



# **KADHAMBAM**

A colorful mix of fragrant flowers transformed into a beautiful garland

**Anant Raman**

AUTHOR NAME

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## DEDICATION

To my loving mother who taught me to walk, speak, write, laugh, cry, smile and feel good to be alive.

To my dear father who showed me the direction in life and helped me stand on my own legs.

To all my teachers who taught me the art of learning and the way to approach the unlimited and eternal source.

To my guru Sri Ramana Maharshi who has showered his blessings and guidance towards an inward journey that surpasses every other quest in life.

To my wife and friends who have stood by me all along in my journey of life and challenges.

To our two affectionate sons and two smart grand children who have taught me a lot of things which I couldn't have learned any other way.

And to all those people who make life worth living on this planet by working together for the common good of all living beings.

# **KADHAMBAM**

## **A garland of fragrant flowers**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

#### **KADHAMBAM**

– A colorful mix of fragrant flowers transformed into a garland

From a flower seller to freelance writer, textile trader to temple priest, carpenter to computer programmer, and milkman to marriage broker we have a million professions that carry the burden of the society but also its charm. A closer look at this marvel at grass roots level shows an amazing ability to adapt and an untiring quest to keep the world going, resulting in a dynamic canvas for the interesting art of humanity in the making, generation after generation.

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I feel good that they will continue to play a part in my life and work, even without being named individually.

I thank them all with folded hands and a heart full of gratitude.

## CHAPTER 1

### FRAGRANT JASMINES WITH TUBE ROSES

#### MALLIKA

By the time I wake up early in the morning, my husband is already back from the flower market with baskets full of different flowers fresh from the farms. He unloads them at our one room palace and goes to take a shower, while I prepare the broken rice and millet gruel for our breakfast.

Both of us eat our breakfast with relish, with a bit of onion and a bite of green chillies dipped in salt and the gruel tastes delicious with these accompaniments.

I get ready after my usual morning chores, to arrange the different flowers into garlands using long fibrous strips made out of banana stem bark, already dried in the sun and kept ready for use.

These fibrous threads lend themselves beautifully for holding the flowers together, once they are soaked in water. The flowers are arranged in neat uniform rows of matched pairs tied with deft knots. If the knots are too tight the jasmine stems will break into two. If they are too loose, they will fall apart from the garland. This knack of applying the right tension to the flower stems while making garlands comes by experience and stays for a life time. I don't even consciously think about it while I make the garland, which gets done in a matter of minutes and I move on to another and yet another until my task for the day is done.

My husband comes back to fetch the garlands and takes them to our tiny shop at the entrance to the temple in our neighborhood and hangs them in rows from the bamboo beam in front of the shop.

Many people who come to visit this temple buy a garland along with a basket containing a couple of bananas, a coconut, a few loose flowers and camphor which are traditionally offered to the deity, in prayer and worship.

I take special care to wash the flowers in clean water before making the garlands as a mark of respect, fully aware that they will adorn the deity of this famous temple called *Marundheeshwar* temple. The presiding deity considered to be an embodiment of *Shiva*, is believed to be showering blessings on all with curative energy and therefore there is always a stream of visitors to seek the blessings.

On festival days it will be difficult to get into the temple any time soon, as there will be long queues.

Once I finish making the garlands I collect them in bamboo baskets and also take some loose flowers like *nagalingam*, *thazhamboo*, *magizhamboo*, *manoranjitham* and *shanbagam* which are liked by many people for their sweet fragrance, elegant shape and color.

I join my husband at the shop to take over the sale until mid day when the temple closes for a few hours to give rest to the deity and save him from the ever increasing demands of his devotees. Not that he minds it but the chief priest of the temple keeps the traditions as laid down by his predecessors and followed religiously for hundreds of years. I go back to prepare lunch that we eat together, after which I take a short nap to get myself reenergized in preparation for a longer session in the evening at our shop, when there will be more crowd and more business too.

When I see young children accompanying their parents who come to buy flowers from our shop, I give them a rose or *nagalingam* or *shanbagam* to offer at the temple. I give it free so they feel happy and also learn the importance of being thankful to the creator for whatever we are blessed with. These young minds may not understand the significance of these rituals in childhood but they will get registered in their tender minds and help them later in life to live a life of values.

You may wonder how a simple uneducated flower seller can talk about values in life!

You will be surprised to know that I am a graduate! Yes, I passed my commerce degree but could not find a job for more than a year. Instead of wasting my time expecting accountancy position in some government office I opted to invest a small amount to buy flowers in the whole sale flower market, make them into garlands and sell them at the temple nearby, so I could at least not be a burden on my parents who had already been through the hardships of saving every paisa to manage to send me to college, as I was their only child.

I quickly learned to identify the flowers that were liked by people who visited the temple and also made sure to keep garlands of their choice for regular customers who used to come every week on Tuesdays and Fridays as they were considered auspicious days.

Soon I saved enough to clear the debts incurred by my parents and even helped my father get a bicycle to make it easy for him to move around. He was full of joy and kept showing it off to his mates.

Last year I got married to Malarvannan, who was actually my class mate. He also could not find a job suitable to his qualification and I suggested to him that he could join my flower business as there was enough scope to start a small shop and take orders for marriages and other functions requiring flowers and garlands.

He liked the idea mainly because he could see me every day and also since it made him his own boss.

One thing led to another and he asked my parents for my hand in marriage. They gladly agreed, knowing that he was a responsible person with no bad habits and besides they could sense that we loved each other.

We have our own dreams as most people do.

We live an honest life and deliver without cheating our customers and have built a reputation for our integrity in dealing with people.

We talk to our customers in cheerful words and always reply politely even if some of them don't reciprocate the same due to their money power or social status.

A couple of times we were cheated too, by political persons who ordered large garlands to please their party leaders but failed to pay for the same. We had to take such things as part of the business and keep going, writing off the loss.

Sometimes even the policemen harass us, expecting bribes on regular basis, just to allow us to do our honest business. How can small vendors like us survive if we don't know how to adjust with such practical situations with tact and humility?

It doesn't pay to alienate people in power who show off their might only to commoners like us.

Flowers make me happy and I love what I do.

When I see regular customers overcome their problems and come back to thank their favorite deity at this temple I feel good too, having been of help to them, however insignificant it might appear to be.

Sometimes I wonder why they waste such nice flowers to please power hungry politicians or for decorating the dais in wedding receptions or over the dead body in funerals. No offence intended to the dead or the living, but there is no need to waste such a lot of flowers.

They could use just a token quantity in moderation and utilize the amount so saved, to educate a poor child or donate to an orphanage or destitute home.

Well, nobody will heed my advice, I know.

But I have to express what I feel.

Otherwise how will people know?

The other day when I was setting up my shop with fresh flowers I noticed a small girl hesitantly approaching my shop but stopped with fear in her eyes overshadowed by a hungry look that was unmistakable. I called her to me and asked her what she wanted. She had tears when she said she wanted some food as she had not eaten anything and was very hungry. I immediately called her into my shop and gave her the food I had brought for me.

While she ate it thankfully, I asked her name and where she lived. She replied that her name was Shanbagam and she lived nowhere. She was an orphan.

Both her parents had died of dengue fever just a few days back and she was left to fend for herself. The little money they had was used for their final rites by the neighbors who knew them.

What a shock for a small girl who had no idea what to do. I told her to wait and help me with sorting the flowers.

The temple provided lunch to poor people every noon and I took her there and introduced her to the staff who managed the food distribution. They were very kind to her and told her that she could come every day and have enough food. It was simple vegetarian food prepared at the temple kitchen which was responsible for preparing the '*prasadam*' or offerings of food to the presiding deity of the temple and they cooked every course with devotion, as a service to the temple.

Donations for this charitable service came from devotees who visited the temple and also from the generosity of the trustees of the temple who earmark a portion of the funds for this purpose. This tradition has been maintained without a break for so many years.

I asked my husband whether we could let her stay with us and also to see whether Shanbagam could be admitted in the nearby school, run by a charitable organization.

He readily agreed and in the days that followed, he managed to secure her a place in the school.

Shanbagam became a member of our household. When she returned from school she would help me at my flower shop and also learn the skills of garland making and choosing the right flowers for different customers, handling them with care without crushing them.

She took her daily chores cheerfully and there was no need to instruct her again once she understood a skill.

One day I took her with me in to the temple when I had a few minutes to spare and introduced her to the head priest of the temple. He was a very generous and kind person, so devoted to his duties in the temple. He told Shanbagam that God was always there to help people in many ways and she was blessed to be cared for by someone so kind like me. God had to help millions of people who seek his help and since he couldn't be there everywhere he chooses to help through kind persons like me. I was moved by his words and hugged Shanbagam close to me.

I told him that we were blessed too, to be able to help a child like her who was so good in her behavior and smart in learning whatever was taught.

He took a liking to her and told her that she could come any time and ask him anything that he was in a position to explain to her in his capacity as the head priest of the temple.

## CHAPTER 2

### TEMPLE PRIEST

#### GANESHA SHARMA

When I see the ocean of people who come to this temple on festival days I feel blessed to be at the *Garba Griham* ( sanctum sanctorum) of the presiding deity here, to help people have a good *darshan* (sacred view) and blessings of *Marundeeswarar*, the divine presence in the form of health giver and sickness remover.

I am serving this temple from my childhood. I was an assistant to the then senior priest who was also my guru or spiritual teacher.

Damodaran Gurukkal was a simple soul who devoted his entire life to the upkeep of this temple. In those days when I was a teenager there were not as many visitors to this temple as now.

The population has grown multifold in a matter of about fifty years.

I had to work very hard all these years to learn Sanskrit, the divine language of our spiritual masters and the vast literature that had been handed down in a lineage of '*Guru-Sishya Parampara*' or teacher to student direct transfer by '*sravanam*' the science of learning through our senses and absorbing by devoted repetition, contemplation and assimilation.



It took several years for my guru to teach me the four Vedas and explain their significance in a way that I could understand and appreciate.

He never scolded me if I made any mistakes in the pronunciation of the mantras or sacred texts. He was blessed with a great reservoir of patience and he told me many times that mistakes can be treated as stepping stones to relearn. The lessons so learned remain deeply etched in my memory and will never be forgotten in the mature years when I will be performing the same task of imparting this sacred knowledge to another generation of learners who have been chosen to carry on this noble work of guidance for life on earth.

Simultaneously I devoted my time to assist my guru in the maintenance of cleanliness in the temple, collection of flowers from the temple garden and also from the flower supplier who was entrusted with the supply of the main garlands for decorating the idols, ensuring that the lamps were lit in time and all the materials like *Vibhuthi* (sacred ash), *Kumkumam* (vermillion powder), *Santhanam* (sandalwood paste), *Tulasi* (leaves of sacred basil plant) and *Karpooram* (camphor) were kept in readiness for the *Pooja* to be performed and for *Aradhana* or worship with multiple lamps, chanting sacred mantras.

The work starts early in the morning, much before sunrise when the idols are washed with pure water from the temple well, cleaned and decorated with cotton clothing of attractive colors. Sacred ash, sandalwood paste and vermillion powder are used in decorating the idols and the *Tulasi* and flower garlands are added to complete the decoration before the *Garba graham* is opened to the public view.

Many devotees bring baskets of coconuts, fruits and flowers to offer at the temple and the priest collects them, places the offerings at the feet of the idol. The coconut is cracked open into two halves and placed along with the rest of the material.

He recites the sacred mantras in worship of the deity for the wellness of the devotees who offer them and lights the camphor to perform *Aradhana*, for all devotees to see and relish. This brings their minds to focus on the present moment and removes their worries for that moment. He brings the offerings back to the devotees and hands them over, after the burning camphor is circulated to all, one after the other for absorption of the divine energy as a powerful source of healing.

This routine is repeated until all the offerings are accepted and returned to the respective devotees.

By noon the prasadam or food prepared for offering to the deity by the temple kitchen is brought in large vessels and placed in front of the idol to be blessed. It is then taken to the outer *praharam* for distribution to all people who have come to the temple for worship.

After the distribution of prasadam, the temple is closed for a few hours to get ready for the next session of Pooja in the evening which lasts until late night. More visitors come in the evening after they return from work.

When my guru became so old that he could not perform the *poojas* to his satisfaction he delegated the entire process so magnanimously to me and was content to watch me do it as carefully as he would have done it, each and every step of the way. The procedures have been etched in my mind in minute detail over the years and I had no difficulty or nervousness in taking over from him.

He was a very contented and peaceful man who could command respect from one and all by virtue of his impeccable devotion to his work and the pleasant manners with which he treated all, irrespective of their stature. I had a great respect for my guru and have served him with love and dedication and naturally felt honored to carry the flame.

It is almost ten years since he passed away peacefully on an auspicious day, knowing fully well that he had never failed in his duties as a temple priest.

If there is one virtue I can recall as the most valuable lesson I had learned from him, it was the ability to carry out all my tasks with equanimity and pleasant disposition, to do it all with equal respect and love and to do it with a smile on my face.

On occasions when my face showed strains due to some worries or burdens, I simply remember my divine guru and I regain my composure in no time.

Such is the grace of a guru.

One other trait which he passed on to me, more through his action than as a teaching, was to spare some time each day to be available to poor people who came to ask for help or solace, as they have nowhere else to go and get advice. I used to stand by his side with great admiration as he would give audience to one and all, hear their woes patiently with such benevolence in his eyes and offer a word of consolation or advice. They would invariably feel so relieved and leave in peace as if their problems had vanished.

Such is the power of surrendering oneself to the divine, who guides us all. We are mere tools in his hands as he carries out the cosmic dance that includes the millions and billions of all living forms who dance in rhythm to his tune, all the time unaware of the magnificence that operates so majestically in their life.

The other day as I was sparing some time for the people of this locality I noticed Mallika, the flower seller who had been supplying mixed flower garlands to our temple for several years regularly. She was sitting in the open hall where I usually meet the people and she was accompanied by a young girl whom I had not seen before.

I welcomed her and the child she had brought with her, blessing her with a dot of *Vibhuthi* on her forehead and a pinch of *kumkumam* over it.

She started smiling and feeling comfortable.

Mallika introduced the child as Shanbagam who had lost her parents recently and was in her care for the past few days as she had nowhere to go.

I looked at the girl who had to face life's hardships so early in her childhood. Her innocence and the eagerness to absorb all that she could from her exposure to what she was introduced to, was evident on her face.

I told her that she was welcome to visit the temple at any time and meet me if she needed any help and I would gladly do whatever I could.

I appreciated the kindness of Mallika in taking care of this child by herself instead of admitting her in an orphanage, as most others would have done.

Mallika told me that Shanbagam was a keen learner and loves her school already, although she had been to school only for a short time.

I recited some easy verses in praise of the deity and asked Shanbagam whether she wanted to learn such verses so she could recite them in the temple for the benefit of all. She surprised me by chanting the verses completely without missing a word, in her sweet and tender voice.

She agreed to come every evening to learn the verses and it didn't take long for me to know that I was dealing with a gifted child. She was carrying the spiritual splendor from her previous incarnations and could assimilate anything taught to her, by hearing it with rapt attention just once.

With her pleasing smile and her charming voice she soon became known to everyone here around, as the temple girl.

I suggested to her that she could attend the *upanyasams* (spiritual discourses) and music performances organized at the open auditorium in the temple premises almost every evening.

In just a couple of years she became so well versed with a lot of compositions by great sages and spiritual masters. She could sing them, explain them and present the essence so fluently, much to the delight of the priests and the trustees of the temple and she was chosen to perform every evening for an hour, before the main program.

It took only a few days for people to realize the divine gift showered upon this young prodigy and I was amazed to see the auditorium getting filled to capacity and overflowing to the corridors and the open space around the auditorium to hear her and enjoy the way she presented deep spiritual concepts with such ease, sprinkled with quotes from our scriptures and songs of the lore, spontaneously. She didn't need to refer to any notes or books while performing to audience.

In my long association with this temple, spanning more than sixty years, I had not come across a child like her. She was possibly the divine incarnation of *Shakthi*, the divine mother who is the most benevolent mother of all life.

I have taught the Vedas and the *Puranas* apart from the sacred texts used in the temple, to hundreds of children and even adults who were so inclined to learn but not to any girls as it was traditionally the boys who went for such knowledge.

I offered to teach her all I knew, so that it will be open to girl children who should be treated at par. A true teacher should not restrict his teachings. It is a well known fact that our divine guru *Dakshinamoorthy* resides in every one of us, always. It is up to each one of us to be open enough to let him fill our cup to the brim.

Our Vedas and scriptures, all sacred texts by *Thirunavukkarasar*, *Manikka vasagar*, *Thiru Gnana Sambandar*, *Bharathi*, *Elango*, *Kambar*, *Valluvar*, *Saint Thyagaraja*, *Shyama Sastri*, *Muthuswami Dikshithar* and other numerous gems in the ocean of spirituality are all available to everyone without distinction or restriction of any kind.

I feel content with the bold step I had taken, although there may be some scholars who may not approve such breaks from tradition, forgetting that tradition is to serve us and not enslave us in to strait-jackets.

Before I breathe my last I will be there to witness this girl taking our glorious culture and tradition to new heights and making people realize how fortunate and blessed they are to be guided by such divinely blessed souls and a cultural system that gives them total freedom to choose to be what they want to be, providing guidelines every step of the way.

Nowhere else can one find such freedom to choose, to question and understand the choices and the consequences of living a life so free and yet so full of responsibilities and the self discipline that inextricably accompanies such freedom.

## CHAPTER 3

### MATCH MAKER

#### MAHA DEVAN

Marriages may be made in heaven but match making is a process that has become an integral part of human life, to put it into reality.

Every individual on earth is governed by the ubiquitous cosmic laws and the effect of the '*nava grahas*' or the nine planets on human life has been deeply studied as a science and documented for the benefit of all.

Just as the power of prayer is a matter of experience, so too the science of astrology works for those who believe in it.

I started studying this science by accident.

My father used to subscribe to Astrological Magazine, a periodical publication in which the well renowned authority Mr. B.V.Raman shared his insights into the planetary positions and their influence on life forms.

The Sun, Moon, Saturn, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter and Venus are among the commonly known celestial bodies that influence life in various ways. Added to that were two other planets not known to western astronomers but documented by the ancient scholars of the east, particularly India, who formulated the basis of Astrology which is valid even today.

*Rahu* and *Kethu* are said to be invisible planets and there are mythological references to their origin too.

When I heard my father say this to me when I asked him about the validity of all such claims on the effect of planets on human life, I was instantly attracted to this science. He even went further and told me to go ahead and do research in this subject before accepting anyone's opinion as true. He was generous to allow me to study the rare magazines in his collection which were out of print.

The time and place of birth of an individual are used in drawing their astrological chart and it is said that the expert astrologer can fairly forecast the person's vocation, temperament, wealth and health over his entire period of stay on earth. Some consider it even possible to pin point mile stones in one's life yet to unfold, as authoritatively as about the past. But others consider all such predictions as only indicative and not infallible.

The more I studied the charts of famous people, the more fascinated I became with the unmistakable correlation of their chart to the major events in their life, as explained by my father, as culled from these rare articles by experts in these magazines.

I set aside a few hours of my spare time every weekend to delve deeper into this ancient science, learning from the collective wisdom of those who have been so generous to share what they knew, with others with the quest to know.

As a bonus, I found that palmistry was an equally amazing subject with vast literature from across the continents showing remarkable similarities in their findings, although they had no contact with each other nor did they have a common language to communicate their ideas across the borders over long distances, in such ancient times when telephones, wireless communication, net working and television had not been invented and paper and printing were unknown.



Soon I started seeing the palms of people along with their charts and did it for free, as this science should be available to all for free and not commercialized.

When a person takes money for studying one's chart invariably there will be a tendency to report only the good and downplay the unpleasant side. The truth will be lost.

Seeing hundreds of charts and hands and recording the correlations, one finds his way in practical application and gets convinced when he gets feedback about the events that happen as predicted.

One such hand I saw was that of a young girl who frequented the temple I visit every day in the morning, before I start my day's work.

Looking at this child's face, I was stuck by the unusual calm and unmistakable radiance. I was curious to see whether her palms would disclose the hidden secrets of what was to unfold in her life ahead.

I asked permission from her mother to study her hand after introducing myself. She reluctantly agreed after telling me that the child was not her own daughter and she had no money to pay for such extravaganza. I replied that I do it as a service to people and do not accept money in return.

As I expected her palm showed it all. She had a spotless headline, the star of wisdom and the confluence of the head, heart and the life lines in a way that signified that the owner of that palm was no ordinary person but a gifted soul with divine presence and was going to become a life changer and spiritual inspiration for several generations of people whose life she touches by her radiance.

When I said this to her mother, she laughed in disbelief and responded by saying that this girl was very poor and was an orphan being looked after by her and all the prediction was nice to hear but completely out of place.

My unwritten policy is to just express clearly what I see and not to argue with people who receive these readings. Each one has to draw their own conclusions according to their ability and background.

An unexpected turn of events happened at that precise moment which is etched in my memory.

Shanbagam, the young girl whose palms I read and whose radiance attracted my attention told me that sometimes she had an inner voice telling her similar things as expressed by me and much of it was beyond her tiny brain's comprehension. She said hopefully she would understand all that later when she was mature enough and will set her life to be of assistance to people in need, in whatever way she was guided by her inner voice.

For a young girl of her background, this revelation by itself was an indication to me that I was not wrong in my readings.

She didn't know her date, time or place of birth as she was an orphan according to Mallika, who was taking care of her.

I noted some details about her, where she lived and told her that she could contact me any day in this temple as I visit it early in the morning every day. She told me that she also visited the temple every morning before going to school and again later in the evening to learn from the head priest and to perform for the temple programs in the main auditorium adjoining the temple premises in the outer precinct.

Some days when I was free in the evenings I started visiting the temple to hear this child sing and perform '*upanyasam*' or discourse about various spiritual themes and I got reassured this was no ordinary person. She was a divine child, gifted and blessed to play a significant role in the cosmic scheme of spiritual unfoldment.

As a matrimonial match maker I do see a lot of horoscopes and help the young to find suitable partners. Many people think that life partnership between two people should be based on love and not on stars.

Well, they are at liberty to cherish their opinions but most of them would not like to accept the fact that love is based on impulsive and biological factors which make them blind to the personality traits that appear once the initial euphoria wears out and they start experiencing the realities of each other which were lying unknown, if only because the power of love had such blinding effect.

They may even argue that even in the cases where the horoscopes are matched and backgrounds are studied there were frictions and it was not always a smooth ride, which is true of course.

The difference lies in the degree to which there is a possibility of match than a mismatch.

Matching temperaments reduce the chances of bitter outcomes that result from extreme mismatch that could occur, if everything was left to chance and ignored in the process of physical attraction and biological factors.

When I studied the hands of this gifted child I realized that there was no match to her and she was born to live the life of a renunciate and lead people in spiritual path in the course of her life.

Very rarely does an astrologer get a chance to study a hand like hers , may be one in a million.

For the time being I can only wait, watch and see how it all unfolds.

## CHAPTER 4

### TEMPLE CAR SPECIALIST AND WOOD WORKER

#### THANGA MUTHU

As an assistant to an *Achari* (carpentry wizard) I started learning the art of wood working early in childhood when holding a hammer or chisel in my hand was itself a formidable task but *Narayana Achari* was like a non-demanding grandfather full of love to his grandchild. That was what he used to call me when I asked him to teach me the art of making '*Marapachi*' or wood figurines that fascinated me in my childhood.

I did not like going to school and wanted to learn a trade so I could be my own employer. My father was an army veteran who had seen the Second World War and fought as a member of the freedom movement of Gandhi in non-violent protests and had been to jail many times and so my mother had to bear the burden of raising us, three kids, of whom I was the eldest.

