieces of her life story with backing evidences. She used to have a good collection of paraphernalia, of old letters, mementoes and other articles or curios. In all her stories, she is the unfortunate victim. And someone from our family or friends always used to be found for taking the role of the nasty villain. Naturally some of us used to express doubt, and the quick suppression of which, was the main purpose of these 'evidences'!

Her favorite story was that of her marriage, that it did not last long and her husband went to Singapore. That he wrote her many letters from Singapore asking her to join him. But she chose to stay back to look after her baby boy. That she had to face a lot of challenges to bring up her son while managing to continue with her job. But all these story sessions used to end with the same theme. She is

having an unhappy time because of the cavalier attitude of her son, her single child, in chastising his wife to behave as a dutiful daughter in law.

Except for these annoyances which unfortunately occupied much of the time of the day, domestic harmony prevailed.

This was the state of affairs when we children began their third stint of academic life at this place, as students of HS Punalur, a school well known for the notoriety as well as fame, of many of its old students from all strata, from the most admirable positions of the society to the least desirable ones.

My father had a choice of three schools, and to decide on the one where we are going to study, he had many a discussion with teachers, parents and others of relevance. Discarding the one closest to our home, he selected the school in which he could find a more affable teaching faculty, I think. For the remaining four years of schooling I spent here is the best part of my memories as a student.

There is little that the school didn't encourage. It had a good library and the teacher looking after that permitted me to draw books, with strict instructions. "Choose any book from Science, History, and Languages, show me the books that you draw from Poetry or Travelogues and remember that all other shelves are out of bounds" But the

books that interested me, novels and stories, were only in those shelves and very soon I learned the trick. I used to volunteer to help the library staff in general upkeep, arrangement of books and magazines, mustering and maintaining records to get in return, the opportunity of reading all those ‘interesting’ books.

Certain ‘more colorful’ student activities were introduced by the government, like photography, fine arts, woodwork etc, to make time spent in school more interesting and useful, naming these as extracurricular activities. I remember, many teachers, especially the ones leaning to the political opposition of the state, for reasons unfathomable to us didn’t take kindly to this and drubbed these as ‘Koya Curricular Activities’, a barbed reference to the then education minister, Mr. CH Mohammed Koya!

Thinking back, each and every teacher who was dealing with us directly in class rooms, whose involvement was experienced elsewhere in the academic field, or who joined us in more colorful activities, stands out with their utmost dedication and genial nature. Whenever I come across reminiscences, especially of student days, where profuse compliments are seen showered on some of the old guiding lights, I have tried to compare between my old teachers. Who deserves more credit? Who stands out from the rest? How much ever I try, none of them appear with any brilliance less than the best. Impossible, it really is, to differentiate between the melodic but stringent approach followed by the Malayalam master, the exacting but

considerate teaching style of the most unpopular subject among all of us, Mathematics, the lingering but animated discussions that took place in the class rooms for Humanities and Languages, or the enchanting but practical demonstrations that demystified the learning of Science, whatever be the yardstick.

True to his belief, whenever he was at home my father used to constantly remind us of the need to take part in games and sports. Though physical efforts were not well taken by my body, being of frail structure and a sickly composition, I chose to join the training classes for basketball, which I thought was a gentler game. The first day began with a demonstration of the way ball is to be held using both the hands, the palms of either hands holding the ball together, making an angle of a little more than ninety degrees. I tried this grip, but could not succeed in achieving a firm hold on the ball without some clumsy manipulation and support from upper torso! And that was the end of my sports classes.

To get over the depressed spirits after the fiasco with basket ball, I turned my attention to other, gentler activities like debate, quiz and cultural gatherings, much of the sage advices from elders suggesting so. Not only that these new fields were substantially more suitable to my constitution and outlook, but also gave many new opportunities of exhibiting my zones of comfort. I could complete matriculation with a worthy record of extra curricular achievements and good academic result.

3. A leaflet from the College days

Sree Narayana College, Punalur is where I began my college education. The college, located on top of a small hill with an approach road winding around it, used to give us plenty of opportunities to plan, meet, discuss and execute many ‘daring’ activities. Mostly they were excesses inseparable from student life, and the few remaining, adolescent pranks. The course of the long walks through that meandering path, before the beginning of classes, as well as after the end till we disperse to different directions was ideal for planning such exploits. (This could be a reason for students’ unrest, a lot of opportunities of such long walks!)