She didn't mind when I told her that my heart was in learning a skill than learning lessons at school. She said both were required to manage a living and I could go to *Narayana Achari* to learn wood working as per my desire provided I also attended school. I couldn't wait to come home from school, have some quick snacks that my mother prepared for us with much love, and run to the workshop just a stone's throw from our hut, to be with *Narayana Achari* and explore what he had made that day.

On holidays and weekends I would quickly complete whatever jobs my mother asked me to do and run to Achary's carpentry shop.

Though he was quite old he had a grip that could crush even one's bone and I would be in a state of wide eyed wonder when he allowed me to touch his huge biceps built over years of hard work.

Initially he used to let me just watch him at his work taking measurements and preparing different pieces of wood by planing them on all sides to a smooth finish until we could see the grains and patterns. He would cut the ends in to dove tail shape and move on to make more and more pieces, measuring, cutting, planing and chiseling. Sometimes he would allow me to hold them while he worked on them and I felt honored that I was a part of the process even though a very minor part, always aware of his words that every simple step was necessary to achieve a goal and it was not possible to learn a skill without mastering each minute step and integrating it in to the process.

Within a few hours he would let me assist him to join the parts together one after another by interlocking the ends so precisely chiseled to match each other. I would be delighted when he joyfully declared that we had made a beautiful chair fit for a king, and it was almost a magical moment of pride and achievement.

He was so generous to make me feel that we made it together although for most part I was only observing the craft and his workmanship.

In a couple of years I could manage to learn measurements and the use of tools such as the saw, planer, chisel, hand drill and hammer. There were no electric machines those days and everything was done with mechanical tools.

He also taught me how to select the right type of wood for each job and the right way to use the planer along the grain to get a smooth finish. He would allow me to make a wooden spoon or a buttermilk-churner to take it home and present it to my mother as a surprise gift and I loved the joy on my mother's face when she received it and used it at home.

Just for those who had never seen a buttermilk-churner, it is a smooth wooden rod with toothed wheel like hub at one end, made by cutting wedge like slots from a cylindrical piece of teak wood to give it teeth. The center of this hub is drilled half way to make a hole where the rod is inserted to form a tight lock. The rod would usually be of about eight to ten inches long, just comfortable to hold on both hands and inserted into a pot of yoghurt or curd and churn it until the butter got separated from the curd and the pot is filled with foaming buttermilk which is a delicious drink that is so cool in summer and nutritious too.

When my mother makes buttermilk we all sit around her waiting for the moment when the butter would emerge and she would give a ball of it to each one, fresh from the pot and it would be so tasty that I could easily understand why lord Krishna was so fond of it as a child that he would go around stealing it from neighboring homes even though his mother gave him enough.

Making figures out of wood and painting them in attractive colors, I soon knew how to produce gigantic characters from our much loved mythological stories and classical folklore for use during the festivities and soon my work was appreciated by many people. I was bestowed with the responsibility of making a new temple car for our ancient temple which I gladly accepted as it would provide enough scope for me to transfer my skills and imagination to revive an art form which had been dormant for too long.

It took close to three years for me to build it and I consulted my guru Narayana Achari to make sure that every part of the car conformed to the *Agamas* or guidelines laid down in *Silpa Sastra* or the science of temple architecture.

The wheels of the temple car and the axle supports were made of specially seasoned wood that could withstand the load and remain unaffected for years by the heat of summer sun and the humidity of the rains. In fact they got strengthened by heat and moisture over the years of exposure to them.

The main platform that carried the *Utsava Murthy* or the festival deity with all the accompaniments is also the foundation that supports the multi layers of decorative top structure which is designed so colorfully to be visible to large crowds who gather to witness the car festival every year, on festival days.

My imagination found expression in the beautiful figures depicting stories of the divine incarnations selected from the folklore spanning thousands of years of cultural heritage, unique to this country.

Each figure is carved from logs of forest wood sun-dried and soaked in natural herbal extracts to prevent them from cracking up over the years.

Once they are ready, they are given a coat of wood primer and allowed to dry before they are carefully painted with enamel colors that bring out the expressions so vividly. They can usually stay unfaded for ten years or more, if the car is kept covered from dust and rain.

After a hard day's work I take a cool shower and a simple meal with my family and we all head to the temple where we offer our prayers and spend an hour at the open auditorium to enjoy the day's program.

That is where I came across a young girl by name Shanbagam performing on stage, in her sweet and clear voice engaging the audience in journeys into our ancient Puranas or spiritual stories. I was spell bound that such a young girl could have so much wisdom to share with all.

Her face was so charming with the confident smile and fearless enthusiasm in sharing what she had learned from the wisdom of our scriptures and epics.

We started looking forward to listening to her every evening and it created a bond between us and with her too.

I decided that such a gem should be immortalized for future generations and so I made a figure of her in her inimitable style and added it to the middle row of the temple car under construction, prominently visible from the front, among the great sages and poets such as *Avvaiyar, Bharathiyar, Kambar, Thirunavukkarasar, Manikka Vasagar, Saint Thyagaraja, Shyama Sastri and Muthuswami Dikshithar* among others who are etched in our memory for their divine contributions to our cultural heritage.

Shanbagam, the child prodigy deserved all accolades and it was my way of making sure that she stays green in our memory.



## CHAPTER 5

### TEACHER AND FRIEND

JANAKI

To be a part of a school that believes in 'value' based education is in itself a reward to any who chooses teaching as a profession and I was rewarded amply by the children whom I taught in the primary level right from kindergarten stage.

Each child is born with unique abilities and to restrict them within the framework of a rigid curriculum which aims at mass production of exam oriented scholars is a very unwise step that could stunt their creativity and lateral thinking.

Fortunately our school placed more emphasis on letting them explore as much as possible along with time spent on academic learning, to make them well rounded individuals with enough skills to face the world.

We encourage children to question every concept and checkout its relevance before accepting it as normal. Consequently they become more free in interactions and learn to see things from different perspectives.

In our science class we let them bring any objects relevant to the subject being learned and share with the class. When we learn about plants and flowers they bring different flowers and share what they know about them. I add whatever I can, to make it lively and interesting.

That is how I came to know about the extraordinary skills of some of the children in my class and their way of understanding concepts.

One such occasion is still fresh in my memory. We were exploring the subject of flowers, some fragrant, some with medicinal properties and some others which were even carnivorous. I had requested one of our old students to arrange a slide show of these unique and rare specimens that were not common in our region. The class was stunned to see the beauty of such flowers and their properties.

We wondered how they got their amazing colors, intricate patterns and enchanting fragrances.

Next day one of our students Shanbagam, brought '*Kadhambam*', a unique garland of mixed flowers, and explained to the class how it was made.

Purple, blue, red, yellow and orange flowers, each with its own unique fragrance, had been combined together with a fibrous material drawn from the dried layers of the bark of the banana tree. Normal threads would cut into the stem of the flowers but the fibers of the banana bark layers are gentle on the flower stems, when soaked in water before using them to weave the flowers together into beautiful garlands.

The fragrance of white jasmynes was soothing to a troubled mind and the red orange marigold's fragrance made one lively and attentive. The yellowish orange blooms of Shanbagam tree were unique in their divine fragrance that was an antidote to dullness. It activated the sense of wonder and that was why she was named after that flower, she said jokingly and confidently amidst the giggles and cheers from her class mates.

I had bought the Kadhambam garlands on several occasions from the flower shop owned by her parents, and offered them at the temple, as many people do, but this was the first time I heard someone explain the beneficial side of these fragrant flowers, so commonly used but taken for granted.

I appreciated her for sharing the information with our class and asked her how she knew so much about these flowers. Everyone in the class started shouting that she was from a florist family, which I already knew. But is it not common for children to know much about their family business and she had gone a step further and knew what even her parents might not know.

Shanbagam explained that there was a plant expert who organized the flower garden belonging to the temple near the school and she had asked him about these flowers and specifically about their fragrances, as he was an expert and a friendly one at that.

He was kind enough to tell her that the beneficial effects of fragrances of flowers had been studied by the Divine Mother, the late head of the *Arbindo Ashram* in Pondicherry near Chennai, and shared a book that was written by her, with Shanbagam.

She grasped every detail from the book before returning it with thanks.

I was very pleased that a child in our class was so well informed through her own initiative and was confident enough to share it with everyone in our class.

Seeing the interest so generated in the rest of the class, I arranged to take them on an excursion, after a few days, to a vegetable and fruit farm in the outskirts of the city, owned by our school to grow our own vegetables for use in the mid-day meal program which benefitted poor children who needed nutritious food and could not manage to bring any from home.

The farm itself was the brain child of our principal who saw an opportunity when that land came up for sale and she had an idea to start a branch of the primary school there, to provide education to the children of the farming community and also for other children in the nearby villages where there was no school.

Every time I visited the farm I started liking it so much that I offered to look after the same when I was due to retire in a few months and she gladly accepted my offer as they needed a coordinator there.

One thing lead to another and thanks to that particular day when Shanbagam made the presentation to the class I became more involved into an entirely different but fully enjoyable activity after my retirement from school teaching.

I do miss the children but I got reconciled to the fact that even plants are like children and needed good care and nurturing to make them grow.

CHAPTER 6

HERBALIST, HEALER, YOGA TEACHER:

JAGANNATHAN

To appreciate the beauty of creation one has to look at the plant world which plays a major part in keeping the balance of all life forms. Plants of different species have specific functions that interlock with each other to form a whole eco system that supports and sustains other life forms too.

Many animals know which herbal plant or grass to eat when they have some sickness. Whether it is poisonous snakes, magnificent elephants or menacing mosquitoes, they all fit into the scheme of things which may not be easily apparent to us, if only because of the limitations of our own capacity to understand the vastness of such cosmic proportions.

I am a practicing herbalist trying to help people use natural substances to keep themselves healthy. I was fortunate to have had the privilege of meeting a tribal elder in the Western Ghats of South India, when I embarked upon a study tour with a couple of friends after we completed our *Siddha* Medicine Degree course and desperately wanted a break. That break was a blessing in disguise and a life changer for me.

*Shivacharya* had dedicated his life to accessing the rare herbs in these mountains which were hidden from civilization for most part. He knew many herbs and their unique properties by talking to the tribals living in these mountains and recording every new find in full detail with the use of his camera and note pad. Some were very common and used extensively in folk medicine but some others were not widely known. He showed me a herb which could instantly neutralize the extremely poisonous venom of a king cobra, by just squeezing a few drops of the leaves at the location of the snake bite. This will lose its potency if plucked and stored. It had to be used fresh from the plant, to be effective.

Similarly he shared with me about the purple red flowers of a rare plant which could cure mental instability, commonly known as madness.

When I see so many people suffering in the mental asylums, I feel strongly that I should try and cultivate this herb by replicating the ecology of the Western Ghats in green houses so they could be propagated and used for curing people.

He even showed me a plant that looked like some weed, the roots of which could cure cancer.

He was a great teacher who was willing to share all his knowledge with others and told me that I could visit him any time to get clarifications. It is indeed rare to see such souls who dedicate their entire life for the benefit of society.

Soon I organized a herbal farm in the vast land that belonged to the temple in my neighborhood, at their request, as a service to people who needed inexpensive alternatives to mainstream medicine and healthcare that was beyond the reach of poor people.

One day I saw a young girl who came to our herbal farm. She had brought some beautiful flowers to give me and I thanked her and asked her what I could do to help her.

She told me that each flower that she had brought had a unique fragrance and they were much sought after, as people like their fragrance. She asked me how these flowers generated such fragrance and wanted to know whether these fragrances had any health benefits.

I came to know she was the daughter of the flower seller who supplied garlands to our temple every day and naturally she knew about flowers.

I was happy to explain to her that each flower was blessed with colorful form but only some were endowed with unique fragrances and it was easy to identify the flower by its fragrance.

As she showed remarkable interest as seen through her rapt attention and her grasp, I offered to lend her one of my books from my collection, which contained rare insights into the world of flowers.

Written by the Divine Mother of *Arbindo Ashram*, where such flowering plants were grown in their beautiful gardens, she had shared her deep knowledge about the beneficial influences of floral fragrances, explaining about each flower and its unique attributes.

Our vocabulary is so limited that you can't express in words the particular fragrance of a flower like *Champak*, *Thazhamboo*, *Jasmine* or *Parijatham* which have to be smelled to experience and appreciate their amazing fragrance.

She was thrilled to read about each flower and asked my permission to take it home, assimilate the contents and return it the next day. I told her to take her own time and return it even after a week but to make sure that it wasn't misplaced or lost, as the book was no more in print.

True to her word she brought it back the next day and to test whether she had really read it fully, I asked her random questions about some rare flowers that she wouldn't have actually seen and she could tell me every bit in minute detail.

I was astonished by her photographic memory and thorough understanding.

I gave her a couple of flowering plants in pots as a gift and encouraged her to explain about them to her friends in school and plant them there for all to enjoy. She accepted them with much joy.

It is nice to see such kids who go beyond their class room study and take time to get to know about life around them.



## CHAPTER 7

### CATERING FOR GODS

#### CHANDRASEKAR

Managing a temple kitchen may not be everybody's cup of tea but only those who come into our kitchen complex at the far end of the temple, sandwiched between the open auditorium and the herbal garden, will get a glimpse into the silent work that goes on from early hours of the day until midnight.

Cooking each day's menu of Prasadam or offering to the presiding deity of the temple, is done with utmost care and religious devotion.

We pick up fresh vegetables and fruits from the market every evening to match the menu of the following day. The store keeper is responsible for stocking up enough grains legumes and other items like spices, salt, oil and nuts that go into the making of daily Prasadam. Once they are ready, they are taken to the Sanctum of the temple as directed by the chief priest, who makes the offering with recitation of the mantras and then arranges to shift them for distribution to all devotees who visit the temple each day

.As per the wishes of many philanthropists, the temple has instituted a scheme by which free lunch is provided to the poor people who can't afford to buy their food. We cook the items in large vessels which could cater to hundreds of such people in need of a meal.

Sometimes even those devotees who come from distant places also have their lunch here along with others and they offer donations, so more people who need food could be fed.

When I serve such people who come hungry and see the satisfied expression on their face after the tasty hot meal, I feel blessed too, that I am part of such a gesture of philanthropy, done so silently.

That is how I came across a young girl, who joined those who were served lunch one day. I later learned that she was orphaned and was being looked after by the flower seller Mallika, who was the one who supplied flowers to the temple.

Shanbagam became a welcome guest and we treated her with a lot of love and sympathy to make up for what she was missing at such a young age.

Soon she won the hearts of everyone here, including the chief priest and the trustees of the temple who saw a divine spark in that soul as she was blessed by the diving mother to be of service to the temple by her spirituality and mind power. Seeing a child grow up in a divine environment is a rewarding experience.

Each day I found her engaged in activities that were sure to take her in a positive direction. She was so peaceful and respectful that everyone in her vicinity would feel her energy and stop to say a kind word or hug her.

One day she came in to the kitchen to see what we were preparing and asked me to tell her the way sweet *Pongal* was prepared, as it was very delicious. I was pleased that there was someone appreciating our preparation and showed her all the ingredients that went into the making of Sweet Pongal. In fact it was on the menu for that day and so I asked her to stay on and see it being prepared.

The main ingredients that go into Sweet *Pongal* are rice and jaggery.

Jaggery is the concentrated form of sugarcane juice that is one stage before it is refined into crystal white sugar and considered very healthy and better than white sugar.

Jaggery is dissolved in warm water, filtered to remove any impurities and brought to boil. Cleaned rice is added to this preparation. The rice gets cooked in that sweet solution to form a delicious mix. Powdered cardamom and cashew nuts roasted in ghee are added to the preparation after it is shifted from the cooking fire.

The aroma of *Pongal* will draw the attention of everyone around and they will look forward to this prasadam after it is sanctified by offering it to the deity.

Shanbagam was fully engrossed in to the process as it was taking place in front of her. Normally we don't allow anyone to come into the kitchen, for hygienic reasons, but I made an exception to her as she was so keen to see it being made. She thanked me and went away.

I had almost forgotten about it until after a week when her mother came to see me.

She gave me a small packet and when I opened it I found sweet Pongal with ghee and roasted cashew, nicely wrapped in a banana leaf and packed in paper.

I looked at her questioningly and she was full of smile when she told me that it was prepared by Shanbagam, just the way she learned to make it at the temple kitchen.

What a remarkably smart child!

She could remember the recipe just seeing it once and could scale down the proportion to make it at home to the exact taste and flavor of classic Pongal, with a bit of help from her mother to stir the ingredients as per her direction.

She had every reason to be proud of Shanbagam. She was quick to learn at such a tender age and I was so stunned to hear her later, at the open auditorium in a few months. She was presenting the mythological story of *Rama Avatharam*, the incarnation of *Vishnu* in the form of *Rama*, with deep understanding, punctuating it with musical compositions of *Saint Thyagaraja*, just as a seasoned veteran would perform on stage for an audience.

From then on I made it a point to be at the hall whenever she was on stage with her commanding and sweet voice, still with the tender tones of a young girl.

It is indeed a rare privilege to be in the presence of a divinely gifted prodigy and surely a bit of her wisdom gets passed on to us in that process.

CHAPTER 8

DOMESTIC HELP AND COW SHELTER ASSISTANT

MANJULA

Some people in the cities may think that working as a domestic help is an easy job and one can earn enough to cover living expenses and also have a bit leftover to save for the rainy day, but it is not all that rosy as it may appear from a distance.

I could not study well at school as my parents were both from a village, migrated to Chennai long ago when agriculture was not rewarding enough and the vagaries of weather made them lose heavily with very poor returns from their land.

They had not seen the inside of a school and naturally I couldn't get much help from them if I had any doubt in my lessons or home work given by our teachers. The word home work doesn't really refer to home related chores but school work carried by school children to be done at home. I got very low marks consistently in all subjects except in singing and handicrafts but that couldn't get me through high school. I dropped out of school and started working as a domestic help, as my mother did.

If you are lucky you get to work for a home where they treat you with respect.

Sweeping, cleaning the kitchen utensils and washing the clothes are not difficult at all, as we are used to it at home too. The only difference is in the type of floors, vessels and clothes.

With most people living in apartment complexes, it takes only a couple of hours to do the cleaning work for a small family of two plus two. In the house where I am working, both husband and wife are employed. Every morning they drop their kids at school on their way to work and leave me alone to complete the house work at my own pace. They leave a key with me and I lock the door when I leave. This suits me well as I don't have to worry about someone looking over my shoulders all the time.

I do my job well and have earned the respect of those whom I work for, as a dependable and sincere worker who can be trusted. I never crave for other people's money or their things. I know how to live within my earnings and do it honestly.

My marriage turned bitter when I found that my husband spent all his earnings in drinking and engaging in brawls with his friends of bad repute. I got fed up when he was repeatedly found dead drunk lying on some road and had to be carried home by my parents who felt guilty for having trusted him and given my hand in marriage. It came to a point of no return when he started abusing me in his inebriated condition and also threatened my parents for interfering in his private life. I decided to leave him and my parents supported me in my decision as it was much better to be peacefully single than spend each night in an unpleasant relationship. He was not bothered and said that he could manage his life without me as it would be care free.

A young working girl who manages her affairs independently is also not left in peace. There are always some anti-social elements trying to take advantage, and to protect myself from such situations I boldly enrolled for a self defense course organized by a women's protection group, which I came across thanks to the lady whom I worked for.

She was herself a firm believer in making sure that all women in and around her neighborhood took the time to learn simple self defense skills and the use of protective gear. She showed me a simple alarm she had in her handbag, which could be activated by the press of a button and would give a loud alarm which can easily unnerve any miscreants and they would run away. She was a promoter of products for self defense and this was one of them that she was selling to anyone who was interested. Particularly she had an arrangement with the manufacturers to get some quantity discounts for distribution to poor people who can't afford high end products at exorbitant prices. She did it as a service to people like me and I was thankful to her for the help in making me more self confident.

She also gave me another product called pepper spray that was the size of a pen which can be carried in a hand bag or even in the blouse or salwar top by stitching a hidden pocket specifically to accommodate it. It is a small price to pay for your own protection at the time of need. The spray can be activated by pressing a knob and pointing it in the direction of the person who threatens you. The pepper concentrate will irritate his eyes and the skin and he would be immobilized for a short time which is enough to escape from his threat and find refuge nearby. It doesn't cause any permanent damage to the miscreant.

She was running a training course for single girls, elderly people and anyone interested in learning self defense. She was kind enough to enroll me for one and I was amazed to know many simple things which could boost one's self-confidence and safety. The most important thing, as taught in the course, is to tell yourself that you are in control of the situation, look in the eyes of anyone trying to bully you, intimidate or threaten you. If he doesn't stop and comes nearer asking you to hand him your valuables, pretend as if you are trying to take out your purse and use the spray on his face in a swift move. It will make him immobilized as he would be completely taken by surprise and wouldn't know what is happening; use the moment to give a good kick in his groins if he is too close, to stun him even further.

Finally scream at the top of your voice and also use the siren to complement your voice and run away from him. It will be mostly he who will be running away from you, never to attempt such a foolish step again anywhere near you in future.

These three steps were usually enough to drive anyone away and we took part in a demonstration on how to do it, by acting it out with partners in the training program. We also learned other skills to protect ourselves in more ways, like karate, kick boxing and strength building exercises over a period of one month by sparing just an hour every other evening and a couple of hours over the week end.

The course was conducted by retired army veterans for helping those who wanted to learn self-defense. The course fee was kept as low as possible by conducting it in a public park where there was no charge for use of the space for such beneficial programs. In fact the authorities maintaining the park were enthusiastic in encouraging such activities which were so useful to women in the neighborhood.

There are instances of chain snatching, eve teasing and intimidation happening almost every day in some part of these neighborhoods and I pity the women who don't take the time to learn these basic skills available just for the asking at easily affordable rates. Should we not spend a couple of hundred rupees and a few hours of our time to empower ourselves for our own protection, instead of blaming the society or condemning the police, without trying to do our part to find a solution?

If I had not gone to school and studied up to my secondary levels, I doubt whether I would have been bold enough to think this way or act this way. Education gives confidence and also opens up avenues to try different approaches in any situation.

I am sharing my thoughts in such detail because I have myself experienced bad treatment from jobless youths.



Once while walking on my way back after work, I was about to lose my gold necklace chain when one such youth tried to snatch it from behind me. Since I had already learned self defense, I was quick to turn around and give a punch on his face and a measured kick on his groins which made him release the hold on my chain and run like hell, catching his groin in pain. Immediately some good people who were noticing the incident caught him and took him to the nearby police station. They requested me to come along and register a case by giving a complaint as otherwise such incidents will continue unabated.

I was not afraid of registering my complaint as I had no fear that he or his mates may trouble me later. I knew enough to take care of myself and had developed confidence to seek justice and stand for my rights to live in peace and safety. Even the police personnel appreciated my presence of mind in dealing with the chain-snatcher and recommended my name for an award for courage and community service.

Luckily for me, my work as a domestic help takes only a few hours which was flexible and so I took up an additional job at our local temple where they needed a hand to look after the cow-shelter.

There were several cows in this shelter maintained by the temple for the sake of caring for abandoned cows which were too old to yield milk and therefore left on the streets to find their own food. In most countries they kill them for meat but here in India we have a conscience. We treat cows as divine, as they give milk year after year for a major part of their life and we consider it our duty to protect them even when they are too old to give milk.

Will you slaughter your mother if she is too old?

Being a rustic girl from a village I knew the value of cows and other farm animals. I have been brought up with a value system that has taught me to be kind to animals, birds and all living forms including plants, which do no harm to us.

I liked the idea of helping at the temple cow-shelter in the afternoons, although the pay was not much for this part time work. The work involved assisting the person in-charge of maintaining the cows, in feeding them, cleaning up the place, collecting the cow dung and depositing it in the *Gobar* Gas Plant that supplied cooking gas to the temple kitchen. I also help the person in washing the cows once a week or whenever needed.

There were twenty one cows in all and it took the whole afternoon to complete the tasks, some of which have already been done by Kuppusamy, the person in-charge who was working from early morning. He managed bringing green grass and plant leaves from the temple garden apart from collecting the left over banana skins and even bananas and other vegetable waste and fruit peels from the temple kitchen, which were all used as food for the cows. They relished these, more than the dry hay usually kept as their feed.

I feel a sense of contentment when I feed these gentle creatures which are so peaceful and undemanding. Once they know you mean no harm to them, they feel safe in your presence and show it in their eyes.

The cow dung is traditionally used as a sanitizer in our village. We mix it with water and sprinkle it on all mud floors. It prevents insects and bacteria.

But here at the temple we use it to generate cooking gas, which is new to me. We used to dry the cow dung in the sun by spreading it in circular shape, like discs, by adding bits of straw and use the dry dung cakes as fuel for cooking. However converting it in to cooking gas seemed a better option and also the sediments that are removed after extraction of gas are still good as plant feed, to enrich the soil. Every two weeks we collect the same while cleaning the gas plant and use it as manure in the temple garden. So even though the cows were too old to yield milk they were still giving us something good in return for the simple gesture of providing them shelter and feeding them.

One day I had a young visitor by name Shanbagam, who stopped by at our cow shelter while taking a walk in the temple complex. I called her in and allowed her to touch the forehead of a cow that has just been washed and provided with food. She was delighted when the cow started licking her fingers and she gave a banana she had brought with her, to the cow.

She asked me why we have this shelter only for cows and why not for all animals.

I had not thought in those lines.

Why not for all animals, indeed.

I thought for a moment and told her that people keep dogs and cats as pets but abandon the cows after taking all their milk for so many years and therefore we need such shelters exclusively for cows so abandoned.

She couldn't believe that people could be so cruel to such a docile and peaceful creature.

After a few days she brought her friends from her school and together they decided to visit our shelter regularly and tell their parents too so more people could take part in opening additional cow shelters in every temple in their neighborhoods, by pooling their resources and collecting donations from kind people who would like to support such a noble cause.

I feel good to see such enthusiasm in the younger generation and that is the right time to instill the values that make life meaningful. They are going to be caretakers in future and I am sure they will not disappoint us.

## CHAPTER 9

### SNAKE CHARMER

#### NAGARAJAN

You will find me moving around a lot but I do set shop for brief periods in street corners and near places of worship. I carry a couple of bamboo baskets with me wherever I go. These are special boxes which are round but flat, like a disc with a bottom piece and a top cover made to fit each other snugly.

My snakes sit inside the box coiled up and quiet, awaiting my call. One of them is a King Cobra, which I saw in the jungle area near my village. It had a wound on its tail, apparently inflicted by someone who had presumably thrown a stone or sharp object at it, to drive it away and save himself. Most people are scared of cobras but the fact is they don't bite or attack people unless they are provoked. If we don't bother them, they don't bother anyone. But our first reaction is to get scared and hit the snake thus provoking it.

I took that snake with me and applied the leaves of a herbal plant ground to a paste along with a bit of turmeric. In a few days the wound was healed. I removed its poison fangs and let it go.

But I found it back at my hut by night and it stayed with me, when I offered it some milk.

It was only about two feet long when I healed its injured tail but now in two years it has grown to more than three and a half feet, with a majestic display of its head when it stood on its coiled body.

I display it at street corners and people get fascinated to see it sway to the music I play on a handmade flute like instrument, shaped from the dried shell of a bottle gourd.

I can play a few tunes which are popular and when children see the snake swaying to their latest favorites they are thrilled. They drop a few coins into the collection box and I manage to get enough money for feeding myself and my snakes.

That reminds me of the other snake in the second box but it is not a cobra. It is a harmless non-poisonous reptile that mostly eats rats and frogs in the paddy fields, and is considered the farmer's friend, as it keeps the rodent population in check.

One of my neighbors in my village came to me with a distress call one day long ago, much worried by the discovery of a snake in his home which refused to move out from the cooking pot and his wife was so upset that she had a nervous breakdown and swooned. I pacified him and told him that there was nothing to worry and I would catch the intruder so his wife will be restored to her normal self.

It was indeed a large one, which had strayed in to their home, probably smelling a rat which was hiding in their kitchen. I could see that it had already made a meal of it with an unmistakable bulge on its midriff.

Once they eat, snakes like to stay put and won't move around for a while until the food is digested. I caught it in my bag which I had specifically designed for this purpose and took it with me instead of letting it free in the fields, as used to do with most snakes that I caught. For some reason I preferred to keep it, although it won't serve any purpose in providing entertainment to children at street corners, as it had no large head like a cobra, nor would it sway to music as a cobra can.

But still, as it was non-venomous and completely harmless I carried it. Sometimes I would allow children to hold this creature and feel its smooth skin. I even put it around their neck like a garland and they start screaming, but in amazed excitement, not in fear. Once they see me handling the snake they get reassured that it is friendly and harmless.

They even pose for photographs with the snake around their neck assuming the characteristic posture of Lord Shiva and it is fun to the whole crowd, resulting in a good collection for me too.

It was on one such occasion, near a temple entrance, that a group of young school kids surrounded me and asked me to show the snakes. There was one curious young girl who told me that she had seen a cobra on the neck of Shiva, in one of the paintings that adorn the ceilings of the temple and wanted to know how it was possible that a poisonous cobra could be so tamed to stay harmless.

I admire such children who are inquisitive and it is better to let them know about snakes so they wouldn't get into panic mode when they see one. They need to respect all creatures and realize that we share this earth with a lot of animals, birds, insects and plants. We don't own this earth but have been allowed to live along with all other life forms, peacefully and in harmony, as long as they do not disturb us by coming to our neighborhood and creating commotion.

I explained to them that even poisonous snakes like the king cobra will not bite if we don't cause any harm or make them feel threatened by our behavior.

I said that there are some temples where they have places earmarked under trees with termite hills for snakes to live in. people worship king cobra and offer milk at these temples. The king cobra is considered to be blessed with a divine character and is not like other snakes.

They were surprised to hear that some people in western countries kept snakes as their pets but that would be going too far. Only an expert like me, who comes in the lineage of snake charmers in several generations, can know how to handle snakes and remove their poison fangs. They can't be completely trusted to remain domesticated as pets. When they are too hungry they can cause harm.

I gave them some information about *Irulas* of Southern India, the tribal people who knew a lot about snakes and were involved in the process of extracting the snake venom with the help of the managers at Snake Park, an organization started by Romulus Whittaker, the famous snake expert, to educate people about snakes and to help *Irulas* in earning a decent income by venom extraction for use in formulation of anti-venom serums to save people from snake bites.

They were surprised to know all these and started looking at my humble snakes with respect born out of this new found wisdom.

## CHAPTER 10

### DENTIST

#### PRIYA

I provide the best dental service possible with latest technology and perfectly clean environment but still some people are afraid of a visit to a dentist, probably with memories of their painful encounters of the past.

Tooth pain is something that can drive a person crazy. Whatever pain killers you take they are not of much help and the intensity of pain would only go up with each effort of suppression by pain killers, when the effect vanes off. It doesn't address the cause, which can only be done by allowing a dentist to help.

I keep my charges as low as possible without compromising on the cleanliness and quality. Every year I attend seminars and short refresher courses to keep myself abreast of the latest technology in this painful job, painful to the doctor and painful to the patient as well.

Most people want to get rid of the tooth when they suffer such pain but I advice them that there were ways to save the tooth and it was not always necessary to extract the tooth that causes pain. A quick examination shows that it was due to neglect and a cavity formed due to improper cleaning over a long period. Just filling the cavity would solve the problem.



There are other causes where the tooth gets sensitive due to nerve damage and a root canal treatment would save the tooth.

One of the important steps in keeping oneself healthy is to chew the food thoroughly before swallowing it. Food should be mashed with saliva before it can be digested in the stomach and the nutrients will not be absorbed if we eat in chunks in a hurry.

The stomach has no teeth and therefore much of the food will end up blocking the intestines causing unnecessary hardship through stomach pain or constipation.

So teeth are important for health and a dentist's job is to save the teeth. Only if there was no way to salvage it we agree to extract it. However when the pain is unbearable the patient thinks it should be kicked out.

Particularly poor people find that they can't afford the cost of saving the tooth and go for extraction which is less expensive. In fact it is the cheapest option but not the best.

Even professionals in different jobs who are willing to work long hours fail to take care of their teeth and end up having to face the dentist's drill. Frequent gargling with salt water can solve half the problems. Brushing the teeth two of three times a day will prevent tooth decay and cavity apart from checking bad odor.

Every day I see so many people coming to me only when they have pain and never for a regular check up that can warn them of any problem before it becomes painful. It is a small price to pay to keep oral health.

I even offer free check up to regular customers because I do care about providing the best advice for preventive care.

There are millions of bacteria in anyone's mouth at any given time and it is a miracle that our teeth can survive a lifetime even with neglect and indifferent attitudes but not all are so lucky.

What is the use of education, if children are not taught the basics of hygiene, which should be a compulsory subject in all school curriculums?

Particularly since they are fond of chocolates, sweets and ice cream, they are more vulnerable to dental problems and must be taught the basic discipline of oral hygiene.

As if somebody read my mind, I was pleasantly surprised to see a group of children in my dental clinic one evening and I asked my receptionist whether they all had an appointment together that evening. She said they had just come in without an appointment but there were no appointments booked for that hour and so they can have one. I called them in to my chamber and asked jokingly whether they were all troubled by a rogue tooth at the same time.

They laughed and showed their teeth which were fairly free of any chocolate stains. I waited with a question mark in my face. The leader of the gang introduced herself as Shanbagam and went on to introduce all her friends. She said they had come to ask me a favor for their school. I asked whether they wanted dental charts or plastic models of teeth or just a drilling machine which they could use to drill the teeth of trouble makers.

I like to make children laugh so they will be able to feel comfortable in my presence as a dentist and the same attitude showed up now without my calling. They laughed again and said that their school didn't have a visiting dentist and felt that it was necessary to have one who could check them up at least annually. They had a nurse on duty and a general physician who visited the school once a month on voluntary basis as a service to the school which was his alma mater. They were both available on call, if any student or teacher needed emergency care.

He was running a private clinic nearby, which made it easier.

I felt honored by their request and appreciated them for taking such a relevant initiative on behalf of their school.

I told them I would be glad to visit their school once a month to provide free check up and also give a short presentation to all children about oral hygiene and tooth care, if the principal had no objection.

They said their principal was a very friendly person and she would be glad to have him in the panel of doctors for the school.

In a few days they brought a letter from the principal and correspondent of their school confirming the request and asking me to indicate a suitable date and time preferably in the afternoon, to enable the children to take advantage of the nice opportunity to listen to me and have an interactive session to involve them in the process.

I prepared a power point presentation along with a short video showing the benefits of oral hygiene and showed them to a packed auditorium in their school and their teachers were present too, with their principal, to make the students realize how important the subject was and I could see their commitment and genuine care for the students of the school.

I offered to visit the school once a month, to give a general check up class by class as a free service to all children and teaching staff too.

I wish every school follows this example, for the benefit of children and hope every dentist spares a couple of hours once a month to provide voluntary service to school children, particularly those in poor neighborhoods.

Pan chewing and use of chewing tobacco are still prevalent in many parts of our country and people don't realize how harmful it is to their teeth, apart from causing problems to others when they spit in every corner. They are no different from the dogs that raise their hind leg every time they see a lamp post.

This bad habit is continuing unchecked in spite of the ban on sale of tobacco products. Particularly the betel nut used in pan is very bad for health, as much as the tobacco.

Only when we spread the awareness about their ill effects to school children we can hope to eradicate it at least in the next generations, just as corruption is so deep rooted in our political system and it will take a completely new generation to wipe it out.

When I see youngsters like Shanbagam and her class mates taking initiatives for their school on behalf of all children, I have hope that I will not be disappointed in my expectations of a tooth-pain free generation and a corruption free India to go with it.

CHAPTER 11

COBBLER

KAILASAM

Looking at a person's shoes or footwear, I can easily assess their personality to some extent.

Some people wear well polished shoes and clean footwear even if they are not rich and I can say that they have a fair amount of discipline in organizing their life.

There are those who treat their footwear with utmost disregard and keep wearing them even if the soles are worn out and the upper layer is torn, unmindful of the poor image it creates about them. They are likely to be careless and disorganized in their life too and possibly with a poor self esteem.

As a person mending foot wear for over forty years, whenever someone is in my vicinity the first thing I see is their foot and not their face. This may surprise many people, but this is the automatic response developed through habit.

I have a small cabin shop between a school and a temple and I get enough customers.

People who visit the temple are in such a hurry and some are even so undisciplined that they won't bother to leave their footwear in the

counter specially arranged by the temple management for this purpose as a free service because they don't want to take the trouble of standing in the queue and collecting the token for their footwear deposited for safekeeping. They leave their foot wear scattered all over the place near the entrance to the temple causing inconvenience to others and also showing disrespect to the system which can function properly only if everyone abided by the rules that keep the system functional.

Just as we respect the purity of the temple space by leaving our foot wear outside when we enter, we need to make sure that our foot wear are washed at least once a week and polished periodically to keep them in good shape. The present day slippers and flip flops are mostly made of plastic or synthetic rubber which do not need polish and are easy to clean.

When people bring their footwear to me for repair, the first thing I do is to wash them or at least wipe them clean with moist cloth. My health is important to me and I wouldn't like to touch the slippers or shoes that always carry bacteria and street dirt, so unhygienic and unhealthy.

I also keep a bottle of herbal sanitizer to clean my hands after every job.

Sometimes people wait until their footwear gets worn out before they bring it for repair. I tell them that there was no point in such major repairs requiring replacement of the soles and stitching all around as it would cost almost the same as buying a new pair. But going to a shop and selecting a new pair of footwear is time consuming and is not liked by many and so they avoid it as far as possible and as long as they could.

Everybody is not Imelda Marcos.

When people bring leather foot wear I tell them "Sorry Sir, I don't repair leather".

They are usually surprised.

I tell them that leather comes from killing animals and so I don't like to touch such stuff. I may be considered an odd man but I do have my principles.

When so many alternative materials are easily available and even more affordable than leather and functionally better too, why not use non-leather foot wear?

Is it because of ignorance or indifference?

People have to be responsible and proactive, not just living any which way they can, insensitive to their environment.

When children from the school bring their foot wear for repair, I fix them for free.

That may surprise many but I do have my reasons for it.

My only daughter is studying in that school and they provide her full scholarship as she is from a poor family and this is my way of repaying and showing my gratitude for the grace of God that guides a poor soul like me, but an honest soul at that.

I go to the temple whenever I can and express my gratitude direct to God. He has given me enough to live a simple life and I have learned to live without comparing my lot with that of others and craving for things that I don't actually need.

Many days I go to the temple for free lunch if I don't have money for buying food that day but when I earn enough another day I share part of it with the temple by dropping it in the temple *Hundi* or Offering-box.

Just as a farmer is an essential part of a society to produce enough for people, so too is each profession. If someone thinks one is superior and another is inferior, that shows lack of understanding and I pity them.

People should learn to respect all professions and that can come if it is taught in early childhood, in schools and at home.

## CHAPTER 12

### TAILOR

#### RANGA

Every cloth has a character so unique to it and the way it is woven determines its usage and its life.

As a tailor I come across more variety in clothes than in people. Some are pure cotton and some are cotton mixed with polyester or wool to give it shine, shape and texture, mainly to fulfill the never ending desire of people to possess new designs and combination of colors.

A well dressed person is automatically respected in any place but more importantly the person who wears well-tailored clothing can easily see that it contributes substantially to his or her self esteem too.

But more than men, women are responsible for taking it to supreme levels as fashion statements. It is hard to believe the extent to which they can go in acquiring designer clothing just to have the pride of wearing what most people can't even dream of.

Women in India traditionally wear elegant sarees and until recently sarees were the most preferred apparel. But due to cosmopolitan living we see more and more girls wearing jeans, t-shirts and Salwar suits and naturally it has resulted in a massive need for tailors to design them and stitch them to perfection.



I learned my skills from my father who was a tailor. He could stitch dresses for both sexes and had hundreds of customers who liked his dedication to details in assessing which pattern would suit a person better and suggesting many suitable alternatives to choose from. He will not rush people and will let them take the time to decide and will again advise them on the pros and cons of their final choice so they would be prepared to accept the limitations that go with their choice instead of blaming the tailor later.

For most people, all this may not make much sense and they would settle for a reasonably good quality as long as it fits their budget. But for the handful of discerning customers who appreciate the best suit or shirt, it needs to be well designed, well draped and well matched to their structure and personality and my father was a specialist who could cater to such people.

Learning from one's parent has its advantages but also some drawbacks. First and foremost is the fact that he is willing to guide all the way with no limits unlike how he treats a shop assistant or an employee, where one teaches only just enough to keep them doing their job and wouldn't let them become competitors.

There are always some special tricks of any trade that a person develops over a lifetime of specialization and he won't hesitate to share it with his son or daughter, if they are being groomed to take over the family business in due course, after his time. There may be exceptions of course, where a master tailor reaches very high levels of excellence but it goes over his head and he carries his secrets with him to his grave; too selfish to share even with his own offspring. Even as an assistant to my father I developed enough interest in introducing unknown and pleasing styles. When customers started liking them my father would not hesitate to give me all the credit and encourage me to go ahead with more innovations. He was content with whatever he had achieved as a master tailor and was happy to see me take over the business to reduce pressure on him and let him have time for other activities that he enjoyed.

One of the most important things that I learned from him was to be prompt in delivering the orders exactly on date and never give room for delays. That was one thing that set him apart from many in this profession, apart from the exceptional quality of his work. He will not accommodate a client who demands 'now, now' service, delaying other orders already committed for delivery. He will give a date and if it is not acceptable to the customer they could go elsewhere. That became my policy too.

I might have offended some self-important personalities and loud politicians but I have quite a large clientele who value my principles, quality of work, promptness and fairness in business transactions.

One of the problems that affects tailoring business is the shortage of skilled tailors. Some come to learn the job and leave for a more lucrative offer and poaching is very common due to shortage of well trained persons.

This is due to several factors like the long hours they have to work, lack of incentives for advancement and stagnation.

I am surprised to see that tailoring field is dominated by men though women can actually perform much better thanks to their nimble fingers and by virtue of their natural ability to work without distractions, unlike the men who need to take frequent breaks for a smoke or a cup of tea.

So I started a training school as an integral part of our business and offered scholarships to girls so that they could be trained to fill the gap. Within a span of ten years I trained more than a thousand girls particularly from poor families who couldn't even send them to school for formal education.

Some have joined my business as tailoring assistants and designers. A handful of them have become well established as independent drapers who take orders and work from home or rented space.

I feel happy when so many of them come back to thank me for giving them scholarship and showing them a way to work independently to earn a decent living without waiting for a job through the employment exchange.

The investment for this profession is not too much and one can start with a small amount of money to buy a decent sewing machine and a few accessories like professional scissors, patterns, polyester thread set and a pack of needles.

I tell my trainees to have confidence and develop their own skills as they worked. Nobody became an expert on day one. Mistakes are part of any profession and we become wiser with each mistake and the wisdom is in learning not to repeat them.

I tell them, “Don’t let your mistakes put you off. Learn from them and become smart enough not to make the same mistakes again.”

By tapping one’s neighborhood one can easily establish in this profession within a couple of years and keep growing from then on.

Since I was the only tailor in my locality adjoining the school I was invited by the principal and correspondent of the school, to stitch the school uniforms at an affordable rate so the children will benefit.

I was a bit hesitant first with the apprehension that handling such volume at short notice at the start of the academic session each year may put a strain on my resources and also may result in loss of other regular clients, but on further analysis I felt it was possible to handle both by enrolling the help of my students to share my work. Many of them were willing to be a part of my team at such peak periods and the volume of work gave reasonable profits even when we offered to do it at a discount because it was for children.

The school management was happy that we could deliver exactly in time and so it was a win-win situation for both of us.

Children grow very fast and their uniforms are bound to become undersized in a couple of years, which has to be factored in to the measurements. However, one can't be too concerned about this as stitching it with a loose fit may not look nice on them and they would start disliking the uniform that doesn't fit them.

So, as you can see, it is quite a tough job to be a professional tailor and careful decisions and promptness in delivery can make it worthwhile.

In my forty years of tailoring work I have experienced many funny as well as difficult situations apart from quite a few happy customers who have faith in my quality of work.

I am now writing a book to share my experiences and also technical tips to make it sufficiently interesting so people can get a glimpse in to the unknown side of our profession.

It won't be "Tailoring Made Easy" but "Tailoring with a Difference"

CHAPTER 13

HAIR DRESSER AND MAKEUP SPECIALIST

SIGAMANI

Technically our hair is a dead matter, the moment it comes out of our body and I wonder why people go so crazy over their hair and spend millions instead of letting it be.

Some may argue that looks are important and a shabby hair reflects the character of its owner. That is obviously true and there is no excuse for such disregard as one can easily organize his or her hair with a bit of hair oil and a comb and periodically get it trimmed to manageable size and that doesn't have to cost a fortune.

I can make anyone look better by simple arranging their hair in a way that suits their personality. After that it is up to them to take care and maintain it in order.

But what can I do to a person who is bald?

Technology has still not found an affordable solution to this universal problem and as long as only an insignificant few are affected by it, my profession will not suffer.

We provide a valuable service to society and cutting and arranging one's hair is not the only service we do.

There are people coming to a barber's shop to check out on the latest happenings in their neighborhood and also to discuss things with someone who can give a patient hearing without violently disagreeing with their point of view. To us it is a matter that needs tact and wisdom, tact to express our opinion only when asked for and the wisdom to know when to keep quiet and just listen, to keep the customer happy.

Most of the discussions are expressions of opinions and it doesn't really matter to us if different customers have very different opinions on the same mundane issues like how the share market is doomed beyond recovery or what the Hollywood is doing to remain the main source of entertainment.

Neither do we have any power to change the course of things like the unscrupulous mismanagement by greedy politicians or the limitless exploitation by unethical business houses that affect our economy beyond repair.

Our job is to give a sympathetic ear to people who wish to offload their weight from their overloaded minds, while we cut their hair to keep our business running.

As a youngster I used to resist whenever my dad took me to the saloon for hair cut. Not that I didn't want to part with my locks of jet black hair but I dreaded the *beedi* smell emanating from the barber and the horrible pull that his cutting machine subjected my hair to. The cutting edge of the machine had presumably worn out long ago and he was still trying to extract additional mileage from that prehistoric mini-monster without going for a decent modern upgrade.

Once the hairs get caught in his cutting machine it would neither cut the hair nor would it let it go. It will hold on to it like a politician holding on to his position of power and there was no easy way out.

I usually resorted to a full throated scream which would paralyze any one in my vicinity including my father but the barber would be undeterred as he was a veteran who had faced it a thousand times or

more and such high decibel reactions to his simple machine were not going to make any difference in his professional conduct.

He would release the handle of that machine and give it a 180degree rotation and it would reluctantly leave my head but not without pulling a patch, uprooting a sizeable stock from the back of my tender head.