After completing successfully the pre-degree course, I was sharing with others at home the forlorn thoughts about a bleak future, the fictitious business ventures of my father having given no returns. My father suddenly sprang up with a newspaper article regarding the introduction of a new ‘unlimited education loan’ scheme by Punjab National Bank. And he instantly dressed up, took me along for a visit to the nearest branch of this bank at Kollam, a bigger town a little far away. The bank manager gave us a sympathetic hearing and after examining academic records, offered to provide me with an education loan. The expense associated with my engineering course was to be met by this loan in full, all payments by the bank being given directly to those who provided the services, board, lodging, students’ effects or

college fees. Though this put me in difficulty many a time by having no cash in hand for meeting sundry expenses, it earned me some fame and goodwill by having the ability, like a big, usual or a well known customer, to do credit purchases at a few big retail outlets dealing with articles needed by schools and colleges. It was nice and enjoyable to watch the surprising look from fellow shoppers. (The bank used to pay directly to those shops!)

The next four years seems to me the most childish period of my student days. I have taken an inordinately deep interest, of course just like most of the fellow students, in all subjects except those mentioned in the syllabus, I have found solace and comfort in almost all activities as long as those were not part of class room study and read anything which came across, if no connection could be made out with my subject or curriculum.

I was attracted to communism also, like many other young men of my age and used to read soviet books, of Gorky, Pasternak and other great authors. The more such literature I read the more obscure the communist tenets looked to me. Dr Zhivago was right, I felt, ‘enlightenment and liberation need not follow a communist victory’, which is exemplified by the state of the ‘post liberation society’ in Russia, China or parts of India. What communism achieved at the end of struggle can, at best, be considered as something better than what was in place before. I however remained a red sympathizer throughout, mainly because that was the path chosen by almost all of the progressives,

whether from arts, science or literature background. Also, most of the other political views were those espoused either by known conservatives, or moderates only in matters other than tradition, both, vocal opponents of free thought.

Communism however left a hard lump in my mind, the frequent sights of the ‘revolutionary’ disturbances to normal life, making it even harder.

Of course, I had my share of experimenting. Reading that the daily requirement of a human being is a certain number of calories, I came to the conclusion that one’s daily consumption of edible items should be modulated such that whatever can supply those many calories at lowest cost is what is selected for one’s menu. Accordingly I made up a diet chart mainly consisting of peanuts, the cheapest source of calories among the food items available in market, specifying them to be appropriately prepared. I think the diet chart was followed religiously for a month before I found myself admitted to a hospital, with serious health complications, unceremoniously bringing my research to a close.

Some of the heroics of those days also include memorizing a few lines from proponents of existentialism like Albert Camus, Kafka, Dostoevsky etc and using them in normal conversations with friends, to look unique and well-read! Following the good suggestions of a few (naughty?) among them that girls will certainly fall for this,

I even blurted out once, the expressions used by one hero of Camus in proposing to his lover, (A beautiful thing is not entitled to grow ugly) to a girl student, pretty, modern and stylish. (That girl however took no interest!)

4. My Friends

All through my childhood and till I completed studies, I have not been able to enjoy friendship with the same crowd for long by not being able to continuously stay at the same locality or study at the same school or college without break. Circumstances forced us (our family) to change our residence on many occasions right since our early childhood, picking up new friends at each new stopover. And that continued right through my life, at school, at work or thereafter.

Finding myself in a frequently transferrable job to pick up volatile friendship, getting married to a girl from another state to make fresh alliances and connections, developing affinity with the local people to attend occasional ceremonies and gatherings, and making preparations for settling down after retirement at either states, mine as well as hers, to find substantial reduction in bank balance, did have its share of rewards, a rather big list, of people known closely.

Each one of my friends is a fit candidate for a practical philosopher, if there be one. The friendships were rooted in beliefs and exchanges that brought those phases of one's moods to fore that did not call for much interaction with others other than of purely nonphysical, literary or abstract nature. I mean these friendships germinated in class rooms, library or other places while involved deeply with studies and reflections on topics that are currently popular among the youth, which included of course extracurricular interests, political, cultural and others.