So I was naturally against any visit to a barber and insisted that my hair would find its own way of limiting its growth once it knew that I was not going to trim it any time soon, no matter what.

My father resented having to see me become a hippie and his most important mission in life seemed to be to see to it that I and my hair were somehow parted.

As fate would have it I became a barber myself, and the circumstances that lead to such a destiny need to be explained in detail for you to understand the full implications of what will happen if you resist anything in your life.

This is the irony of life.

You become what you put in to your mind, just as the food you eat makes up your body, irrespective of whether it is good for your body or not.

The funny thing is it came to me unasked for and completely as an unavoidable consequence of extending a helping hand to a close friend who got himself inextricably in to a tight corner.

He had apparently gone for a hair cut after a long delay, postponing it for several weeks until finally giving in to the pressures from his parents. But the barber was not too pleased to see him, as he has not been paid for the previous several visits by his father and so he refused to cut his hair until he paid all the arrears.

His father got angry and told the barber that if he so wished he could buy his saloon and drive him out of business.

The barber accepted that challenge and dared his father to do it if he was a real man.

And that is how my friend's father ended up buying that barber's shop on borrowed money to keep his words spoken in a moment of misplaced pride.

Despite the reluctance of the barber to part with his shop he had to sell it to my friend's father and vanish from the scene as he himself had taken a lot of loans from different customers who saw this as the best opportunity to get their money back by making him sell and pay them their dues.

Once my friend's father became the proud owner of the barber shop he didn't know what to do with it and my friend being as unemployed as I was, at that precise moment, it was destined by powerful fate that he would save his father from losing face, by offering to run the saloon as a way to assist his father pay back the loans he had taken to buy it.

He asked me if I would join him in his new venture as a challenge to prove to people that one could make a decent living even from an unexpected turn of events.

He reasoned that we could make some money for ourselves without having to raise any capital, which was an impossible task anyway even if we wanted to do any other business.

After much pondering I accepted his offer and shouldered his responsibility as a true friend would.

That is when I understood the power of destiny.

I was not a person who would run away from a situation that challenged my wits. I worked full swing to learn the art of cutting hair along with my friend and it didn't take very long to introduce novel additions to our shop to attract young customers who wouldn't mind paying extra to have the most fashionable cut.



Step cut, crew cut, Jackson cut, Yul Brynner cut and Obama cut were much liked but nobody wanted Osama cut.

Some people came just for a shave and I used to wonder why they chose to spend their time and money unnecessarily, instead of shaving at home which would take only a few minutes. I realized that they came to chat and have an outlet for their views. Shaving was just incidental.

Sometimes there were hardly any customers.

To attract more customers we devised a new scheme.

We called it "Pay As You Use"

We slashed the hair cutting rates to Rs 20 from the usual market rate of Rs50 per hair cut.

Many people in our profession thought it was a bad idea and predicted that we would be unable to meet our expenses and would wind up our business with heavy losses within a short time, but we proved them wrong.

Our secret formula worked like magic.

We had several options to suit different customers and they were required to pay only for the value added extras they chose.

For instance:

- (1) If they wanted to read the latest news papers and magazines they had to pay Rs 10, but for old ones there was no charge.
- (2) If they wanted a mirror in front they had to chip in and extra Rs 10 only.
- (3) To have a rear view mirror in addition, there was a nominal charge of Rs 5, as it was a portable mirror used when requested for.
- (4) To have their opinions heard without being offered a counter opinion or interruption, we expected them to compensate us

with Rs 20 and not surprisingly there were many takers for this option as they seemed to have nobody to talk to at home.

- (5) Lastly we offered a 30% discount to those who preferred to have their hair cut by themselves. They had to pay only for using our facilities.

No wonder we became the talk of the town and just to experience the novelty of these innovative options many new customers thronged our saloon and we had to expand our business by renting the adjoining space.

We soon opened branches in other areas and became the first and only chain of DIY hair-dressers.

We are strategically situated between a temple and a school and that gave us other ideas when some of the children from the school asked us whether we could do make up for a historical drama which needed long hairs, moustaches, beards and ancient dresses.

I thought it was a funny request and asked the leader of the group Shanbagam, how it was related to a hair-dresser. She said without laughing, "If you can dress the hair, why not the whole body?"

When she put it that way I asked my partner, "why not?"

We felt good at the trust these children had in us and thought it would be heartless to refuse a request from young children. We accepted the challenge and became make-up wizards over night, picking up things from here and there. Everything fitted perfectly when we put our heart and head in to it and we had the special privilege of watching the play from the first row.

'*Veera Pandiya Katta Bomman*' enacted by these creative young children drew applause for the majestic delivery of long dialogues and the matching make-up and the robes that went well with the periodic characters of this famous freedom fighter who gave sleepless nights to the British who had been looting India and treating Indians as slaves.

The school management was pleased with the efforts put in by the children and made us the official make-up experts for all their productions all year round.

We also saw an opportunity with the people who visited the temple.

You may wonder what a hair-dresser has got to do with a temple.

It relates to a tradition special to people in the regions of South India, which is being practiced for ages. They tonsure their head and offer their hair at the time of special events, as an offering to the deity, for the grace bestowed upon them.

For example, when a baby turns one year old, it is customary to shave its head and offer the hair to the temple, usually at the Lord Venkateshwara Temple at Tirupathi. But those who can't go all the way to Tirupathi offer the same at a local temple.

We offered to provide the necessary service with sterilized knives and razors and very clean set up at a nominal cost as a service to poor people and not to make any profit. This was received well by the people and those who appreciated our gesture started becoming our customers in the long run.

Whatever be our profession, if we do our job with sincerity and an attitude of service without greed, we are respected and treated with dignity.

There was no respect for barbers in the past and all that has changed now.

This is a decent profession that addresses a need of the society and when we look back and see how we started from unexpected circumstances with only our enthusiasm to try our hand at something which was completely new to us, we are glad that we have made a name for ourselves.

## CHAPTER 14

### AUDITOR

#### KANNAN

If your mind is filled with zeros and numbers even in your dream, you are most probably a school teacher or a chartered accountant and I am saying this based on my personal experience as an auditor crunching numbers all the time.

At times it may appear that our work is completely unproductive compared to doctors, engineers, technicians and farmers who provide services that are easy to see.

We turn everything in to numbers and see them in different ways to find patterns or measurable comparisons to document performance of variables.

Because businesses need accountability as an important attribute to professionalism, accounting has evolved in to an essential field of academic study and business practice. We auditors are often blamed for not exposing unethical business practices but in reality it is very different from such cursory perception.

Compliance to accepted norms of accounting procedures enable a common yardstick for all organizations including schools, universities, businesses and charitable trusts to make sure that their finances are in good shape.

We establish regular checks to ensure the books of accounts are maintained in order and income and expenditure are matched through financial statements at quarterly intervals and produce an annual statement of accounts including a balance sheet to assess the health of the organization which hires our services.

Auditing is a healthy profession and should be carried out with utmost regard for standards and procedures.

Very often we find that our clients are unaware of the provisions in tax laws which keep changing year by year and it is our job to keep them informed and make sure that they comply with the provisions.

Sometimes substantial benefits can be received by organizations and even individuals by rearranging their investments, the inflow and outflow of funds and certain expenditures to claim tax saving benefits.

An auditor helps in tax savings by planning the financial management all year round.

Many organizations like schools and charitable trusts do not see the benefits of proper auditing, thinking that they are not business houses making a profit but service providers with non-profit motives. But even in such organizations if proper accounting procedures are followed, funds lying idle can be invested judiciously to get good returns and thus maximize their overall financial health.

It is like allowing a third party or an outsider to have a look from a different perspective and help you see the whole picture to manage the parameters more efficiently and professionally.

There are tax rebates and concessions available for research and development activities and investments in infrastructure developments for the benefit of the nation. We need to keep ourselves informed of such new developments to enable our clients to reap the benefits.

Banks in particular have a huge fund management system and their accounting procedures ensure that they operate on sound basis as they are dealing with public funds.

Some people are reluctant to cooperate with us in providing all the information forgetting that we are actually on their side in trying to put their accounts in proper order.

There are others who don't even maintain proper records of their income and expenditure thinking that it is their money and they don't need to account to anybody else, but the taxman is not so generous in sharing that line of thinking. He wants to make sure that every taxable rupee is covered with proper records of tax payment in time.

I audit several schools and colleges and only a few have a transparent accounting system. There is one school among them which stands out as the best where I see every donation is accounted for, along with the fees and other income and their expenses are recorded meticulously to show transparency. Radhe Krishna Vidhyalaya is an exemplary institution.

I usually manage to get them a tax rebate or refund by guiding them to allocate part of their donations towards building their laboratory or research wings however small they may be. This step will snowball into a significant credit to the school and also enable the students to get involved in research activities to expand their creativity.

One such step taken by this school on my advice was to build an auditorium that could seat all the students for all major functions of the school. With a lot of enthusiasm the school management earmarked a large chunk of their funds for this project and roped in members of the alumni to fill the gap through their own donations apart from finding patron donors and sponsors to make it a reality.

Within a couple of years the auditorium came up in the school premises. The school management wisely decided to allow the auditorium to be available for spiritual and cultural programs at reasonable charges, when it was not reserved for school functions.

The Radhe Krishna Auditorium became a landmark in due course and the school benefited a lot from this simple step as they could get much needed funds by sharing the hall in the evenings when it was not required for the school activities. This proactive step resulted in garnering support from the residents in the neighborhood who started identifying themselves as benefactors as the school provided a platform for clean entertainment right in their neighborhood.

When the auditorium was not booked for any program the school management graciously allowed the school students to showcase their own talent, by letting them use the hall for free at least one evening a month.

On one such evening I happened to be present for a spiritual presentation by one of their senior students by name Shanbagam. I was spell bound by her sweet voice and the bold perspective with which she took up the topic of how women were respected and revered in our culture which is so unique and unparalleled. She substantiated her thesis with facts from the *Upanishads, Thirukkural, Bagavad Gita and Ramayana*. The audience was overjoyed and gave her a standing ovation when she completed her presentation.

What a gifted child!

She brings laurels to the institution where she studies and also helps to revive the pride in our heritage.

## CHAPTER 15

### PHOTOGRAPHER AND IMAGING SPECIALIST

#### RAVI VARMA

Looking at the old photos in our family albums dating back by a couple of generations, I get amazed by the technology of photography when they captured moments for memory on black and white prints. Because the photographer had to set every parameter by his own experience including the focus and aperture, the art was more individualistic and one could see things from rare perspectives and capture those fleeting moments on film.

The technology has advanced so much in the last fifty years and one can see a sea change in the way the camera has evolved into an easy to use gadget that even a child could handle with confidence and ease.

The best that has ever happened to photography so far is the use of digital technology. This has done away with the time consuming and expensive processing of film negatives to get the image transferred on to paper, and the color printing machines that occupied a huge space.

Now we could shoot any number of pictures in high definition format on a small smart card the size of our finger tip, which slides into a slot in the digital camera and store the pictures for instant viewing on the camera display screen or transfer to a computer memory for further processing or safe keeping.



The digital video camera is another revolutionary product that is so compact it can be carried in a hand bag and used instantly to capture moving images for compilation into movie clips of family functions.

Nobody would have imagined fifty years back that a pocket sized device could capture live images in full color and with amazing clarity along with sound and transmit it to any person anywhere in the world instantly. Mobile phones have revolutionized photography so drastically that it is now christened “Imaging Technology”.

My father had a Kodak Box Camera that looked really like a black box and many of our family pictures were taken with that simple black box with an eye on one side and a view finder on the other. No focusing, no adjustments ... just press a lever and release it after a fraction of a second and the image was captured on a glass plate at the back of the camera.

When I graduated from school my father presented me with a camera which was the next generation model with separate adjustments for timing, aperture and focus and gave the owner the impression that he was operating a complicated device that needed special training, just as an engineer or technician was required to undergo training to master his craft. I was inspired to capture every sparrow, squirrel, crow and dragon fly with my camera that it became a passion for me to keep learning to take better pictures every time and also look for tips in making the frames fascinating to people who looked at them. I have since become the self appointed photographer for all our family functions and also for all vacation trips.

My son has taken over from me with a more advanced piece of marvel called SLR camera, which is even more sophisticated. It has a mirror and a single lens for both the main image and the viewed image in the view finder so the picture we see is the exact frame that is being seen by the camera lens, that truly is the image captured.

It also sported telephoto and wide angle lens attachments which could be added to the camera body to make close ups of distant images like a bird sitting on a branch a hundred feet away or fit a large group of youngsters for a school class photo-shoot. Amazing feats that were not available in old models; and that made a photographer even more sought after.

Now my grandson has a range of digital devices that could not only capture the picture in high definition format but also enable “Photo shopping”, a term unheard of in my teenage days.

And my grandson can also take moving pictures or digital video and send it to his brother across continents, faraway, by the click of a few buttons on his tablet.

If you think this is the ultimate and there was no scope to make it any better than this, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that just a century back they believed that all that could be invented have already been invented and there was nothing left.

When I capture the smile of a child or the laughter of a flower with the latest digital camera presented to me by my grandson as he had moved on to the more sophisticated next generation equipment, I am amazed by the true to life images it can capture, but my heart and mind say that is no substitute for the masterpiece of creation in front of my eyes, full of life in multidimensional splendor.

The day is not far off when we may be able to reproduce an image really true to life, smellable, touchable and hearable as in real form.

I like photographing young children. They are not fussy about how they look. Most adults need to adjust their hair and apparel and put on an artificial smile to pose for a photo which turns out to be a fake image of a different reality. It is more natural with young children and they let me capture all the fun without any fuss.

But once they reach teen age suddenly they become self conscious and I become very cautious, not to click them without their permission.

I am the official photographer for many schools, colleges and universities and I am always busy capturing the groups of graduating classes, sport events and school functions that need to be recorded for the posterity.

But my main money spinner is wedding photography.

People are prepared to pay any amount to record the happenings at a wedding reception and the rituals of two people joining in marriage in front of all relatives and friends need to be recorded both in still photography and video coverage.

The photo album is now printed directly on photographic paper and bound into an album. It is so heavy but well built to last a life time and then some, so future generations could laugh at the way their grandparents and their great grandparents got married, or view the whole episodes in video format, if they had the time and inclination.

I really doubt whether any family members ever see the wedding videos, even once in a hundred years. Yet they are indispensable to any wedding, and provide bread and butter to people like me.

Most people are not allowed to take photographic images of deities in temples but I am allowed since I am the official photographer for these temples too. I record the various functions and celebrations at the temples which mainly remind people not to forget God in their busy pursuits that occupy most of their time either awake or asleep.

On one such occasion when I was covering a celebration in the temple I was asked to wait at the main auditorium to take photos of a young girl who was the main speaker that evening.

Mostly I have covered music performances, dance recitals and spiritual talks but this was the first time I was covering a child on stage in the temple.

My wait was not in vain. I was spell bound to hear her deliver an extempore *upanyasam* or spiritual discourse on *Krishna* and his greatest gift to the world, the *Gita*.

Although my camera clicked mechanically from different angles my ears and eyes were glued to her and to hear her sweet bold voice that unified the entire audience to a state of adorable veneration to the master of the universe who was omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient.

Even after her *upanyasam* was over I just sat on the steps adjacent to the auditorium, coming to terms with the powerful message she had so eloquently delivered much to the delight of a packed hall.

I have photographed thousands of events but never have I been so gripped by the message delivered through a young girl, who seemed to know every bit of what she was presenting as a direct experience and not as a mere reproduction from her memory.

It will remain fresh in my mind for a long time to come.

I will cover her time and again, if only to hear her message and be blessed by the divine splendor that was guiding her and all of us.

CHAPTER 16

SINGER

RANJANI

Our five senses represent the divine creativity of the master creator.

To appreciate the priceless gift we have been given, we have to experience the million hues that our eyes can see and transmit instantly to our brain which is a marvelous processor that can let us see the images in a dynamic succession and in a smooth sequence.

Our nose can experience so many fragrances that exist all around us, waiting to be explored. The subtle fragrance of *Parijatham* blooms, the captivating fragrance of *Manoranjitham*, *Thazhamboo* and *Shanbagam* are all treats that make us bow in reverence to the divine creator who has given us the means to experience them.

So too are the faculties of taste, touch and hearing.

The tongue can distinguish minute variations in taste and infinite combinations of the six major tastes.

Our touch can tell us the smoothness, warmth, wetness or combinations of them to any degree.

The ears are masterpieces of sound perception and most of us take them for granted without really experiencing all the lovely sounds of music, the song of birds and the soothing sound of a slow moving brook in a silent forest.

What a great body we have been blessed with.

Each sense organ is amazingly complex and we can appreciate their full splendor when we compare ourselves with those who have unfortunately lost their power to see and hear.

As a singer I thank God every day for giving me this unique gift of a melodious voice.

Our voice itself is a priceless gift which is so unique to humans and to be additionally endowed with a melodious voice is a rare blessing that only a few have received.

As a young child I didn't even know the rare gift I had, and it was my music teacher in our school who told me that my voice could bring me laurels if I learned *carnatic* music which was the most advanced system of music that lends itself to systematic learning.

When I told my parents about what my teacher said, they were very happy and started visualizing me as MS, MLV and DKP rolled into one. [ for those who are unfamiliar with these abbreviations they represent the three great carnatic music doyens of our times, M.S.SubbuLakshmi, M.L.VasanthaKumari and D.K.Pattammal whose voices still ring in the ears of music lovers, long after they left their mortal bodies.]

My father asked me whether I was really interested to practice for at least an hour each day and stick to the discipline required for learning it from a master. He said it required a tremendous will power to undertake a journey in music that may transform me from a music lover to a music maker. He planted the seed then and there. I was interested in making it my lifetime venture and he arranged with a musician to take me as a disciple.

Each Raga in carnatic music is so well defined by the masters who had devoted their entire life to music and possessed the rare capacity to compose divine songs in each raga that set the standard for others to follow.

The seventy two *Melakartha Ragas* that form the main framework of melodious music, will surely take a major part of one's life time to learn and appreciate.

Music is considered divine and carnatic music compositions are mostly in praise of Hindu Deities sung at temples or in other places of worship. It is rare to come across a composition deviating from this tradition. Perhaps the only exceptions are the patriotic songs in praise of our country and its culture.

Language is not a barrier to music and the uniqueness of carnatic music is that it lends itself to compositions in any language. The nuances of certain ragas are rendered more melodious in some languages like *Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada*, and that has resulted in thousands of compositions in each language but the raga can be easily identified by a connoisseur of music. Same is the case with Hindustani music ragas of North India.

When I learned some of the classical compositions of *Saint Thyagaraja* in *Telugu* language I was mesmerized by the elegance of the compositions and the exposition of the ragas, even though I did not know the language. But singing without understanding the meaning of the lyrics didn't satisfy me and so I started learning the language too. Once you are into carnatic music and know that your voice is good for music, it turns in to an all consuming passion. The more you learn, the more you realize the vastness of what is yet to be learned. Ragas such as *Riti Gowlai, Hindolam, Ananda Bairavi, Suddha Danyasi, Thodi, Kambodhi, Sankarabaranam, Sahana, Atana, Madhyamavathi, Neelambari, Kapi, Kalyani and Keeravani* are so melodious they touch the soul and take us to divine levels of being even if we have no formal knowledge of the ragas when we hear them.

That is the beauty of carnatic music. It can be enjoyed by anyone even without much knowledge about the structure and composition.

But those who know the ragas will appreciate the magnificence of each raga in its elements.

Any number of compositions I learned in these ragas, I still long for more. Such is the power of ragas.

*Amirtha varshini* is believed to be a raga that can bring rains even in draught stricken areas, if sung in a group with full devotion and faith.

Some ragas make you happy, some induce peace and there are ones which can help even a child to sleep, like *Neelambari* or *Mukari*.

However much I may explain the beauty of these ragas, one cannot understand their majesty without hearing them. Words can't do justice to wonders of divine splendor.

After rigorous practice for more than seven years my voice was able to move effortlessly from the lowest octave to the highest with such ease that even I was astounded by my repertoire. The credit for the same goes to my master who molded me so tirelessly taking a lot of pains to polish every rendering of a raga to utmost perfection that it deserved.

He told me one day that I was now ready to sing on stage, so the world could experience my voice in its full glory.

The first performance in front of an audience is called '*Arangetram*' and it is accompanied by a lot of nervousness but my teacher was so kind to know the difficulty that she chose simple but popular compositions which were sure to please an audience and at the same time help the singer overcome the initial nervousness and stage fear.

I received genuine applause for my first concert on stage and my parents and my guru were beaming with pride.



I have come a long way from that unforgettable *arangetram* but it is something I relish even today.

I choose the compositions for each concert with the audience in mind, and never to show off my expertise. I also remember to appreciate the artists who accompany me on the violin and *mridangam*, without whom it would be impossible to shine on stage.

Every concert is still a dedication to all the masters who had set the standards so high that every generation following them had only one way to go, and that was up.

And a time comes in any artiste's life when they have to pass it on to the next generation and I was no exception. It is a pleasure to teach children who have the natural inclination to absorb and integrate the skills in to their performance. When they show signs of excellence that indicate their potential to surpass their teacher, that is extremely rewarding and immensely satisfying.

The disciples keep the flame glowing and bring out the best in the music for all to enjoy.

And I also learned another lesson from my master :

To be contented enough to stop singing when the music was still good.

Now I have to share an incident that happened during one such concert.

I was performing on stage in the famous Radhe Krishna Auditorium presenting the song 'Karpaga Valli Nin' on the Divine Mother *Shakthi* in the glorious form of *Karpagambal*, the respected deity in the *Kapaliswarar Temple* who is worshipped first before entering the main sanctum sanctorum of Shiva in the form of *Kapaliswarar*.

This song is one of my favorites and it never fails to take me into divine levels every time I sing it on stage to a discerning audience.

As I was mid way through the song fully absorbed into the emotional peak in the combination of the touching words and the melodious ragas that have made this song immortal, I was suddenly voiceless.

I was overpowered by the moment and my voice was frozen.

I signaled to the violinist to keep going and closed my eyes, took a couple of deep breaths and mentally prayed to Divine Mother Karpagambal to show me the way to regain my voice. When I opened my eyes I saw a young girl walk towards the stage. She came to sit by the side of the performing artists and joined in the singing with a harmonious voice that merged so well, taking it from where I left off, rendering the performance so delightful and spontaneously captivating to the audience. What a way to be saved by an unknown yet magnificent kid who rose to the occasion and gave her voice just in time, when I lost mine.

I called her to see me after the program and congratulated her for her courage and presence of mind to come on stage, and for her melodious voice. I asked her whether she was learning carnatic music from any guru.

She said she sang from hearing the songs and did not have any formal training in carnatic music. Her name was Shanbagam and she was a student of this school. She did have free access to the loving guidance of a music teacher at school, who would answer all her questions about any song, like the *Raga and Thala* it was set to, and the name of the composer. Once she liked a song she would make it a point to get to know all possible details such as the *Raga* and the composer.

I asked her whether she knew the name of the composer who gave us this song. She said it was composed by Yazhpaanam Veeramani Iyer. I was surprised by her knowledge, as he was not a well known composer. I asked further whether she could tell me the name of the Raga in which the song was set.

She was quick to answer that it was set in Ragamalika, starting with Ananda Bairavi followed by Kalyani, Bageswari and Ranjani .

It was now my turn to be spell bound.

I offered to teach her carnatic music and take her as one of my disciples. She was happy with my offer but said she couldn't possibly take it as she had no money to pay for the same.

It is extremely rare to come across such divine talent and I was humbled by her response. I told her that I would teach her for free, as her gifted voice saved me at the time of need as if she was sent by Goddess Karpagambal herself in answer to my prayer and that was more than enough to pay for her tuition, as *Gurudhakshina*.

## CHAPTER 17

### WEAVER

### LAKSHMI

Driving from Chennai towards the south, you will be delighted to see miles and miles of pleasant green paddy fields and the palm trees that dot the fields in never ending rows on all sides on and on with occasional signs of habitation with a handful of huts, a tea shop with benches that have not seen paint for ages, and children running around chasing their goats.

After driving for several hours you reach *Kanchipuram*, the silk-sarees capital of the world.

You can check out the fascinating silk sarees freshly hand-woven by weavers who have been in this profession for generations and have mastered the art of silk weaving.

The designs, textures and color combinations are so unique to silk and they provide a feast to the eyes. It is hard to choose the best among them, with so many to choose from and each one not less than a work of art compared to any other.

South India is famous for its magnificent temples and multicolored sarees, and no one can claim to have seen it all even after living here all their life.

A wedding reception in South India will be incomplete without silk sarees from Kanchipuram. There are special sarees for the bride with pure gold strands woven in to the body and border of these sarees which make them so elegant and they in turn make the bride look more beautiful than she already is.

When you see almost every woman, young and old clad in silk sarees in a wedding event, you know the power of silk and gold, a combination that never fails to impress one and all.

The silk sarees of *Kanchipuram* are traditionally woven by hand and there are thousands of weavers in this town who produce sarees of intricate patterns in single or multiple colors and it is rare to see two sarees of the same identical pattern and color combination unless it has been specifically ordered by a buyer.

The silk saree has even entered the Guinness Book of World Records for a saree in more than fifty-thousand colors and that is to be seen to be believed.

I can say with pride that I have produced more than a thousand sarees in my forty years of professional weaving from the time I joined my family business as a teenager after completing my schooling.

Each saree takes typically about ten days to weave and those with intricate patterns take longer depending upon the extent and nature of the designs.

It is amazing how the silk fiber lends itself to the absorption and retention of colors that stay unfaded for many years after it is woven. No wonder it is given a pride of place in any woman's wardrobe.

But what I am going to say now may put many people in to a state of guilt.

If they see how the silk fiber is extracted from the silk cocoons, they will not feel as comfortable to wear it as before.

It takes more than ten thousand silk worms to produce enough raw silk that goes into the making of a single saree.

When the cocoons of the silk worms are ready for extraction of the fiber they are soaked in boiling water and the fibers come off in long strands which are carefully collected and rolled into bobbins. The worms get killed in this process suffocated by the boiling water and that is the cruel reward they get for giving such fine material.

Some people are aware of this inhuman treatment given to silk worms and they avoid wearing silk.

For those who don't want to wear silk because it involves the killing of thousands of silk worms, they have a harm-free silk which is made from the cocoons after the silk worm completes its full term and emerges by breaking the cocoon open as a free butterfly. The silk fiber obtained this way is not as fine but it has the same shine and smoothness. It is called 'Ahimsa Silk' or non-violent silk.

There are even synthetic silk materials now, that have almost the same properties as natural silk and people are increasingly opting for such alternatives to avoid such mass scale torture and killing caused to innocent silk worms.

We need to treat all life with reverence and respect their right to live their life as nature has intended.

Many people from different parts of India and also from other countries come to Kanchipuram to see how these sarees are made and also buy a few to take with them for their own use or for gifting to others close to them. We make special bits to supply to the temples too, where they use them to dress the deities and it is nice to see the way they are decorated especially on festival days when a lot of people gather to worship at the temples.

But as a profession it is still not highly paying and we weavers find it difficult to make both ends meet with escalating cost of living and therefore many of us prefer to see our children take up other jobs and avoid this line.

Those who make a huge profit by stocking and selling our silk sarees should seriously think about this issue which affects all weavers and unless they come forward to take preventive steps, this art of hand weaving may find no takers in the years ahead and the weaving apparatus may end up as a museum piece.

Hand weaving is an art and to keep the technique alive I offered to teach this craft to school children when one of the schools in Chennai wanted to include it as an extracurricular activity. I have set up a weave bench for this school at my own cost and so far I have taught hundreds of young kids, both boys and girls. Shanbagam was one such student who took keen interest in learning the hand weaving technique. She was quick to learn and produced several outstanding designs.

The school has decorated many of their class rooms with the patterns woven by their students.

## CHAPTER 18

### POET

#### PARANDHAMAN

Many languages has evolved over thousands of years and the abundance of literature resulting from the perennial thirst for expression and sharing contains cherishable gems that appeal to people beyond boundaries when translated in to other languages.

Prose and poetry are both like pillars of a language and culture. Ancient languages are living proof of their capacity and flexibility in growing with cultures that use them as their tools of expression.

If a picture can speak a thousand words, a poet can portray scenes in word pictures that go beyond mere prose.

As a scientist famously said, it is easy to write an essay or dissertation running to several pages but it requires good skill to condense it to a single page without losing the impact. So too is the skill of a poet who sees things from a different perspective and expresses it in a way that provides a window through which the reader is guided to access the scene and enjoy the perception in a creative mode.

Poems do not appeal to all and just as we need to take the time to learn a language if we want to enjoy the literature in that language so too we need to develop a taste for poetic expressions to appreciate their import.



*Thirukkural, Ramayanam and Mahabharatham* are examples of how poetic expressions have stood the test of time and have kept their language alive and vibrant for thousands of years, enriching them and equally enriching the lives of people, generation after generation.

Each one is a masterpiece in its own right and they have been translated in to several languages to share their rich content with other cultures.

*Thirukkural* in Tamil is a great work where the author *Valluvar* of South India has used a unique form of just two lines per verse to express his thoughts on various aspects of living in this world. In 1330 couplets he has condensed the essence of a life time, with amazing clarity and conviction. Dating back to more than two thousand years BC, these were written on palm leaves cut to workable size and bound together with threads of natural material which have stood the test of time.

Every language has its own charm and much of the beauty of expression in a language is difficult to translate into another language where a metaphor so translated may not carry the same appeal or context as in the original language. Nevertheless such translations may give a glimpse in to the deeper aspects of life's moments as seen through the eyes of fellow beings in distant cultures.

I was attracted to poetry when I read the poems and other literary works of *Barathiyar*, a Tamil poet who used this genre to inspire people to feel proud about their culture and their mother land. He wrote patriotic songs during the freedom struggle and many of these songs have been set to melodious music and sung by one and all as they are so popular.

Every poet has his unique style and their creative expressions stand even after their time and give joy for hundreds of years.

When I write poetry I feel free to write whatever comes to my mind in a flow and work on it later to make it more precise by removing unnecessary words and phrases without compromising on the message.

Haiku is another form that attracts me. In this Japanese form of poetry the poet conveys profound thoughts and spiritual insights in just four or five lines.

The seed for a poem can come at any time and if we don't capture it then and there we lose it. I always carry a note pad and a pen wherever I go and note down ideas and starters that appeal to me even if half of them turnout to be not up to the mark.

A good photographer once told me that he discards more than two thirds of his snaps and only a few pass the test to become great pictures. So too, if a poet is able to polish only a fraction of the lyrical attempts that he makes, he can still be considered a success.

Traditionally our poets have mostly sung on divine themes in praise of Almighty God and their lyrics have a touch of genius.

Some may argue that after all a language is just for communication and if something can be expressed in plain and simple language why bother to complicate it by giving it difficult twists and call it poetry. But there are many who keep looking for avenues of expression not only in spoken or written form but in others like music, dance and drama to create other ways of inspiration and bonding. Poetry finds a place in such uncommon quests.

I was once called to be part of a panel of judges for a poetry festival in a school and to select the best three poems presented by the school children for inclusion in their golden jubilee souvenir.

I was surprised to see so many talented poets in the making. It was indeed quite a task to select only the best three. Among the hundreds of entries we finally managed to short list ten that reflected originality and creativity.

One of the poems was really outstanding. It was by a girl by name Shanbagam and she had skillfully created a verse addressed to Shakthi, the divine mother, to unite people together as citizens of this beautiful world urging all to discard divisive thoughts and come together for a friendly world of all beings free of hunger, enmity and poverty. I was pleased with her construction of the poem in a melodious raga, *Riti Gowlai*, and the powerful message it carried. There was no doubt in my mind that she was to be awarded the top honor for the best poem and all the judges in the panel agreed with my choice.

Every generation has an enormous responsibility to carry the baton from the previous generation and do their part in making the world a better place for all. I see such smart children as the torch bearers for writing the script that will define the next millennium.

## CHAPTER 19

### PAINTER

### GOVINDAN

In the field of art when we talk about paintings, invariably we are reminded of Raja Ravi Varma, a great painter of India who had such mastery over oil painting techniques that his paintings of Hindu deities adorn millions of homes in their prayer rooms.

Ravi Varma's *Saraswathi, Lakshmi, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva* are masterpieces that have a touch of divinity painted with reverence and minute details relating to mythology and culture that form an integral part of our heritage.

He had the vision to reproduce his paintings as lithographic prints at a time when printing technology was still at a nascent stage and multicolor printing was by itself an amazing work of art.

Even today we can see millions of Ravi Varma's paintings in reproductions and that speaks volumes about their excellence. No other painter anywhere in the world has ever achieved such a distinction and widespread popularity like him.

Through his immortal paintings he has made himself a house hold name in India.

**Leonardo da Vinci's** Mona Lisa is another master piece that comes to our mind when we think of paintings.

So many experienced artists have tried to reproduce that stunning smile and captivating beauty of Mona Lisa, which is a tribute to the capacity of art in bringing out the best in human skills.

But, unfortunately, the human greed has entered even into this field of art and famous paintings have become objects of commerce that have been auctioned to fetch huge sums of money that have no direct relevance to the value of the art piece.

Such great paintings are hoarded as private collections and hidden from the eyes of common people who would love to experience their beauty, but are prevented from accessing them.

Even those collectors remain anonymous out of fear. They are afraid that their possessions may be stolen and they lock them up in vaults. Even they don't enjoy their beauty.

The museums like the Louvre in Paris, France and some in the major cities of the western world manage to obtain paintings of famous artists, paying a ransom to such traders of art with a view to exhibit them for the viewing pleasure of visitors who love art.

The irony of this blatant commercialization is that the artists did not benefit in any way and many of them died poor and uncared for but their passion for art gave them all the satisfaction and made their work immortal.

Cezanne, Van Gogh. Leonardo Da Vinci, Reuben ...

Are there any parallels to the Sunflowers of Van Gogh, the blue irises, the lotus pond, the dancers?

I derive a lot of inspiration from these masters and visualize their techniques while I work on any of my paintings and they turn out well, irrespective of the subjects I choose to paint.

Nature provides an abundance of subjects to the painter and a budding artist need not be at a loss for a subject to paint.

Every flower I come across tells me that even if I keep painting for my entire life time I cannot exhaust all the beauty of the intricate designs and lovely shades that flowers are blessed with.

Painting animals or children may be tricky but the rewards are worth the effort. Children at play, laughing babies, playful puppies, cheerful piglets, wide eyed kitten... there is no shortage of subjects at all.

I didn't have any formal training under a painting master and learned to paint by myself. The initial period of experimenting with form and color soon gives way to work with more confidence using different mediums and soon it becomes a lifelong affair.

Most of us may not become professional artists but painting for pleasure is its own reward. Every art work so done is much like giving birth to baby.

I still remember every painting I have done, even after the hundredth. I was fortunate to develop it as a hobby and did not depend on art for earning a living.

My work as a forest ranger provides me my bread and butter and I am quite contented to use much of my spare time in pursuit of my hobby. Particularly I love to go on painting expeditions over weekends and I always carry my camera with the painting gear. That way I can capture the scenes and work on the paintings later to give the finishing touches. In this process I have become proficient in photography too and some of my paintings are exhibited with photographs of the locations to give a perspective to art lovers to appreciate how a subject appears to an artist and how the camera sees it in its pure form.

Nature has been the theme of their work for many famous artists.

Oil colors and tempera can render them almost in three dimensional beauty when the light and shade are taken into account.

Water colors work well for certain compositions like the seascape, the clouds in the sky, trees in a forest and water bodies like ponds and rivers. With wash techniques and layering it is possible to show minute details that come out much better with water colors.

Acrylics are relatively new and one can experiment with acrylics for portraits, children, pets and studies of contrasts.

Sometimes I mix different mediums in the same painting to complement each other and produce results that are very pleasing.

One of the most important steps in painting is to know when to stop. That comes only with experience. There is always some scope to improve any work of art and working on details could rob us of our time beyond a certain point.

In spite of our best efforts sometimes a painting may not come through the way we would have liked. There is no shame in discarding it or putting it aside for the time being and go on with the next, instead of brooding over the same. Perhaps it could be reworked after a period of time when new ideas may emerge and it may even become much better than expected.

A painter paints for his own pleasure and satisfaction unless he is on a commission to do some specific projects for private users or for a museum of art.

Occasionally we get called to demonstrate our skills to school children in an effort to motivate them to work with colors as a dynamic expression of their creative mind. Invariably we meet with some gifted children who have abundant talent but lack the guidance to channel the same in a way that brings out their best.

Shanbagam was one such girl who could grasp the technique of working with water colors in layers to capture the beauty of Nature. I gave her some lessons in handling water wash techniques after she expressed her admiration for some of my seascapes and sunsets.

Soon she mastered the art and created a series of paintings depicting trees in different settings. I was stunned by her use of light and shadows to highlight their beauty resulting in almost a three dimensional effect. Each piece was a tribute to the marvel of nature and a treat to the eyes of anyone interested in nature and art.

It is indeed a pleasure to see a budding artist trained by you to become so talented that she exceeds all expectations and wins laurels for her work. I was happy that I had the opportunity to inspire such a wonderful kid, full of humility and grace.



CHAPTER 20

WRITER

VEMBU

Human mind is a fantastic equipment and it has an amazing capacity to adjust to any situation. It can learn anything that can turn in to a special skill unique to humans.

Writing is one such skill that anybody can learn.

Printing technology has revolutionized the way a written book can be printed in mass quantity to make it more affordable and to reach more and more people that would not have been possible earlier. Even those who cannot buy books can read them in public libraries for free.

Writing is a great form of expression and once the writer masters his handling of a language he develops a unique style which gains a lot of appeal and more and more readers would get attracted to a writer who has something significant to say and says it in a way that hooks the reader's mind to ask for more.

Electronic digital media has again taken it to another giant step forward and it is mind boggling to realize that I can carry a complete library of over forty thousand books in a tiny device called tablet and read any of it at my convenience at any place and time. Buying bulky books for reading in train or air travel is not necessary any more.

One can even be in the middle of several books at a time and it is not necessary to complete one before moving on to another.

Reading is a good habit and books can be one's best friend and companion when real life friends are not able to spare their time to meet each other due to the fast phase of working life.

I can spend an entire day in a book store, browsing titles and getting a glimpse in to the current themes that make it to the popular titles from biographies to fantasies, juvenile fiction to self-development.

Many authors keep writing more and more pulp fiction and most of it is gobbled up by ever hungry readers.

One of my friends specializes in biographies. He keeps himself very busy collecting whatever he could about many aged personalities in politics and public life, cinema actors, singers, dancers and even industrialists.

I was curious to find out why he specialized in such personalities and whether he was trying to gain some insight in to their success formulae which he could compile and publish for the common good.

When I asked him hesitantly whether that was his motive rather than hero-worshipping people, he laughed and told me that it was 'none of the above'.

I pressed him for a more elaborate explanation, if it was not confidential; and even if it was, I told him that I would keep it a guarded secret.

He burst in to laughter and told me that normally he would have avoided talking about it but since I promised to keep it a secret he was going to share it with me in utmost confidence.

My interest was kindled to a peak and I waited eagerly for his confidential explanation.

What he told me was unbelievably smart and he gained my respect for his uncanny ability to find an opportunity in uncommon ways.

As promised to him I had kept it a secret all these years and I am sharing it only now and that too with his consent.

He told me that he had a data bank of all trivia about popular personalities in various fields collected painstakingly at every opportunity. Particularly he targeted elderly people who were likely to die soon or at least sooner than most others. The moment they passed away he compiled all that he had collected into a book with several color pictures sprinkled here and there and got it published through a friend who was in book publishing. Together they advertised to get enough attention and managed to sell thousands of copies to those who were fans or sympathizers or sometimes even arch rivals of that public figure. Fans of movie stars, for instance, bought the book like hot cakes to know the hidden secrets and interesting trivia that never failed to interest people.

Particularly movie buffs don't mind spending money on anything that is connected to their popular hero and his fan club members who have a blind following would love to read all superlative attributes but turn violent if anything is not to their liking.

So he was quite careful to glorify the fallen hero and make them buy as many copies as they would and make a decent profit.

He was completely against distorted information and was equally against sensationalism in dealing with the private life of public people which made him write only what people wanted to believe and bury the rest into the unwritten depths of his huge stockpile of gigabytes of miscellaneous information.

On a different genre:

I have a girl friend who has written several books and almost all of them are cook books.

She fills her books with excellent photos of the dishes in their final form and chooses very carefully when it comes to the cover picture to make it so inviting that many people buy them just for their covers.

She confessed to me that most of her titles sold in thousands. They never go out of print as there was always some demand for cook books from different sections of the society, particularly the newlyweds.

I asked her whether she tried out every one of her recipes before including them in her books.

She said she didn't.

She didn't know cooking at all and she had no personal interest in cooking either, as her husband was a good cook. There was no need for her to compete with him and make life miserable for both.

Her husband was shy of publicity and so he gave her full freedom to publish any number of his recipes as her own as long as it was going to benefit people in some way.

She soon found ways to recycle the same recipes by giving them different platforms with titles like "Hundred Delicious Soups under hundred seconds", "Ninety Nine Nut Cakes and Nine Puddings", "Fifty Five Feasts Fit For Kings" etc.

She soon had a cult following just for the sheer ingenuity of her presentations and irresistible titles.

I asked her how she managed to handle the feedback from her readers who sometimes may not be happy with the outcome of trying out the recipes in their own kitchens.

My friend said that was never an issue, at least not so far, as most of her readers were not into cooking either. They were buying the books just to add to their collections which gave them some psychological satisfaction as if they knew these recipes.

That was a stunning revelation for me.

I had never assumed that cook books could be collectors' items.

I congratulated her on her ingenuity and wished her husband many more years of recipe filled life.

Pulp fiction and murder mysteries never interested me.

My own preference is for travel writing apart from juvenile fiction.

Travel writing has several advantages.

You get to see a lot of places which you write about and it is quite interesting to collect information from travel agents, star hotels and holiday resorts who are only too glad to be featured in the media and bend over backwards to make a travel writer comfortable so that they could get a fair review that is not far from the truth.

Again it is a genre that sells reasonably well if you know how to time it.

There are a whole lot of arm chair travelers who get all their actions from just reading about unheard-of places and exotic people in still unexplored parts of this overpopulated planet.

Juvenile fiction may be completely weird in its treatment of different realities that appeal to some sections of the youth but they go crazy when they want to buy books from their favorite authors even before their books hit the stands and money is never in short supply for them.

So too are books on self development.

Every now and then an author appears on the horizon with a different sounding approach that guarantees success and their book becomes a best seller. That inspires them to write more books on follow up themes that extract more mileage from the same formula for success until it becomes too stale and unsuccessful to go any further.

They milk the market to the last penny before moving on to the next new wave.

In recent times I noticed that health books are also a good bet as more and more people are less and less healthy due to various factors such as stress at work and at home, junk food at work and at restaurants, shortage of time for doing what is healthy and numerous other reasons. Health books may make people guilty about the unhealthy ways they are living but they do suggest remedies that act as an inspiration to buy these books and continue with unhealthy ways as usual.

Knowing is not doing.

Most people buy books to know everything that may make them feel better but do not realize that the books can't make their life better unless they follow up with appropriate action to make it work in daily life.

That gives me ample scope to write about things that affect peoples' lives, by making them know more and more about things that they don't want to do anything about and continue with their life unperturbed, notwithstanding the new found wisdom offered to them on a platter.

I was elaborating on this theme during a writing workshop for school children and one of the students by name Shanbagam came forward to present a book she had written on what each one of us can do to make this world a better place for all.

I was stunned by her versatility in enlisting almost all professions in its scope and suggesting ways for people to participate directly instead of being satisfied in just being onlookers while others made it happen.

We do have brilliant children who make a difference.

CHAPTER 21

BEGGAR

PICHAIPPAN

I was a seasoned beggar and you couldn't have missed me at the traffic signal junctions, at the entrance to temples, churches and mosques where even miserly persons become generous to offer alms to the poor, with the hope that they could wash away some of their newly accumulated sins in exchange for a few coins dropped in our open palms.

I kept changing my place of begging to make the most of seasonal variations like religious festivals that make it mandatory for people to show some kindness to the less privileged at least at those times if not all the time.

To be honest, I did not choose begging as a preferred profession.

Most of us beggars are left with no other alternatives in a society which seems to specialize in shrinking employment opportunities leaving a lot of people unemployed and left to fend for themselves.

Having lost my parents as a child, I tried to do odd jobs to earn at least enough to feed myself, but even this is a fiercely protected field and a newcomer had to face extreme alienation and brutality that left him with the only alternative, begging.

However there are still some kind people here and there who are willing to provide a meal to the hungry and shelters for street children. I was lucky to find one who provided night shelter.

I followed my own ethics and never harassed people. I took only what was offered with genuine sympathy.

Even the night shelter that accommodated me was soon overflowing and I had to leave but by that time I knew some regular spots where I could surely get enough money and also saved a little bit to rent a hut on the banks of the river *Cooum*, that was the abode for the poorest of the poor in this city.

I came across some unscrupulous gangs who exploited orphaned children by maiming them and forcing them to beg. They would come and grab the day's collections and give them some packed food that was not even fit to feed the pigs. I felt sorry to see such exploited children who were not able to get any protection from the law of the land and were left at the mercy of exploiters, who had neither a heart nor any conscience.

It was a shame that a society that boasts of a democratic government claiming to be interested in the welfare of its people treated its children in such callous disregard while it spent millions on war machines that brought only more destruction.

Most people who saw the movie *Slum-dog Millionaire* got a glimpse of the raw deal that slum kids have to face. I had a chance to see it with a friend of mine. But surprisingly the people who made that movie amassed more wealth and the begging children continued to beg with no real help coming their way.

Even if only ten percent of the movie revenue had been used for rehabilitation of these children, we would have wiped the tears from the eyes of thousands of children.



Furthermore, the anti social elements who are responsible for the plight of these children could have been arrested by legal action if a corrective system had been put in place to initiate cases against such parasites.

How can a country develop if it turned a blind eye to issues like these which need to be addressed in time to prevent them from growing to monstrous proportions, rendering them too difficult to handle.

Of late I have become a wandering crusader with a mission for rehabilitation of beggars, abandoned and orphaned children, disabled people and destitutes.

Wherever I go I carry a set of display boards and flyers that I have prepared with the help of another ex-mendicant like me, who was good at artwork and lettering.

He also joined me in my mission and together we do what we could to make people aware of the mafia that kidnapped street children and forced them in to begging and even stealing.

We persuaded people to come forward and build child care homes and also raise these issues in the media as well as with relevant government departments until effective steps are implemented to protect abandoned and orphaned children.

Our efforts are bearing fruit.

We are happy to see groups of youngsters in different local bodies raising these issues in the relevant forums including human rights organizations.

I am myself a member of a couple of action groups. I am able to make a strong case for effective measures to curb begging as I have direct experience at the grass roots level.