The Story Teller

I like peanut candy a lot, especially the locally made ones using brown sugar. The origin of this taste goes back to the earliest of my friends, my best friend in fourth class.

He was the son of a small time vendor in the local market and was in the habit of bringing packets of such sweets to school. Being a good friend, I used to be permanent companion in finishing it. And this bonhomie became a regular affair, he sharing the intricate details of the stories he used to weave to make his mother part with a few coins, and how he managed to extract information regarding the safe hiding places chosen by his mother in between those stories. Now that he is knowledge of that

secret place, he is able to bring a few coins from her collection without much difficulty.

One day my friend says ‘Mother has smelled something, she has changed the hiding place of her money chest’ He also makes a suggestion that till he is able to sort this out, his friend should make arrangements for supply of candy.

His experiences of course encouraged me. But the thought that the stories I will have to weave for getting a few coins from her should be sound enough to stand her immediate scrutiny, used to give me sleepless nights. She also used to reconfirm the need for whatever monetary requirements I put forward, with neighbors and other acquaintances whose children are of similar age. I think most of such referees readily supported whatever excuses I gave and didn’t have any second thoughts about it, as we children have been enjoying considerable sympathy living with a strict grandmother.

Things didn’t stop there, she, not satisfied with the concurrence expressed by one neighbor, used to consult and crosscheck with many other parents, even from far flung areas, to reconfirm the support. And one day, what I feared happened. One of them exposed me by telling her that the expenses shown are fictitious.

Hell broke loose. I remember being marched up to the school head by my grandmother with a fervent

appeal ‘to punish me suitably’. It is only the gentle disposition of the headmistress that saved me.

In a way, it is this incident that sparked off the chain of events that was to threaten the very existence of our family. My father received a letter asking for ‘immediate alternate arrangements to look after your children’ from his mother. That set off a chain reaction, my father resigning his job, he joining a few other like minded friends and starting a business venture, the venture meeting with failure, the failure leading to fresh venture and so on with every fresh venture meeting with a another instance of failure.

As I had to change my school next year, we shifting our residence as demanded by our grandmother, my first friendship also came to a close.

The ‘Backbencher’

As mentioned earlier, having accustomed to reading and enjoying stories since the early childhood and it was inevitable that I become a thick pal of the ‘writer’ in my class. Then I was in seventh standard, in high school, and in no time we became quite close. He, I think had a book ready in his mind, its title and two to three pages completed, and was on the lookout for further ideas. He liked to shorten his name from R Sudhakaran to RS Karan

as it sounded better as an author's name that blends well with the title of the book. ('The nimble fingered thief' or 'karaviruthulla taskaran', in Malayalam) His forte, as he used claim, was detective fiction and to add substance to his writing, he used to visit dilapidated buildings, abandoned structures and lonely places, especially those with a peculiar, eerie or ghostly look.

When he learned about the stories I knew of great authors like Chesterton, Gardner or Agatha Christie, his interest to get fresh ideas got kindled promoting further discussions on adopting writing style from such authors. And our visit would be followed by long walks and talks, mostly during the extended lunch breaks on Fridays, usually followed by even more discussions. The need to continue such exchanges unhindered is the one reason that led me to the last row of benches in the classroom; it was there that we could silently exchange our observations, ideas and future plans while the teacher was busy attending to others.

The choice of 'backbench', however, stuck with me. In all assemblages, whether in school, colleges or naval training establishments, I found it quite ok to be seen in the background. This trait remained with me throughout; even in the performance of my job, I felt it much more gratifying to be discovered as a hidden talent than, as a known winner who always has to be on guard to maintain his 'winner' status! Whatever good, one may do sitting with the 'backbenchers', whether by giving correct answer to a

question, or by doing well in a test, or by formulating an effective plan of action to meet some deadline, the rewards received seemed to be much more than its rightful treat. Also, more importantly, most of the undesirable acts trespasses or pranks, when committed by those from the back row, tend to be quietly overlooked. It was certainly delightful to find myself being acknowledged (often) with an element of disbelief as well as being admonished (more often!) with a bit of reluctance.

The Referee and the Appraiser

After completing the tenth class, I joined Sree Narayana College, Punalur for continuing the pre-degree course. My house being more than a few kilometers from the college with two of my new classmates hailing from neighborhood, it was natural that we become thick pals, making the long walk to and from college a pleasant affair.