There is a lot of resistance to our crusades, as expected, from the organized begging mafia who managed to stay out of reach of the law.

They even bribed the police officers to keep them looking the other way.

A society that doesn't care about its own abandoned, orphaned and disabled children reflects a serious degeneration of values and a skewed social welfare system.

I see so many people driving in posh cars who get irritated when they are approached by begging children at traffic signals when they wait for the green signal. Just a few coins offered to these unfortunate souls are not going to make these rich people poor.

Some of them reluctantly throw some coins in disgust, just to get rid of these begging kids or women with an infant in their arms. Many just turn a blind eye and go away as soon as the signal turns green.

But they all forget the simple truth that by a quirk of fate the roles could have been the other way. They could have been on the other side of the window, if fate had decided so.

Nobody can choose where they would be born.

If they were really interested in eradicating this curse they could spare a bit of their time and organize shelters and rehabilitation centers in as many locations as possible by roping in the help of organizations such as the Lions and the Rotary where they invariably have their membership as a mark of their social status and to enhance their image in the society. What is the point of just meeting at such clubs over a glass of liquor and periodically condemning all the evils of the society, if they couldn't spare some time to do something about it in action?

The younger generations hold a greater responsibility as they are reaping the benefits of the inaction by the previous generations. They have much better tools and techniques at their command to mobilize support and my hopes are strongly on them.

Even electronic media can bring about a revolutionary change in the attitudes of people if only they set their minds to it just as they have done with citizen journalists to highlight the civic problems and finding collective ways to solve them by social activism.

## CHAPTER 22

### SCULPTOR

#### SIRPADHASAN

Every year when I see thousands of Ganesha idols being created in clay or plaster by imaginative and skillful artisans, I admire the refreshing creativity of designs and themes that add a touch of originality and contemporary look to an age-old tradition.

September is the month of festivals and *Ganesha Chaturthi*, the birthday of Ganesha is celebrated all over India as a joyous occasion to thank Ganesha for removing the obstacles that keep showing up at regular intervals but get surmounted nevertheless, thanks to Ganesha's grace to those who have an unshakable faith in his powers.

Unlike other Gods, Ganesha is a playful incarnation and loves to be visualized in every which way people want to.

So I am always delighted to see my favorite Ganesha in any number of forms adapting to the latest times and technology. We see computer Ganesha, mobile Ganesha, laptop Ganesha and even Nano Ganesha with latest gadgets and never resisting the attempts of his devotees and fans in making him a part of their modern life.

Making an image in different mediums enables a sculptor to bring out the characteristics of the subject in a way that is pleasing and appealing.

Working with black granite or marble is much more challenging than with clay or plaster, because the entire subject has to be visualized in full detail at the start and the stone selected to match the subject. Once we start chipping off the peripheral material to expose the figure in stone, our mind and heart become engrossed with the task at hand and every bit chiseled out is done to great precision. There is no scope for errors. One careless cut that chips off more than needed could result in discarding the entire work and restarting all over again in a fresh block of stone.

I had my training on temple sculpting at the School of Temple Architecture at *Mamallapuram* near Chennai, started by the famous *Ganapathi Sthapathi*, an expert in this field who had built so many temples and had trained hundreds of sculptors.

There are well laid out procedures and guidelines dating back to thousands of years as so many grand temples of India were built to these unique designs and extensive artwork.

All these have been passed on through a lineage of sculptors, generation after generation, as there were no facilities like paper and printing those days.

*Silpa Sastra*, as it was called, gained acceptance from kings and religious heads who made sure that eminent sculptors and their families were taken care of with all support, so that they could work undisturbed.

Once I gained mastery in *Silpa Sastra*, I realized that I could incorporate modern tools like diamond disc saw cutters, sanders and buffers to make the work faster without compromising on quality.

Some of my friends branched out to specialize on wooden sculptures and ivory work which are always in demand and a lot of such works are even exported to many countries.

But personally I am not in favor of working with wood or ivory since these two materials are obtained by causing injury to trees and elephants.

No form of art should use materials derived from felling and killing trees which have a right to live their full lives without being cut short by inhuman intervention by commercially greedy and ruthless logging businesses.

Ivory obtained by killing elephants is another material that should be avoided by all nature lovers and animal lovers. Elephants have their right to keep their tusks and there is absolutely no justification for robbing the animal and killing it for the sake of man's vanity.

Stone, marble and clay are excellent materials for sculptures and they can withstand floods and fires. There were several temples in the coastal areas which survived even the tsunami attack. That is proof enough of the efficacy of using stones for temple architecture so wisely selected by our forefathers.

Initially I was making various forms of deities for temples as there were many requests from places where new temples were being constructed and also for additions to existing temples. As I was also trained in *Agama Sastra* – the ancient scriptures providing guidelines for divine constructions, I was able to make them as per specifications.

Stones are not inanimate as many people commonly believe. They are full of life and the vibrations of different stones like diamonds, moon stones, emeralds and rubies have been well known for ages.

So too are granites selected for making temple deities. They get imbued by the *yantras* that are set below the idols before they are installed and regular worship with *abishekams* or showers of specific materials like sandal paste, milk, fruit, honey and water, together with chanting of mantras give them supreme power which in turn is available to all people who visit the temple and helps them overcome their problems by virtue of their faith in these powers.

I take special care to follow personal cleanliness and observe *yamas and niyamas* (self cleaning steps and discipline in daily life), while I work on making such divine idols.

Pillars, columns, beams and steps of the temple are equally intricate in their innumerable figures and carvings depicting mythological characters and I enjoy collecting background information before embarking on the construction to make it authentic and full of life.

Sometimes people come to me asking for making sculptures of their leaders or religious heads but I politely refuse such requests.

After making divine idols my mind is filled with the form and content of such divine themes and the purity of such tasks will be compromised if I accept other jobs involving forms of mortals.

Just as a musician who has devoted his or her life to singing the praise of divinity would abhor the thought of singing in praise of humans, even if they happens to be kings, as exemplified in the life of saint Thyagaraja, there were many sculptors who devoted their entire life skills to the temple architecture. As a mark of respect to that lineage I too follow their footsteps.

Renowned western sculptors like Michael Angelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, Rodin and many others who worked with Italian marble had produced immortal sculptures like the famous David, Venus and The Thinker which are still as new and enthrall millions of people who come to see them in France and Italy. These are so carefully preserved as they represent the cultural and artistic heritage of these countries.

Sculptures that are considered works of excellence, made in ancient times by Indian sculptors, like the famous *Nataraja* in Cosmic Dance, a masterpiece in bronze, the classic sculptures of *Khajuraho* and *Konarak* temples and the *ArdhaNariswara* idol of Southern India depicting both the male and the female forms as integral parts of Ishwara are so unique that they are notified as representative of the cultural heritage of India.

The sculptors who made them did not claim any name for their work and did them in anonymity, out of their love and respect for the temples and the divinity so incarnated in these installations.

Every effort made to protect these monumental masterpieces and preserve them for the future generations will be steps in the right direction. With that in view I started teaching *Agama Sastra* related to all forms of sculpting to enable new generations of young minds to appreciate the great works of our timeless masters and take their talents to new heights without compromising on their quality.



## CHAPTER 23

### DANCER

#### ABINAYA

Classical dances like *Bharatha Natyam*, *Kuchipudi*, *Mohini Attam* and *Kathakali* have evolved over long periods and they carry the traditions and cultural heritage of the people where they originated.

These dance masters used their dance form to express selections from *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and other innumerable folklore and people were never tired of listening to the music and enjoying the dances choreographed to match.

Almost every girl child in South Indian families gets enrolled in dance schools apart from the normal academic stream, to learn dance from renowned masters or their disciples. The most favorite among the dance forms learned is *Bharatha Natyam*.

Boys were spared the ordeal but I happened to get attracted to it when I was in my teens and my sister was taught by a master who used to visit our home thrice a week to teach her.

Whether I liked it or not, the majestic rhythms of the steps called by the master in his characteristic bold voice kept ringing in my ears even after the dance sessions were over and I would repeat them as a child much to the delight of my parents who thought I was a genius who could remember such intricate '*padams*' after hearing them only once.

My sister was not as pleased, as she had to earn their wrath for not being so attentive. Comparisons bring bitterness and I was helpless in such a situation, unable to pacify her and make her understand that it was not of my making and it just happened so.

It didn't take very long for the dance master to spot the genius in me and he offered to teach me separately as my sister was against a joint venture, where she would have been required to slow down to the level of a beginner like me.

He was a great master. He knew how to inspire different disciples with selections that matched their interests. What he taught my sister were gentle narrations from *Krishna Leela*, which contained playful episodes of *Gopikas* who were drawn to the melodious flute of *Krishna* and danced in abandon mesmerized by his beauty and charm.

What he taught me were entirely different.

He introduced *Shiva Thandavam*, the cosmic dance of Shiva, and *Narasimha Avatharam*, that depicted the divine man-animal form taken by *Narayana*, to counter the atrocious *Hiranya Kasibu's* unlimited powers that he grossly misused to terrorize people.

There was no going back.

It became a passion for me to continue learning more and more of what our master was willing to teach and I became his favorite disciple as I could grasp every sequence without any need for repetition. He even told my parents that it was a delight to teach a student like me with such passion to learn and abundant dedication to this art form. I was elated and resolved to stick to the process as long as it lasted.

When I completed my graduation majoring in materials science, I was already an accomplished dancer with six years of *padams*, *javalis*, *thillanas* and a whole lot of dance ballets that included many more students he was teaching.

Together we formed a team and went on to stage our master's original version of the divine Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva theme entirely visualized and choreographed by him, which was to become a masterpiece of sound and light in a fantastic ballet form, called 'The Cosmic Magnificence'

It was staged as a benefit performance for the Association of Dance Masters which supported dance teachers who had dedicated their life to promote this ancient art and revive interest in the younger generation.

Many of the parents of those students taking part in this epic ballet did chip in and managed to get many sponsors to raise funds for staging the performance.

Shanbagam was one such student who was full of enthusiasm in doing a major part in this epic ballet and with her keen sense of learning she could perform so flawlessly at every rehearsal. Her enthusiasm was so contagious that entire team rose to the occasion and we knew that we were going to make it a memorable event of a lifetime.

We rehearsed and rehearsed for days, spending most evenings with our master in our school auditorium which was made available to him exclusively for this mega production as the school was also keen to take part in such artistic excellence.

When the final day arrived, we were all very tense. We didn't want to make any mistakes on stage and let our master down.

Our master was very happy with our final rehearsal and said that we were going to set the audience on a spiritual experience they would remember for their life.

He told us to be confident and perform at ease without worry and nervousness.

He assured us that the initial nervousness was natural for all and it would vanish within a few seconds once we were on stage and we would be taken over by a divine power which would conduct the entire performance to our satisfaction.

He blessed us, gave a brief introduction to the audience in the packed hall and left the stage amidst thunderous applause. We took over.

We were six main characters – Brahma and Saraswathi, Vishnu and Lakshmi, Shiva and Parvathi, each pair performing the three aspects of divine manifestation which were Creation, Protection and Dissolution with Renewal. These were presented in *abinayams* ( finger mudras coupled with facial expressions ) and rhythmic movements.

Saraswathi represented all knowledge universally available to all living beings including the lowest amoeba and worm to the highest in human form.

Lakshmi the goddess of wealth was ever blessing every form of creation with the five elemental modes of energy that pervades the universe and each living being was free to receive all the wealth to their capacity of absorption.

Parvathi the benevolent mother of the universe seen variously as *Durga, Amba, Kali, Akilandeshwari, Bhavani and Amman* represented the motherhood and cosmic abode from which all life emerged and to which they subsided before renewal and rebirth in an almost continuous cycle of birth and death to the incarnated form but deathless continuum to the individual soul that merges with the universal soul and again reincarnates into newer forms ever fresh and blessed by the cosmic splendor.

When these six divine characters were played by us in expanding steps to the choreographed episodes following in sequence, other characters like *Narada and Indra* joined in at the appropriate junctions and everyone in the audience was mesmerized as predicted by our dance master and choreographer of this epic production.

We received several massive applauds of appreciation at every innovative movement that lead to the next and it was so designed that the performance was one continuous flow with no breaks, to keep up the tempo and the audience attention.

The final standing ovation given by the audience was enough to make us feel the sense of achievement and hug each other and our master who came on stage again, to introduce each one of us. He thanked the audience for their appreciation and told them it was our first time on stage as a group, which made it all the more memorable.

It remained in our memory for a long time and resulted in our bonding together as a performing team. We resolved to meet regularly and continue with our passion for dance, even if we were to take up different professional jobs to earn our living.

“The Cosmic Magnificence” was staged again and again on request from various *Sabhas* and auditoriums, for the benefit of their members and dance lovers.

We have since added several other ballets with our dance guru’s patronage but this first masterpiece was still being performed to packed houses as there were still thousands of dance lovers who had not seen it earlier.

## CHAPTER 24

### SOOTH SAYER

#### NALLA SEIDHI PERUMAL

Bringing good news to people early in the morning – that is what I do for a living.

My name is *Nalla Seidhi Perumal* and the phrase ‘nalla seidhi’ which means ‘good news’ got attached to my name for obvious reasons.

I put on colorful costumes, wear a bright turban and go around early morning before day break, with my bull called “*Bhoom Bhoom Madu*”, a special breed of bull which had a short stature, beautiful face, curved horns and a majestic nod at my beckoning. I decorate the bull in brightly colored clothes over its body, tie decorative ribbons, tiny bells and pieces of ornaments on its horns and garlands of multicolored flowers on its neck and body. With this entire make up my bull looks better than me. I carry a small drum made of wood and sheep skin which makes a ‘bhoom, bhoom’ sound when I move a bow over it and that is the signal which announces my arrival to the people in a neighborhood.

It is considered very auspicious to see a sooth sayer and his bull early in the morning. Most women wake up early and clean up the front yard of their homes, sprinkle water and draw a ‘*Kolam*’ which is a design that is drawn with rice flour on the floor, again considered auspicious to the people who live in that home.

The Kolam is also meant to serve as a source of food for tiny ants and other insects that live nearby, as a gesture of support to all living beings.

That is the time I make my appearance.

I greet each one of them as they are busy with their Kolams, and move along the street offering some pleasant words and short predictions of good times ahead for them.

With my bright yellow turban and generous spread of ashes on my forehead which marks my divine connection to my maker, I give hope and expectation of things to come.

To reinforce the impact of the words of divine message I end each sentence with a stroke on my sheep skin drum which reverberates with a 'bhoom' sound. The bull responds automatically with an affirmative nod of its head, as if to proclaim the authenticity of its master's prophecy.

Some people believe my predictions as they are mostly positive and hope earnestly that it would turn out to be true. When I announce "Good times are ahead, Madam's problems would melt like the dew in the mid day sun" etc. the women folk feel happy and when they see my bull nodding in agreement they get doubly convinced.

Those who believe in my message find that it comes true.

It doesn't work for the people who doubt everything and don't believe my words.

Some people who think they are rationalists dismiss my words as bullshit and a ploy for making money.

I don't care what they think. I keep moving.

I have no time for arguments with negative minded nerds, as I have to cover my usual rounds before it is too late.

I then take a break for a cup of tea and a '*porai*', a form of bread in the shape of a bun but hard and dry. It tastes nice when dipped in tea and consumed bit by bit with each sip of hot tea. It is indeed very soothing to a sooth sayer after the early morning rounds in a neighborhood of nice and simple people.

I remember to buy a couple of bananas for my bull and it relishes the sweet taste. The shop owner likes me and usually keeps the banana skins and other fruit bits left over by his customers, to feed my bull.

Some bystanders pick a conversation with me over a cup of tea and I don't hesitate to give my opinion about happenings in general without getting in to controversy.

I always make it a point to be careful with some people who have nothing better to do than keep arguing about some political personality involved in the latest scandal or scam, or about some superstars in movie land and their private lives. I avoid them saying that I have no idea about such things and walk away with my bull, but not without offering them good luck.

I make another round by late afternoon to go to the same neighborhoods which I had visited in the morning and make my "bhoom" sound without saying anything. Some of the householders come out and offer me their old clothing or a bowl of food, some fruits or a sweet made at home, whatever was at their disposal. Some even give me money.

I accept their offerings blessing them again. Looking at their face I can know that some have found a bit of salvation through my words that morning, and some others have got reconciled to their day's happenings without much ado.

Never have I received a bad word or scolding from the women of the house. If they have something to offer me they do. Otherwise they mind their own business and I keep moving.



I don't like pestering people or bothering them for money or materials which I consider inappropriate and unbecoming of a sooth sayer.

Each day I choose a different route and don't visit the same location again until after a fortnight or even a month. That makes people comfortable with my presence and doesn't irritate them as it would, if I visited them every day.

During one such round in a middle class locality I happened to meet a young girl with a camera hanging from her neck and a big smile on her face as he greeted me to strike a conversation.

As I was almost finished with my rounds for that day I greeted her back and signaled to my bull to do the same. she was quite pleased when my bull nodded its head with a 'moo' to greet her.

She introduced himself as a college student and asked my permission to take a photograph of me, as my colorful apparel and bright yellow head gear made an excellent subject for a composition with my little bull to complete the picture.

I felt good when she put it in so many words and agreed to pose for her, with a request that she should give me a copy of the picture in color print for me to keep and show to my wife and children. She gladly agreed and took several snaps from different directions and angles. This was the first time somebody was taking my pictures and I asked her what she was going to do with so many pictures of a poor old guy and his equally poor bull. She laughed and said anybody who could make people happy with his optimistic words is not poor. She added that it was not money that made one rich but friendship, kindness to fellow beings and to all living creatures including my bull, and acts of encouragement that made life better for others. These values were what made one rich.

I really felt good that a young person had such clear ideas about values in life, and also for accepting me as a valuable member of the society. I thanked her.

I asked her whether I could know her name. She said she was Shanbagam and she was a student with an open mind to learn all about life in all forms and manifestations. She went on to ask me how I could know what problems people faced without even knowing them and how I was able to predict that their problems would be resolved soon.

I shared my secret with her for the first time in my life.

I had never disclosed my professional secrets to anyone before.

I said , “It is not difficult at all. I could easily make out from people’s faces that they were brooding over something and it invariably happens to be about relationship or money.

I give them hope by saying that their problem will be solved and good times are ahead. They long for such comforting and consoling words which are not easy to come by.

In most cases there is some solution soon and they become relieved that what they were worrying about was not so serious after all.

When they see me again, they remember what I had said and they form a connection between what was said and what happened soon after.

They are ordinary folks and simple people. They don’t hesitate to reward me with something or the other.”

My young friend appeared convinced that what I said could be true.

She asked, “But surely there may be some instances when their problem persists or even becomes worse. How will you handle such a situation?”

I replied, “Oh yes! It does happen now and then. I am not perfect and this world is not designed to be perfect either.

Those people who are unfortunate to find no solution to their persistent issues accept it as their fate. They don’t blame me for such a situation.

In fact I am able to give them extra bits of hope and that would be something worth looking forward to. It never fails.

People live on hope and I provide all the hope I could muster. So far there has not been any major mishap in this regard. God is great.”

She laughed in agreement with my irrefutable logic and practical wisdom gained over a lifetime of personal experience in living the life of a soothsayer.

My bull nodded in agreement with my reflections as if it was telling me not to be too concerned with such petty matters which did not make any major difference in our lives, one way or another.

Our attitudes run our lives and it is quite possible to bring about a change even if it means placing some faith in the soothing words of a soothsayer.

## CHAPTER 25

### GARBAGE COLLECTOR

#### KUPPUSAMI

In some countries it is compulsory for the citizens to serve in their army for at least a couple of years soon after graduation and perhaps it gives them a sense of patriotic duty to their motherland even if many young people may be against the idea of serving in a war in another country just because they are lead to believe it is actually for defending their own country's interests.

In an entirely unconnected manner and completely irrelevant to this business of defending one's country, I would like to suggest that it should be mandatory for every citizen to serve as a garbage collector for at least one year, before she or he is allowed to take up any other professional employment of their choice.

This may sound insane to some and completely boisterous to others, but I have very valid reasons to support my suggestion and it would be a grave mistake to brush it aside as garbage talk without giving it a decent consideration.

I work as a garbage collector.

Every day I see so much garbage, I wonder whether people would generate so much waste if they cared to realize how much it costs in terms of tax payers' money to collect it, segregate it and deposit it in the dump or the recycling assembly line, every single day.

And it is scary to think what will happen to the next day's lot if the present mountain of garbage is left uncollected for some unavoidable reason.

This is a massive operation carried out every working day to keep the neighborhood clean and healthy.

Just imagine the stink it would cause if it is not cleared for a week, and the health hazard it would pose to the very same people who contribute so generously to their garbage bins.

The health of a nation's economy could be gauged from the amount and content of the rubbish generated by its loyal citizens.

I am appalled to see huge amounts of usable items thrown in garbage just because their owners have an insatiable thirst for new models as and when they are released in the market and the older ones are no more in fashion, even if they are still perfectly usable and fully functional, albeit old.

The other day I came across a four piece sofa set junked by some resident in a posh neighborhood. Obviously they were fed up with the old design and had gone for a more expensive and showy replacement for the simple reason that they could afford it.

I also noticed that they had discarded a whole lot of other items too, still in excellent state of health, like side tables, center table, colorful curtains and a couple of wall clocks still ticking to time. I couldn't think of how a sane person would abandon such stuff. The only reason I could conjure up was they had opted for a complete makeover and these didn't fit in.

With more and more people becoming members of this make over club, I am scared to think what the future holds in store for an already overburdened waste collection system.

New ways have to be thought of for fresh landfills, when land is already a scarce commodity. Perhaps they would come up with vertical garbage dumps, in the lines of vertical cemeteries already in practice to overcome shortage of burial space.

All this may sound too pessimistic to people who have no idea about garbage.

Only if each citizen is made to serve as a garbage collector for a year or two would they realize the enormity of the situation and the evasiveness of the solution.

When more people actually deal with garbage collection and are given firsthand experience into the system of processing, they would hesitate to dump items that have not yet served their full life. They would think twice before they discard items that could still serve their purpose.

Electronic waste is another major new comer to the world of garbage and it has brought many headaches with it. Disposing of electronic waste poses serious problems and in certain cases they are still awaiting new guidelines as they have no clue about proper disposal to prevent possible health hazards.

Bio degradable materials are at least known devils and methods are in place to handle them safely.

Source segregation of waste was started in our state with a lot of fan fare and media coverage to involve people but it worked only for a fortnight. There was no follow up and people treated it as another gimmick to siphon off tax payers' money.

I was reminded of a funny set up that I came across, a few years back.

I went to a post office in *Alwarpet, in Chennai*, on my way to work, to post a letter and I was perplexed to find six different mail boxes in different colors right at the entrance to the post office.

I found each box having a label and they read: Foreign Mail to US, Foreign Mail to Europe, Foreign Mail to Other countries, Local Mail to Chennai, Local Mail to Tamil Nadu and Local Mail to rest of India.

As my letter was to a friend in Tamil Nadu I posted it in the appropriate box, appreciating the efforts of the Post Office in Source Segregation of letters.

However my appreciation was short lived. When I was about to leave, I noticed a post man collecting the mail from each box to take it in for processing.

What I noticed was unbelievable.

He collected all the letters in the same bag.

I wished him and asked him what was the purpose of having different boxes for different destinations, if all the contents were going to be collected together in the same bag?

He was amused by my question. He laughed aloud and said that people sitting at the top in air conditioned offices have no idea of ground realities.

When someone gets a brainwave like this, if he is in a position of power, he manages to implement unnecessary and impractical schemes like these six different mail boxes for different destinations.

However when a postman collects the mail he hardly finds a handful of letters in the local box and one or two letters in the rest. Why would he carry six bags to collect them and process them, if one bag would do the job easier and better?

I could understand his logic.

The source segregation of garbage is similar.

Unless there is enough volume, the collecting personnel would not bother to collect them in separate blocks.

They would put them all together and dump them alike.

There is another important benefit in making everyone serve as a garbage collector for a year or two before taking up their chosen profession.

An experienced garbage collector can have a good idea of the state of the economy and prosperity of his neighborhood. This may surprise you and you may wonder how on earth a garbage collector can know about the economy or the level of prosperity. What has the garbage got to do with it?

Well, garbage has quite a bit to do with the state of the economy, if one cares to take a look.

I have found that in some localities people throw DVDs and CDs and even cell phones in garbage. Obviously those living in this area are well to do and don't mind throwing things just to go ahead and buy new ones. Money is not an issue for them.

There are areas where the rubbish contains only half eaten pizzas, spaghetti and burgers, and there is hardly any vegetable or fruit waste in their garbage. This neighborhood is in for ill health sooner or later. People who avoid vegetables and fruits and go for fast food or junk food are playing with their health.

I used to find newspapers, magazines and packing boxes thrown in garbage along with kitchen waste in the past, but now a days I don't find any. I can only infer that people collect them and sell them to the waste paper dealer who pays a reasonable amount per kg and it gives them some relief from the escalating prices in recent times.



This is an indicator that I am in middle class neighborhood and the economy is pinching them.

So, as I said, it is possible to get an idea about the general state of economy and prosperity by having a cursory look at the garbage.

I don't want to spend the rest of my life as a garbage collector although they pay me enough to manage my needs. I have enrolled for evening classes in computer applications and usage, as applied to call centers. It may take a while for me to grasp enough but surely I will move on in a few years.

In the mean while, my request to people is to try and reuse the materials that still have some useful life or donate them to poor people instead of throwing them in the junk, just because they have a desire to go for newer models or fashions.

I happened to share this knowledge with students in an educational institution in our neighborhood and one girl student by name Shanbagam told me that in some countries they have already developed sophisticated robots to segregate and use garbage for generation of electric power apart from extracting valuable metals and minerals from discarded gadgets. I was happy to see our youngsters so well informed and taking part in discussions that can make a difference in improving our planet and its environment. I appreciated her input and told her that the future generations can make a huge difference in making life better for all.

It is quite important to live without extravagance today, so that we won't be required to live without essentials tomorrow.

## CHAPTER 26

### ENGINEER

#### EASWARAN

Do you live in a house or an apartment, built with cement, sand, bricks and concrete?

Unknown to you, you have been served by a civil engineer.

Do you use a vacuum cleaner, electric kettle or water heater, tube lights, fans and air conditioners at home to make your life easy and comfortable?

You have utilized the services of electrical, electronics and air-conditioning engineers somewhere on the line.

Do you have an electronic clock showing time so accurately, a thermostat that ensures that your bathroom geezer supplies the shower at the right temperature, an energy meter that shows how much power you are consuming and a level gauge that controls the water level in your overhead tank?

An instrument engineer has been at your service, invisible to you.

Do you use a car, a scooter, a motorbike, or at least the public transport system to go to work?

You have been helped by an automobile engineer indirectly.

Have you painted your apartment or house, the windows and grills, doors and gates of your abode at any time?

A chemical engineer would have been involved in that process.

Are you fed up with all the above and want to go away to preserve your health and peace of mind, by ship or air, to a secluded place far from the maddening crowds and gadgets that occupy much of your time and life and leave you no time for yourself?

You are about to be served by a health and fitness engineer, marine engineer or an aeronautical engineer.

Every service that goes into the making of a community or a society has been made possible by engineers, technicians, scientists and technocrats who keep doing whatever they could to make things easier and better for people.

I am an engineer and a specialist in the field of diagnostic and surgical instrumentation and allied equipment.

Every hospital needs diagnostic equipment used by physicians and medical technicians to check the parameters that determine one's health. Instruments for checking blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol and numerous other variables are designed by engineers like me. They need technicians to maintain them to perform their designated functions to great accuracy and dependability.

Everyday new instruments are designed and manufactured to cater to the increasing demand of healthcare professionals.

In surgery too there are marvelous instruments and devices developed to help a surgeon do his job better and easier.

Endoscope, laparoscope, laser surgery, electro-cardiogram, electro-encephalograph etc are aids to surgeons to save a patient through minimal surgical incision to bring them back to normal health.

Nano technology, the latest in the series of advanced engineering marvels, can take it by a quantum leap and you can even be operated upon by robots which enable even more precision than the doctor's hand which can get tired due to over work or tension.

This field is so vast that every day new devices are being invented to provide better healthcare, but there are still a lot, waiting to be discovered.

Once a year, every year, I have been earmarking a day for devoting my time to share the latest technology updates with school children in different schools by rotation.

The interest shown by youngsters in the scientific and spiritual knowledge is gaining ground with every generation and I feel good to interact with them and also feel the pulse. One should not underestimate the power of collective wisdom that results from such interaction, in shaping the future of our country and the quality of life of its people.

CHAPTER 27

TOUR OPERATOR

SANKARAN

Have you ever been to *Badrinath*, at the foothills of Himalayas?

If you have, then you would appreciate it if I say that the experience of traveling in a bus from *Haridwar* through the winding roads and the breathtaking views while passing through the eighteen mountains to reach *Badrinath* is nothing short of a miracle.

For a high school dropout from South India, I was stunned beyond words when I saw such beauty in the confluence of those mountains and the salubrious flow of unpolluted air provided enough energy to stand the long journey.

Whatever little I had learned in our history and geography lessons at school touched upon only Kashmir and the Himalayan snow peaks. So, naturally I was taken by surprise when I went with a small group of elderly people, as my mother wanted to see Badrinath Temple as part of her pilgrimage dream and I offered to go with her to provide a supporting hand, as she was too old to travel alone. Also I had nothing special to do as I had dropped out of school to look for a job and my mother was always there to reassure me that I would surely get a job soon to my satisfaction.

She said that if I knew how to read, write and speak that was enough education and there was no need to feel bad that I could not fare well at school and complete my school finals.

I have come across so many parents who kept pushing their children to study harder and harder and never accepted anything less than 99.5 % but I was lucky to have a mother who was different. She believed that anybody who had all the five senses in working order and knew how to talk with cheerful and polite words could manage to make a decent living and right attitude was far more important than all the bookish knowledge.

No wonder I adore her. Having lost my father when I was barely five years old, she was both father and mother to me. She used to make *Appalams, Papads, Pickles and Vadams* at home, pack them nicely in transparent covers and supply to shops in our neighborhood and was quite content to live a simple life. She earned enough to cover our living expenses and my schooling.

She taught me everything she knew and I assisted her in all the work at home as soon as I returned from school and also during weekends. I was not much interested in playing cricket with friends on the streets. I felt it was much better to help my mother and share her work than waste time playing. She was a strong person with a clear mind and confident attitude, all of which I inherited from her by sheer association and admiration.

At school I have come across children from rich families where both parents had top jobs and had no time even to talk to their kids who had to manage on their own with a bit of support from their domestic help.

Compared to such situations I was really so blessed to be with my mother who never scolded me and always had some kind words even when I didn't perform well at school.

Every month she would save a little bit of money and keep it separately and at the end of the year we would go on a pilgrimage for a few days during my school vacation, to visit different temples and also enjoy the beauty of nature, waterfalls and gardens wherever we went. She was very particular that we should only pray for courage and blessings to make an honest living without being a burden or nuisance to others and stand on our own legs.

In her entire life she had never taken a loan from any one. She would always save a little from whatever she earned and manage to pay for all the living expenses without default. Even at the corner shop where I used to get our provisions we would promptly settle our monthly bill on the first day of every month and the Shop owner used to tell me that he had never come across such honest people. Most of his clients would pay only after several reminders and that too very reluctantly as if they were doing a favor.

When we have simple food, she would say that we should be thankful to God for whatever little we have and also for blessing us to be contented with what we had rather than craving for more, as there were millions of people less fortunate than us.

When we cultivate such a habit from childhood it stays with us for life and I can see how it has helped me in dealing with my own life situations.

On numerous occasions I would come across my class mates bringing some expensive items like watches, mobiles, electronic games etc and boast to others. I would remind myself that they were unnecessary for life and I can be happy with just an affectionate mother to stand by me and nothing else was important.

But whatever be the state of our personal finance, she would surely buy a pack of '*Kamarkat*', the most delicious sweet and my favorite.

It was made with coconut and jaggery and was much more delicious than chocolate.

She told me that it was more nutritious too, as coconut and jaggery contained much needed minerals and helped the stomach lining to be maintained in good condition to prevent ulcers.

Our trip to Badrinath was the longest. We had taken many pilgrimage trips to places in Southern India but this was the first time that we ventured in to the north. I was concerned how we could manage without knowing the language spoken there or at least a bit of working English. Both of us knew only Tamil and Sanskrit but she said that wouldn't bother her as we were going as a group and the tour operator was well experienced in these regions as he had taken many such tours. He was known to her as he was a customer at a store where she supplied her pickles and he had specifically asked the store owner to introduce the person who made such delicious pickles and he met my mother to tell her how much he liked her pickles. Such small gestures make everyone feel useful and appreciated and acted as an incentive to remain quality conscious.

He had assured her that she would have no difficulty and he would provide all help to make the pilgrimage a wonderful experience.

True to his words he was always there to steer the group and arrange alternatives when the going was not smooth. There was a land slide in one of the mountain sections half way through and our bus had to wait in line with most other vehicles. He quickly got down, went to find out what was happening and came back to reassure us that the border security forces personnel have already arranged to get the block cleared and make way for the movement of the vehicles. He said he had experienced such situations many times earlier and these people were very prompt and efficient in restoring normalcy as this road was vital for all supplies to the border security forces stationed ahead.

Just as he said the road block was cleared in a couple of hours and we resumed our journey to reach the destination although it was almost mid night.



I forgot to mention that I had invited my best friend and class mate Shanbagam and she gladly accepted to join us as she knew my mother very well and had great respect for her. Her foster parents did not hesitate to let her go with us realizing that she needed such an exposure and she wouldn't get an opportunity to go with reliable and known people, if she missed this opportunity.

Shanbagam is just the same age as I am and could naturally adjust to any situation without tension. She had a balance that is very rare to find in teenagers and I was attracted to her peaceful gait and pleasant manners. She had helped me many times when I had struggled to get to terms with some subjects like math and science and that was a major contribution in my passing through my grades to reach secondary school final, when I couldn't take it anymore and just dropped out, even though she told me that just as she was helped by others she would help me too, to get through the final exams and told me not to lose heart but appear again next year to clear the exams.

We had carried some sweaters and shawls to protect ourselves in the cold climate of those mountain regions but being from the South where it was mostly hot, we found the chill reaching our bones and our teeth started chattering even in sleep.

Next morning we had some hot tea with a pinch of ginger in it and it was a life saver. We quickly got ready, had a simple vegetarian breakfast specially arranged for our group and proceeded together to pass through the never ending line of shops in the market, cross the bridge and climb the steep stairs that led to the great temple on the hills, the abode of Badrinath. Many people had already arrived at the temple gates but the flow was well regulated by the volunteers. We were thrilled to see the market and shops from the elevated platform at the entrance to the temple.

People wearing colorful dresses carrying orange red flowers and garlands of marigolds that filled the air with sweet fragrance kept chanting '*Har Har Mahadev*', '*Om Namashivaya*', '*Narayana, Narayana*',

'*Govinda, Govinda*', '*Hare Rama, Hare Krishna*' and we too joined the chorus that unified all the pilgrims from different parts of this holy land.

Badrinath was visible from the entrance and we soon reached the inner passage that led to the main hall at the end of which the priests were chanting mantras and distributing the sacred water to all, as a blessing from the magnificent deity overlooking the entire congregation with benevolence and benediction.

Actually these words can't describe the charged atmosphere resulting from the repeated patronage of spiritually inclined *bhaktas* or devotees who come here time and again to soak in the celestial bliss.

At such times we realize the insignificance of all mundane things and the magic of the moment gets etched in the minds of one and all as a collective experience of a life time.

We had to move on after being blessed, to make way for those behind us. We climbed down through the narrow passage and walked around the outer precincts of the magnificent temple built several hundred years back and still strong enough to go on forever.

My mother was very happy to be assisted by me on one hand and Shanbagam on the other. She had a nice darshan of the deity, received the marigolds and roses offered by the priest with all reverence and viewed the experience of a lifetime as one of the best she had ever had.

We spent some time at the market on the way back, to pick up some mementos from the marble replicas of Badrinath, copper pots filled with the sacred waters of the river Ganga, and other innumerable items on display. Choosing from such a vast collection of items was really a difficult task.

Next day was scheduled for a trek in the mountain to reach Neelkant, the Himalayan peak that was reachable from the side of Badrinath Temple, through a well laid out path.

My mother didn't want to climb all the way to *Neelkant* and said she would go to the temple again and wait at the steps by the side of the geyser where people took a dip to purify themselves and benefit from the natural mineral content of this unpolluted water that sprang from the melting snows.

Shanbagam and I joined the members of our group to trek through the long path, stopping every now and then to breathe the fresh air and to enjoy the view from the top. We reached the place where the snow was melting into stream and we were delighted to see the crystal clear water flowing beneath the ice, making a soothing sound that could be heard to the last decibel in the silence of the hills, an amazing experience that can't be expressed in words.

Moving further ahead we saw the foot impressions of Shiva preserved in the rocks and worshipped by all who visited here.

That was the farthest we could go. We stayed there for a while, quietly enjoying the peaceful atmosphere thousands of feet above sea level, before starting on the return journey which took only a short time compared to the climb.

We were excited to share our experience with my mother who had already made friends with those who were waiting at the steps to witness the evening prayers and the *Aarthi*, the worship of the sacred river *Ganga*.

Our tour guide explained to us about the unique attributes of Badrinath that attracted people from different parts of our country. He had been arranging such pilgrimages year after year, and the satisfaction he derived when people thanked him for that wonderful experience of a life time, was matchless. He has always maintained the standards of quality at affordable rates.

Next morning we had to pack up and start early as our return journey was a long way back again through these lovely mountains and we managed to get an eyeful of whatever we had missed when we

travelled in the night when we came here. There was no road block in the passage and we stopped for a while at the point where the three rivers met, to form the sacred Ganga.

Each river had a distinct color and the merging was smooth and gentle.

We reached Haridwar by late evening and rested to a sound sleep at night as we had to leave early in the morning to catch the train back home, carrying the unforgettable memories.

While in the train, our tour guide sat with us and told us about so many interesting experiences in the past trips to many other places and said that it expanded one's perspective in life and inculcated a sense of appreciation for such beauty of nature everywhere.

He had some kind words to share about people who took these pilgrimage tours from the South. He said they managed to be happy even with the basic facilities and mostly accepted unavoidable changes with grace.

Particularly he appreciated me and Shanbagam for helping my mother in this pilgrimage. He liked us both for being so calm and so different from many teenagers who are so demanding and noisy, unmindful of the disturbance caused to others.

He asked me whether I would be interested in joining him as an assistant in his business as he needed a person who could help elderly people who made up the bulk of his pilgrimage tours and at times he couldn't handle it all by himself.

My mother gave me a knowing glance with a smile and I understood the words she had spoken earlier, that I would surely get a suitable job and there was no need to worry.

Her faith in God's inexhaustible kindness and love for all indicated to me that I could go ahead and accept the offer. I asked Shanbagam for her opinion whether that was the right thing to do and she told me to go by

whatever my mother would approve of. Her own life was still in fluid stage with many options open to her to choose from and she was in no hurry.

That was the setting for the start of my career as a tour operator. I worked with him for several years as his assistant, learning a lot in building my skills as a people person and organizer. He taught me many things and treated me as a student and friend rather than an employee or subordinate.

He taught me that we should always have alternatives planned ahead, as everything will not work out the way we expect and things that crop up in the last minute should not be allowed to stun us into unprepared tight corners.

If the train comes late and people have to wait at the station, alternative arrangements have to be made to take care of them and provide food and water until they board the train.

If the hotel bookings go astray due to heavy rush in the season we must have alternative places to go to even if they are more expensive, so people wouldn't be stranded.

We always carried a first aid box and some essential medication and made sure that it was in order, before every journey.

These background steps carried our religiously have earned us a name for the quality of service and dependability.

We knew the nearest hospitals at every destination, to go to in case of emergencies. And also the nearest repair shops to mend a flat tire or any breakdown on the way.

Most people who take our tours may not even be aware of all these steps we take, but may raise hell if the tour gets disrupted due to some reason beyond our control, like the landslides, floods, fog etc.

These lessons were valuable to me and at one point when he was planning to wind up his tour service because of his old age, saying it was enough for him I asked him if I could take over the business and run it by myself with his blessings and the training he had given me.

He was very happy to let me take over and he even offered it on easy terms. I had not much capital to run such a service except for some small savings kept aside for the rainy day, over the years. He told me not to worry and said I could pay back in installments or do it on profit sharing basis which sounded as the best option for me.

Although I had to work very hard during all these years earning his appreciation and confidence this was a gesture far beyond my expectations and I was extremely indebted to him for his magnanimity.

It was not all smooth ride and there were hiccups but I had learned to be prepared for any situation and manage well, making reasonable profits to honor my commitment to him, at his ripe old age, full of gratitude to my mentor, guide and inspiration.

I always remember my mother's words, that we should always have gratitude and never forget the help received from other people.

In the meanwhile I had maintained the friendship with my class mate Shanbagam, and was amazed to see how she kept learning at every opportunity that came her way. She graduated as a state first ranker in preventive medicine and chose to work in research, to find affordable cure for cancer and AIDS among other ailments that affected poor people. All along she developed herself spiritually too and continued to give discourses in a simple language with practical tips for people to integrate these values in their daily life to keep it simple and uncluttered.

She herself never let her position or achievement change life style. She was always friendly, accessible, kind to people who came to her with their problems and above all considered herself always a learner.

## KADHAMBAM

I had given her an open offer to go with me anytime she found it convenient, on a pilgrimage to any place of her choice.

My mother was too old now, to go with us and she was contented to visit the temple nearby, every day, which provided all the spiritual space she needed.

Shanbagam said she would love to go on a tour for a few days and would plan soon.

I am still waiting.

## CHAPTER 28

### A GRATEFUL CITIZEN AND A THANKFUL INDIAN

#### SHANBAGAM

I choose to tell my side of the story at the end, after letting all those who made a difference in my life, have their say.

Each one of them has influenced my life in ways that make me thankful to God for this immensely rewarding game he has been playing on me.

Although I lost both my parents at a time when I couldn't even know what was happening to me, when I look back now as a senior citizen, I don't consider myself an orphaned person anymore. The whole world is related to me and I am part of the universal divinity that operates from inside me as it does from every other living being. These are not mere words of philosophy or wisdom but an expression of what each one of us needs to experience in life as we live it.

I often hear that I am a gifted person. Well, indeed I am, and as a matter of fact most of us are, even if we don't realize it.

The body-mind-intellect equipment that we have been bestowed with for conducting our life on earth is a gift from God.

The faculties that come with the five senses, the fantastic mind with unending and amazing power to analyze and assimilate a wide variety of inputs from our sense perceptions, and the innermost being inside us



which even the mind can only infer through experience, what else can we call them if not a gift? ... a divine gift to us. We didn't pay anything to acquire them and because we got the whole equipment free we take it for granted and abuse it and misuse it.

To truly see the magnificence of the gift of life, we need to be a witness all the time, to witness the divinity expressing its vast immeasurable avenues of experience that open up for us to explore and be part of.

Right from childhood I have had the good fortune to be guided by people who shaped my life with their bits of wisdom. My part was only to absorb what was meaningful to me and to be a witness to the total perspective emerging from time to time without losing focus. When I see things happening around me with open mind and positive approach to be amazed by the magnificence of the cosmic emergence that I am part of, I am filled with supreme ecstasy and unlimited thankfulness.

Even though I lost my parents when I was still a young child, I came to know later that my parents migrated from Kadhramangalam, a village in southern India, to Chennai, which was known as Madras at that time during the days of India's freedom movements. They were earning their living by cooking the prasadam for the village Krishna temple, barely enough to manage the daily expenses. They came to Chennai hoping to earn enough to settle and live a simple life in peace. They started a small eatery in Mylapore where my mother cooked idlis and vadais with tasty chutney and delicious sambar. Soon people started liking the food they served and became regular customers. However, even before they could establish themselves they suddenly fell ill due to a virus that swept across the region and both of them passed away on the same day leaving me as the survivor. The people in the neighborhood pooled together and gave them a cremation but there was no one to take care of me.

I wandered for hours trying get some food from the same neighborhood which was fed by my parents. Even in extreme poverty my parents had never resorted to begging.

That trait was ingrained in my memory and as I kept wandering I was guided by a divine hand to a flower seller.

She shared with me the food she had kept for herself and asked me about where I was living. She thought I had lost my way and needed to be reunited with my folks. When I told her that I had lost both my parents just a couple of days back, she was shocked. She took me as her own daughter and taught me to make garlands from various flowers that they were selling in their small shop adjacent to a temple. She took me to the temple where they provided free food to poor people and I was relieved of my hunger. Mallika, my foster mother now, told me that all the food that my parents had cooked for the people has protected me indirectly in getting me the temple food. It is traditionally believed by us who belong to the Hindu community that whatever service we render to the people will come back to help us at the time of need. I did not understand all that as a child but later it dawned on me that at every step of my life I have been guided by a divine force which made me what I was destined to be.

With the kindness of my foster parents I managed to get school education and also learned our scriptures and Vedic traditions from the head priest of the temple who was so magnanimous to teach me all that he knew. How fortunate I was to be bestowed this rare opportunity and privilege of knowing this vast source of spiritual knowledge handed down through generations on end, for the betterment of humanity!

I have no words to thank my teachers, my spiritual mentors and a host of various professionals who inspired me with their fields of knowledge so vast and yet waiting to be developed further to higher levels of exploration and assimilation.

What a rare privilege it was to be taught by a great soul like Ganesh Sharma, the head priest of *Marundeeswarar* Temple. He took me as his disciple without the slightest hesitation, at a time when it was not common to include girl children in the Vedic line of teaching.

He was so deeply knowledgeable in Vedas that he recognized the fact that there were many women pundits in *Vedic* times and *Rishi Pathnis* were as scholarly as the *Rishis* themselves. Vedas were open to all and did not discriminate by gender or one's position in life.

By the grace of Abirami the goddess of compassion, I had the inborn ability to assimilate anything, blessed with a photographic memory. I was taught to learn with open mind and check out what I learned by applying it in my own life.

Every person I came into contact with taught me some valuable lesson that guided me in my life and helped me to see everything in proper perspective as a part of the cosmic whole. Music, Dance, Acting out roles on the stage, learning to work with wood, carving stones, building temples, sharing ideas with people and appreciating the wonders around us are all part of the total scheme of things.

I realized that if we keep learning and sharing something all our life there would be no boredom and life will be so enriched that one lifetime was not enough to experience the vast arena of divine splendor. To experience the magnificent outburst of billions of flowers blooming every day, to smell their fragrance that fills the air all over the universe, to feel the cozy comfort of warmth near a fireplace in the cold months of winter and to enjoy a cool shower in a waterfall in the hot summer, to taste delicious fruits and sing melodious songs ... these are all divine to those who feel blessed to be alive to experience them. And I am one of the fortunate ones.

Whatever we do to be of service to others, including humans and animals and all living beings, can be a source of immense satisfaction and fulfillment.