One was like a referee, always on the lookout for issues but pointing them out only when they aren't self-healing. We used to share often our 'deep' understanding of the Christian 'schisms' and engage in debates about it, both of us being from different sects of Christianity, but of course the unlimited hospitality shown by his loving mother was the reason for such frequent discussions.

The other was like a valuator, whose assessment, like that of all those who estimates worth, depending on the scale he employs, the appreciation from his elder brother occupying a large chunk of it. We used to meet everyday after college; all three of us being in different classes, for exchanging interesting experiences and stories, some of the most charming tales I ever heard are from those personal narratives. For example, take the story of the valuator's elder brother.

He, while doing professional training in paramedical technology fell in love with a classmate before confirming her suitability, as far as other areas are concerned, for a marital alliance. He was terrified of disclosing this at home. His father being part of the police service was always sporting a strict countenance and he being the eldest borne was expected to be of exemplary qualities with deep sense of responsibility.

His aged parents had plans of the eldest opening a successful venture, making new alliances and furthering the family's standing. He devised a contrivance to charm his father into permitting the love affair to reach its logical culmination, while remaining a healthy repository of the parents' hopes and aspirations. He said he is going to enter into the field of diagnostic services, an area of intense competition, and convinced his father that an assistant is needed for providing prompt service, a necessary value addition, more so in its infancy. And the assistant needed to be a female as it will greatly help in attracting new clients

in addition to the significant advantage of lower salary. He advertised in newspaper for a qualified help and accepted applications from many, ensuring that his 'love' is one of the applicants. He made an interview board to be chaired by his father, who selected the successful candidate based on the 'professional assessment' by his son. A few days before the date for the assistant to join duty, he puts across the view that as employer, he is morally and legally bound to ensure safety for the female employee and it becomes an easy affair if she is accommodated at home. It was only a matter of time thereafter, for the marital alliance between the pretty assistant and her boss to get the dad's seal of approval.

The Maestro and the Sage

They belong to the most treasured of the connections that fell upon me. Though I was successful in maintaining contact with almost all others with whom there was some history of camaraderie, I have never been able to meet them since I left the college in the early days of 1975. Like almost all of my friends, they were also extremes of whatever they held high, in this case, a gentlemanly countenance. One was on the way to a maestro, already renowned in the academic world for his musical prowess, violin having become a child's play in his hand. The other was a repository of wisdom, one who could never be shaken from his steady, discerning self, come what may.

As we all know, in the junior classes specially, college students are natural rebels. The immediate reaction from them, to whatever garners the attention of the elders as necessary or essential, will be to oppose as dispensable and redundant. The sage and I were in the same class. He caught my attention by his unique style of circumventing the need to rebel when joining the rebels; he was the epitome of moderation. Of course he joined us in everything we did, but, as it was only metered doses of hooliganism and other pranks, no one really took notice. (These days whenever I have to resort to maintaining a calm demeanor to find my way through, I am reminded of him)

As I managed to fit comfortably in to the good books of the sage who was already in such a bond with the maestro, my entry into the good books of the maestro was not at all an issue. I became a frequent visitor to the maestro's home and I think, at least part of the blame for this should go to his homefolk, especially his elder sister, who was more than affectionate in provoking me to visit often. Normal course of a visit always included a game of chess which I constantly lost, a bit of small talk discussing authors like Arthur Hailey, one of the hot favorites of those days, and sumptuous refreshments.

The maestro was, justifying his acronym, more or less a permanent member of the college team that

took part in youth festivals and various other places which attracted talents. As a good friend and admirer of most of the team members, I used to manage an opportunity to be part of such gatherings, and the fact that I was a member of the team for group dance was always there to prevent any murmurs in this regard. (Or so I think now, on hindsight!)

About the Author

He has taken to writing on retirement from Indian Navy in 2013 after a lengthy career, during which he had the good luck to come across as colleagues, subordinates and superiors, a real, wide cross section of India, and quite a few more from the rest of the world. Every second person, during those years, that one had to do business with, thus being from entirely different backgrounds and consequently opening up a kaleidoscopic view of society, he couldn't but reflect on human transactions in many colors, each of them leading to a horde of imponderables, human or non human, living and non living.

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