An astrologer or a Soothsayer can give hope to people who are overwhelmed by some life events that come as a shock and are desperately looking for a way to move on.

A temple priest can help people offload the stressful worries and deep wounds caused by relationship issues, by offering divine blessings and words of empathy at the time of need. A doctor can heal the body and a Spiritual master can heal the mind and soul of distressed people caught up in the never ending cycles of birth and death.

A cobbler can protect the soles of our feet and a hairdresser can make us look good to ourselves and to others thereby providing a unique service to mankind in their own way, however small it may seem to us.

A software specialist or a hardware engineer contributes to the overall wellbeing of societies that are made up of all kinds of people who in turn play their part in keeping the wheel moving. Everyone and everything seem interconnected in this amazing 'work in progress' by the mighty almighty.

I feel so grateful to be part of this magnificent drama that at once entertains us and also keeps us engaged as eternal players in the never ending script. Even to have the presence of mind to appreciate the intricacies of life's moments, as they unfold for each and every life form, needs the grace of divine blessings.

A popular photographer once taught me the art of looking through the camera lens, to know the difference between how our eyes see the world around us and how the camera lens sees it. It was a revelation to me that the camera sees the whole picture in its view and depending on the depth of focus set on the lens it will show the objects in front of it in full clarity with the background areas becoming comparatively less focused. The effect can be stunning. We can see a worm or a butterfly in amazing detail with the natural surroundings of leaves and flowers as a hazy backdrop to accentuate the main subject. Our eyes on the other hand can't do that. They show all objects with same detail as long as we have normal vision. But the ability of our eyes to just see only one specific object or even one minute part of an object comes from the complexity of our brain in interpreting what is in front of us.

Every sense organ is so amazing in design that to appreciate its full potential we need to fall back upon our mind's ability to perceive it in total, pervading the entire universe and not just as a mere faculty that we possess as part of our physical apparatus.

The senses of smell, touch, taste, hearing and seeing are all so vast that one lifetime is not enough to come to terms with them fully and to appreciate their value as an unparalleled gift.

It is so unfortunate that human learning is limited to just the skills needed to earn a living. The skills that we need for appreciating life and living it well are mostly left for us to learn all by ourselves. So naturally we ignore these and keep living a mechanical life.

Luckily for me my teachers taught me to appreciate the brain's vast capacity to learn not just the language and mathematical skills, science and logic, music, dance and stage acting but also the capacity to laugh, to empathize with all life, to see things from others' point of view, to offer a helping hand to the needy, to stand for the right in any situation, to realize that the five elements of nature make up the vast play of whatever we experience in the manifest world of ours and to appreciate the hidden splendor of divinity that governs it all without itself being affected or limited by the manifestation in any way. I am so fortunate to be born in this land that values such teaching and learning that lets each one of us turn our mind inwards and experience the inner world of self realization through this life long process that runs parallel to the worldly life we are born to face.

Self discipline learned from early childhood enabled me to face adverse situations with equanimity and treat setbacks as minor inconveniences in the process of living rather than as insurmountable problems. Cravings don't enslave us and so too is the need to prove ourselves to be superior to others, when we develop equanimity. Excellence comes to all those who dedicate their life to serve a greater cause than mere accumulation of power and prestige, wealth and ego.

Time and again I have come across great masters who have made a significant difference to the lives they have touched, mostly remaining so humble in that process, attributing all the good they do, to the divine power that guides us all.

One of the most important lessons that I learned from one such sage was that it makes life much enjoyable and full of freedom if we keep life simple and always remind ourselves to be aware that “Simple life is its own reward”. Though this appears to be so simple to assimilate and easy to follow, it doesn’t work out so easy for most of us as we get carried away by sensuous pleasures and comparisons with others in the course of normal living guided by the society we live in.

To learn to know when and where we should draw the line in our professional life and to keep each compartment in proper perspective to gain and maintain balance and equanimity is also a gift that comes from the grace of the divine. Work, financial independence, time for family and friends, contributing to the society we live in, caring for the needy and elderly, taking part in social activism, offering a helping hand to those who are unjustly treated are some of the compartments that have filled my life and enriched it too, beyond measure.

However there is no single yardstick for all. Each one is in this world for a specific purpose and the best we can do is to live it without regret and with grace, using our divine faculties to keep life simple and enjoyable, helpful and friendly.

Every time I am in a position to help a fellow being I gladly give priority to such an act of fellowship with empathy and understanding. The very fact that not all of us are so blessed to be of help to others makes me humble and thankful.

In the course of my career as a medical practitioner after completing my internship, I came across so many village folks who live such a simple life and still find happiness in simplicity born out of faith in the power of divine protection leading to contentment.

I started documenting these cases of unshakable faith in divine healing and an attitude of surrender that enabled them to live in unity in spite of repeated adversities that they faced at one time or another during their lifetime.

They somehow provided the value system to the next generations to help them cope with the impact of modern gadgets and technologies without losing their values and faith in humanity.

I noticed that our places of worship, those thousands of ancient temples built in every village and city, provided a very important space and ambience to help people connect with each other and also reinforce their faith in the divine connection that conducts their life in the first place. The concept of '*Vasudeva Kudumbakam*' (*the whole world as one family*) so unique to Hinduism was so ingrained in their life that it became their second nature. Rural folk have the ability to help each other naturally and to provide support at the time of disaster and grief. They don't wait for someone to ask for help. Instinctively they know when to offer help and support.

I made it a point to devote a significant part of my time to these temples and share the ancient scriptures that have been handed down over thousands of years as guiding principles for making life worth living, enjoyable, supportive and peaceful for all beings. The treasures like *Thirukkural*, *Thevaram*, *Divyaprabhandham*, *Thiruvachakam* combined with the epics *Bhagavad-Gita* and *Ramayana* are so inclusive that they are an unending source of inspiration and guidance to us all, who care to find meaning in our life and go beyond the call of earning a living, and living a mundane life.

Every temple stands testimony to the divine connection between the people who lived around them and the timeless wisdom of collective sharing of knowledge, skills, emotions and feelings. These unifying factors are so dynamic that they replicate in successive generations spreading the message of love and peace again and again with universal vision of interdependent living.

Even though we change with the times, the respect for our traditions and adapting the value system to suit the context of present day living surely makes it more enriched and structured towards finding common ground in contemporary social settings.

I am awed by the scientific agamas that provided advanced and detailed guidance in building temples to ensure that they combined divinity with community living, love for nature with compassion for all living beings, respect for the five elements that form the basis for all life on earth with thankfulness for the eternal abundance permeating every living cell.

As a practitioner of alternative medicine I get to know a wealth of information from these village folks, from the herbal healers in villages that are surrounded by thick jungles and forests providing rare herbs to cure many ailments and I document whatever they share to ensure that such wealth is not lost, for future generations. To see a child come back to life, after being bitten by a venomous snake, through the timely intervention of an herbalist, is a miracle that happens in villages all across our country, time and again.

As a regular practitioner of Yoga and subsequently a teacher of Yoga as well, I experience the immense benefits of this unique system that evolved over thousands of years by the grace of great Rishis of India as part of the Hindu dharma. This is perhaps the only system in the world that incorporates the processes that help in keeping the whole system healthy: the body-mind-intellect equipment through which we conduct our life on this planet. Sage *Pathanjali's Yogasutras* are so well formulated that they are relevant even today, more than two thousand years after he gave them as a gift to the world. I teach the Yoga *Asanas*, *Pranayama* and *Dhyana* free to all who are willing to learn and practice them for their wellbeing.

Yoga *Asanas* with *bandhas* and *mudhras* keep the whole body with all the internal organs and processes in proper physical balance. *Pranayama* or the practice of systematic breathing helps in mental and emotional balance.



*Dhyana* or the process of meditation helps in turning the five senses inwards to experience the *Atma* that is operating within our body-mind-intellect equipment and also to reach the ultimate stage of merging with the Paramatma or the universal cosmic divinity that pervades everything in the universe.

When I follow my cultural heritage, handed down from the lineage of our great ancestors including the self-realized Rishis and sages from all across the nation dating back to time unknown, I realize the importance they gave to the science of inner engineering while the rest of the world was busy exploring the outer world. This one simple step has given us the unique perspective of striving for inner excellence and self-realization, irrespective of the profession that we follow for a living. That keeps me thankful for being born in this divine nation that unites us by the culture in spite of the repeated invasions by outside forces and their attempts to divide us by the diversity of language and region.

My culture teaches me that all life is one and is pervaded by the same universal divinity that gives life to all life forms. It gives me a value system that includes love of Divinity, respect for tradition, duty and responsibility, basic human virtues such as non-violence, truthfulness, compassion and charity. It teaches me to respect all faiths and realize that all paths lead to the same ultimate destination.

Most of all it teaches me to enquire, question and take the time to understand what is important for me to experience by myself instead of blindly following someone else's path. It teaches me to live in freedom; freedom from bondage: to things that have no lasting value, to people who come into our life as relatives and friends, to my past that is already gone, to my form that keeps changing, to my ideas which are of no consequence to the universe at large, to my wealth that makes life comfortable and most importantly freedom from the need to be right, to prove to others that I exist and the need to make others accept my point of view.

Each one of us is looking at the world through our own window and it is worth remembering that the window frame is limiting the view in a subtle manner all the time. That awareness is perhaps the first step towards liberation from much of the bondage resulting from our self-generated mindset from a lifetime of accumulated perceptions and interpretations. The more educated we are, the more we fall prey to all these accumulations.

It may take the rest of our life to undo the crippling effect of such self-inflicted bondage and experience freedom.

In my own humble way I have enabled many of those who happened to travel with me as fellow living beings, to turn the focus inwards and strive to experience the process of a lifelong journey of self-realization.

The common bonds that unite all Hindus into a single spiritual body are the faith in the oneness of life, in the law of Karma and Dharma, in the all pervasive Divinity expressed as various Gods merging into one, in the Trinity of creation, preservation and liberation that underlies the manifestation in innumerable forms and beings. Our culture is based on closeness: all Hindus are one family; all our Gods are connected to each other and so too are all of us who worship them with love and faith. It is our duty and important purpose in life to take the time to learn and understand these tenets of our culture, the *Sanatana Dharma*, variously known as Hinduism and *Hindutvam*, to relate to what appeals to us as the guiding force from this vast library of comprehensive guidelines that allows us to take the pick without enforcing anything on us. We owe it to our children and to the future generations of children, not to brush it aside as unimportant or irrelevant to our contemporary living in a cosmopolitan society. There is no freedom without responsibility. Our life gets enriched with self-discipline and the earlier we learn to adopt the right principles and values to live by, the better it will be for the whole society we live in, not by force or pressure but by our own willingness to be a part of the total scheme of living an interdependent life.

Just as we put a fence around a sapling to protect it during the period of establishing its root system and building a strong body to support the growth of branches to become a full grown tree, so too we need these value systems for ourselves and our children to live a meaningful life in harmony with all creation.

A gardener taught me to enjoy the beauty of watching plants grow from tiny seeds and to appreciate the unique process of colorful flowers opening so gently to greet the sun and to fill the air with subtle fragrance; to wonder in awe of the hidden intelligence inside these plants that makes them shed their leaves during the fall season, to burst into magnificent blooms in spring, so precisely in unison as if they are part of a grand orchestra conducted by an invisible but all pervading *Brahma*. He went on to teach me that just as the mango tree keeps on giving the same sweet fruits of the same supreme taste every year and yet we don't stop enjoying the same year after year, so too the ancient wisdom from our long lineage of *Rishis and Sadhgurus* providing us spiritual direction through valuable ideas and guiding principles be borne again and again in our mind, generation after generation, to help us enjoy the life's precious moments without taking them for granted or wasting them in trivial pursuits that add no value to life.

A painter showed me the process of transforming a blank piece of canvas with colorful brushstrokes thereby performing the magic of giving a form to his imagination that is invisible to all including himself. He has the unique ability to experience his imagination which is invisible even to himself but can only be experienced in an abstract manner, until he gives it a form through his painting. Even there, he cannot make any other viewer see it the same way as he has imagined it. So too are our life's experiences. They are unique to each individual and can't be transferred to another person. Experience of divinity is similar. It can't be explained or expressed by mere words or forms. It can only be experienced by each experiencer. Our senses and faculties are limited and do not have the capacity to perceive that which is beyond perception, nor do we have words that can express or explain them,

since all words are based on only what we know, by default, and therefore fall short of covering the unknown or the unknowable. I understood that even a simple device such as a painter's brush could teach me to appreciate the wonders of the hidden splendor lying beyond our senses and not to take anything for granted.

A weaver took me to another dimension in the process of creation. She was weaving an exquisite saree out of colorful silk threads on a handloom.

The patterns that emerged as she passed the shuttle with every step of maneuvering the bed of threads through her leg and hand movements was nothing short of an exercise in creative transformation. The process of transferring her thoughts and imagination to the yarn that moved up and down and across, was sheer magic. What the mind can achieve is so vast and she taught me to develop my sense of appreciation for the potential power lying dormant in every one of us waiting to be explored and shared with all, by whatever means we have within our power. She also made me understand that the cloth that she has woven has no existence other than through the threads running in warp and weft, at her command. And even these individual threads with brilliant colors on them mean nothing so special, if they don't come together as a team to transform their individuality to become a part of the saree as a whole.

What a subtle lesson she has taught me. A weaver with no formal education, who has learned her trade by direct transfer from her parents and grandparents with whom she had the unique family bonding, taught me what I would have otherwise missed, in spite of my long years of schooling. She taught me that each one of us is a part of the whole that binds us and makes us do what we do. We have no existence beyond that whole.

A teacher taught me to read between and beyond the lines, not to get stuck with the concepts that we learn in the course of our academic life but to apply our mind in lateral thinking and see beyond the ideas to get in touch with the source that governs all knowledge.

I still remember the day when she asked me to come prepared to explain in front of our class something I knew, apart from the academic learning, that I could share with all my classmates. Every Friday, during the 'show and tell' session we had the chance to share something with our class as a way of learning to express ourselves and also be in the teacher's shoes to experience what it takes to be a teacher.

On that day I had taken a bagful mix of fragrant flowers to our class and right in front of their eyes I joined them together into a nice garland, explaining the technique I had learned from my foster mother.

Our teacher asked me whether I knew the names of the flowers I had used in the garland. I named each flower and also explained how the fragrance of each flower influenced our well being, like calming the mind or making us joyful. Janaki teacher appreciated my presentation and the entire class applauded spontaneously.

Janaki teacher didn't stop with that. She asked the class to think beyond the simply marvelous skill of making a garland of fragrant flowers, called *Kadhambam* in Tamil, and see how they could relate to it as a metaphor for something more profound. I was wondering what she was going to say and so was the entire class, waiting for her to go further.

She then made us look at it from another perspective that was wider and unbelievably mindboggling. She told us to see it as a metaphor for the different professions that make up the society we live in. A flower seller, temple priest, carpenter, milkman, fruit vendor, tailor, cobbler, bus driver, nurse and doctor ... we have a million professions that carry the burden of the society but also its charm, which shows an amazing ability to adapt and an untiring quest to keep the world going, much like the bonding together of individual flowers to make a garland to serve a larger purpose, such as adorning the presiding deity in a temple as a mark of our gratefulness for the grace of divine splendor permeating all living beings including us. She waited for us to allow it to soak in.

What a wonderful way to connect the simple garland, Kadhambam, with the oneness of all, the thread that binds us together as a peaceful and interdependent society!

This simple session of 'show and tell' that I had participated in as a child has remained etched in my memory forever.

A Soothsayer made me realize the importance of helping people keep an optimistic mindset to overcome life's train of problems and to tap the full potential of what our mind can do if we switch it to positive emotions. He was a simple man, dropped out of school in his early childhood as his parents couldn't afford to send him to school after the first few years.

However he picked up enough education to read and write, count and care for himself, because of the kindness of his sympathetic teacher who motivated him to always believe in the simple one liner: 'even this will pass' and to believe in his own ability to find a way to earn a living to support his parents and his siblings even if he could not continue his studies due to the family situation. One day as a teenager when he was roaming beyond his neighborhood he came across an elderly man with a colorful turban and an equally colorful bull accompanying him, nodding its decorated head with painted horns and multicolored garlands on its neck, with a brass bell to go with it. He followed him wherever he went and found that the old man was a soothsayer and he was greeted with warm welcome by the households, who gave him food, money or clothes while listening to his 'good news' forecasts. In his own way he was giving hope and relief to the simple folk who lived in that area. That made such a deep impression on his young mind that he took this man as his hero and decided that he would become a soothsayer by becoming his apprentice. He did. And no one stopped him.

When I happened to see him some time during my college days, I was in-charge of our college magazine and I thought it appropriate to interview him for an article on people who matter in society. I asked him so many questions and he patiently answered them as best as he could. I asked him how he was able to foresee the good that was going to happen to any family as he was giving such predictions during his early morning rounds in various neighborhoods. He laughed and said that he was intuitively giving out good news to each household knowing well that everyone had some problem or other in their daily life, like financial crunch, relationship issues or illness to a close member of the family. He knew the background details of most people as he has been moving around in these neighborhoods for a long time and so his predictions matched the needs of the people individually even though he was careful to make only general predictions and always about the good news to come.

But surely all predictions may not turn out to be true. How will people react when he comes around next time? He said that was not an issue at all. In most cases they will see something good happening anyway. But in rare instances where they are still not out of the blue I could sense it by a glance towards their face and I follow up with a more hopeful message, to keep up the spirit of expectation which makes life less miserable. In the long run it doesn't hurt to lend your shoulder to those who need support, even if it is just by way of hopeful messages. He has lived by his philosophy all his life and has served a useful purpose to the society as a member of it, however trivial it may seem in comparison to others in high positions.

Even a garbage collector had something to share with me that made me realize the importance of lateral thinking and keeping our senses open to the unusual and the extraordinary perceptions that may go unnoticed if we don't train ourselves to look beyond. When he explained that a neighborhood's economy could be gauged by the garbage that it generated, I was simply taken aback. And when he went on to prove his point it made sense.

Not all of us can become architects, doctors, engineers and business wizards but every one of us can be proud members of the society we live in, if we do what we do, putting our whole heart and mind into it, as an offering to the divinity which is operating from inside each one of us. The satisfaction that comes from realizing that we have contributed to the wellbeing of all who share this earth with us, is priceless and humbling.

Those who have travelled widely in India would have noticed that most of the famous and ancient temples have a Temple Car or '*Ratham*' attached to each temple. The idols called '*Urchava Murthys*' of the temple are kept specially for the purpose of taking them around the temple in the temple car during the annual festival on auspicious days. This temple car is a work of art with so many figurines decorating it and it is mammoth wooden structure supported by wooden wheels is a marvel to see when it is pulled by a huge multilayered rope made of coconut fiber, with mostly everyone from the community participating in the celebrations pulling it around the four streets surrounding the temple for all to see and get the blessings of the deity taken on procession. Everyone is free to join in without any distinction and enjoy the celebration.

This is an age old metaphor for how the different professions of a society keep it going as an interdependent process. Every one's contribution matters. No one is low or high.

I have lived my life with that guiding belief both professionally and spiritually, treating all fellow beings with respect, dignity and brotherhood doing whatever I did as an offering to the divinity that resides in each one of us while pervading all life in the universe. In turn I have been so fortunate to have been blessed to be born in this nation, India, which has served as a melting pot of so many different cultures over millenniums and has come out so adorable as a peaceful and friendly cultural amalgam called Hindutvam, as a way of life that denotes: 'live and let live'.



Whatever level we are in with respect to our social status or financial position doesn't matter in our ultimate journey towards self-realization by turning our mind inwards to go beyond our senses and experience the hidden splendor inside. Our body-mind-intellect equipment is all that we need for that supreme journey and so it is worth keeping it in good working order till the end until the journey is over.

In conclusion I would like to say that awareness is the first step towards liberation. Learning to keep the mind in the state of a witness and working with that awareness running as a backdrop all the time in our conscious state of mind helps us in that journey of life.

To keep that equipment in good shape and to enjoy that supreme journey, I would like to share with all my friends and folks who are also in the same journey with me, some of the wisdom that was showered upon me all through my life as the guiding force.

A well trained mind is your best friend.

If you don't know some skills it is mainly because you have not taken enough time to learn those skills.

Happiness is not measured by the absence of problems but by our ability to handle them with confidence. Some of our situations become a problem only if they are not acceptable to us. If we are able to accept things that we can't change, they cease to be problems.

Feeling good is important: Don't feel frustrated about what you can't do. Feel good about what you can.

Enjoy what you have but don't let your possessions possess you. It is not what we possess but what we value in life that makes us rich.

Give: Giving is one of the fundamental ways to reach the source of happiness inside you. Share whatever you can.

Share: each one of us carry an expertise born out of all that we have experienced in our life, which in turn is built upon the collective wisdom

of all the generations that have lived before us. We in turn must add our contribution to make this world a better place for those who follow us.

You have a right to be in this universe as given by the divine power that has created you and the universe that you are in. With all its troubles and surprises, the world is still a wonderful place to live in, like no other. Make the best of it and live with acceptance and appreciation of the blessings.

To quote my mentor Hasyananda:

***Be strong, be simple and be smiling;***

***Be happy, be gentle and be loving;***

***Be friendly, be fun and be free;***

***Be, just be and enjoy being.***

He always emphasized the need to be strong, as a precursor to being simple, smiling, happy, gentle, loving, friendly, fun-filled and free.

Why is being strong more important than everything else?

He used to illustrate it with a simple anecdote that is still fresh in my memory and it is the best conclusive piece I can use for my narration:

Here is the ageless piece of wisdom in his own words, handed down from his guru:

***What is the single most important thing in life?***

***To be strong, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.***

***Why?***

***Anyway we are going to die one day, whether we are strong or weak. So why take the trouble?***

***There are two things to consider:***

***Either you are alive or you die.***

***If you are alive there is nothing to worry about.***

***But if you die, there are two things to consider:***

***Either you go to heaven or you go to hell.***

***If you go to heaven there is nothing to worry.***

***But if you go to hell there are two things to consider:***

***Either you have friends there or you have enemies.***

***If you have friends there, there is nothing to worry.***

***But if you have enemies there, better be strong!***

***So the single most important thing to learn in life is to be strong.***

***To be strong, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.***

I wish you all: friendship, laughter and kindness.

Friendship ... with all around you, including your spouse, children, parents, friends and even strangers.

Laughter ... with the awareness that nothing that happens in human life is worth worrying about; and laughter lightens the heart at times of stress and distress.

Kindness ... for all beings including human, animal, plant and others who are all an integral part of the cosmic dance that has no beginning and no end.

Be laughing and spread it around as much as you can.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### **Dr. Anant Raman**

Instrument engineer by profession, Yoga specialist by choice, Humorist by God's grace, Sunday painter, Photographer, Terrace gardener and Freelance writer among countless other things that keep him thankful for being alive at this wonderful time, on this divine earth.

Can be contacted at:

Email: [laughingflowers@gmail.com](mailto:laughingflowers@gmail.com)

Face book: [www.facebook.com/dr.anantraman](http://www.facebook.com/dr.anantraman)

**KADHAMBAM**

A colorful mix of fragrant flowers transformed into a garland.

From a flower seller to freelance writer, textile trader to temple priest, carpenter to computer programmer, and milkman to marriage broker we have a million professions that carry the burden of the society but also its charm. A closer look at this marvel at grass roots level shows an amazing ability to adapt and an untiring quest to keep the world going, resulting in a dynamic canvas for the interesting art of humanity in the making, generation after generation.

Here is a first person account of the blessings of an interconnected world.

