

## | Chapter – 2

### My Tambaram Days

I could hardly sleep, for I was all agog with excitement at the thought of leaving home for the first time, free as a bird. Do not get me wrong. I had not exactly been a bird in a cage, but like any other fledgling schoolboy I could only flutter so far and no more. This was going to be different. Come morning, I would be heading for the Quilon railway station to board the Madras Mail that would take me away from home. New horizons were beckoning me, along which I could stretch my wings more freely. The year was 1946 and it was late in the month of June. I reached my destination early next day. The destination was the Madras Christian college at Tambaram.

To be thrown headlong from the protected life of a schoolboy in rural Travancore into the relative freedom that college life offered at far-away Tambaram, on the outskirts of Madras, was to me a heady experience. This was despite the initial misgivings that this uprooting from the familiar milieu of one's family might have caused me. I was going up to Tambaram, no less, as a freshman to join the Junior Intermediate class of Madras Christian College, a highly regarded institution of higher learning in those days, in South India if not in the whole of India.

The college was well known for its particular emphasis on corporate life that its three Halls of Residence nurtured. These halls were located within walking distance of the college complex of buildings on a sprawling 400-acre campus. Yet, they were sufficiently hidden away from the classrooms to give the residents a sequestered existence of their own in leafy retreats. At the same time they were close enough to the college to be part and parcel of its *raison d'être*. Each hall with its share of staff quarters in close proximity to it was easily accessible from the college. The many-hued luxuriance of flowering trees that lined the campus paths and the well-manicured lawns and the well-trimmed hedges of the campus and the halls of residence created a laidback ambience from the din and bustle of the world beyond the perimeter fence of the campus.

It was in such a setting that the college offered its scholars a busy programme, both academic and extra-curricular, for a well-rounded education. It prepared its products to face the future and its uncertainties with confidence. Overt social control to achieve this objective, however, was anathema to the college. It was no wonder then that it drew its scholars from all parts of India and beyond, year after year; from Ceylon and Burma, from Malaya and Singapore, from Anglophone Africa and even further afield. The image it projected was that the 'Gentlemen of Christian' stood a class apart as urbane individuals from products of the other colleges of the city, especially the less than charitably portrayed 'Slaves of Loyola' and the 'Rowdies of Pachaiappa's'! Far be it from me to make invidious comparisons! And in any case, not all who came to MCC left Tambaram as polished products to become, of their own volition, gentlemen. There were many who did not prove to be quite equal to the challenge. I was one of them, very nearly.

I still remember with what sense of wonderment I looked out of the window of the train that was taking me to Tambaram as it steamed out of the Vandalur Railway Station, our second last stop. I could see for the first time, across open scrubland but for a palm here or a palm there, the bright-red roofs and the cream-coloured walls of St.Thomas's Hall in the early hours of a day. I was planning to join St.Thomas's Hall.

The college had other ideas. Against my stated preference for St.Thomas's, I was assigned to Bishop Heber Hall. Heber Hall was, by and large, patronized by expatriate students and Eurasians (Anglo-Indians as they are known in India) with a few odd ones like me thrown in for good measure. Caught between on the one hand the Eurasians with their aloofness and, on the other, the unashamedly outgoing, Baila-singing Ceylonese in their ridiculously flared trousers, I did not find my stay there particularly congenial. My initial diffidence in building bridges with most others there was largely to blame for this.

One of the few that I found easy to get along with was my classmate, the unassuming, chubby-faced, ukulele strumming 'Anglo-Indian', Ivor Smith Cameron, who later in life became a man of the cloth and was until recently one of the chaplains to the Queen of England. Then there was John Pothen who was reading for a Philosophy Honours Degree. Although he was many years my senior, I enjoyed his company for his unassuming ways and admired his skills as an exceptional volleyball player. It was a joy especially to watch him springing up and making a feint as though to smash the ball that has been set up for him, only to let it drop delicately in an unguarded corner of the court just out of reach of his rivals. He also became a man of the cloth and rose to be a canon in the Anglican Church. He is no more. Incidentally, his son Simon Pothen was the Parish priest at the Anglican church of St. John the Evangelist of Friern Barnet in North London when I last met him. I gather he has since moved to Durham.

The closest friend I had at Heber was Mathen M. Koshy, known to his friends as Babu. Our two families were tied by marriage, since my uncle Abraham had earlier married his sister. Our association continued for many years after we left Tambaram. In fact, it was through his good offices that I was able to secure a teaching position in Tanganyika in 1955.

I write this in the year 2006. In hindsight, I realize that I should have gone the extra mile to make more friends at Heber. Truth to tell, thanks to my parochial moorings, I was too slow in changing my mindset. In consequence, I was marked for the 'special ragging' that was administered with kit bags stuffed with regulation army boots. Although ragging was part of the relatively painless rites of passage into hall life, those who took it upon themselves to do it on this occasion went over the top with malicious glee. They wanted to show me where I stood in their scheme of things. Of that number, I recognized only Jesudian, a Jaffna Tamil from Ceylon. It was too dark to make out the others in their lightning raid. I could, however, make an informed guess judging by the kind of company that he had been seen to keep. Almost immediately after the 'attack' they made a hasty exit, for they must have feared that they had overstepped the limits. Normally, they would have only strolled off casually. So much for their phoney swagger! That I bore the onslaught with a stiff upper lip did prompt Jesudian and one or two of the others to hold out the olive branch the very next day. Had I so wanted, I could have responded to their

overtures. I chose not to. I was too perversely proud to give them that satisfaction. They were not the kind of friends I was looking for.

Rather, I looked for and found friends at St.Thomas's, a good ten-minute walk away from Heber. This proved to be a somewhat unclever thing to do. The sheer logistics of toing and froing to enjoy the kind of company one feels comfortable in and in particular to satisfy my addiction for '56', a card game that was native to Malabar, was distraction enough. The mention of '56' immediately brings to mind my friend and classmate, Kochubalan Nair of Ottappalam. As a typical Malayalee proud of his culture, he wore white clothes and was invariably clad in a white *mundu* (a 2-yard long, ankle-length wrap-around very much like the sarong) and white shirt. He was an inveterate card player whose blandishments I could not resist. His dry sense of humour also endeared him to many, including me.

There were other distractions too of a more delectable variety from another quarter about which I would rather maintain a discreet silence. But, if the two girls, whose friendship I had cultivated during the Students' Christian Movement Freshers' Camp at Chingelpet and followed it up with single-minded application, were to pretend no knowledge of it, I would be hard put not to break my resolve. They were from the Women's Christian College of Madras. And that is how it came to pass, in the summer of 1947, that I failed the Junior Intermediate exams and had to repeat the year.

I managed to get transferred to St.Thomas's Hall in my second Junior Intermediate year. Perhaps it was St.Thomas the Apostle's legendary connection with the Malabar Coast that drew the Malayalees (inhabitants of the Malabar Coast) to this hall. Or perhaps it was the gourmand in the Malayalee that attracted him to the culinary delights of the Thomian Mess whose fame had reached far and wide. Most of the residents of the hall were Malayalees as indeed were that 'tasteful' triad, the secrets of whose culinary exploits no words could adequately describe. Namely Nambiar, Krishnan Nair and Raman Nair, who, between them, would, day after day, conjure up dishes and desserts so divine that the likes of which, I dare say, none other could have tickled and pampered our tastebuds more. Or again, it could well have been the herd instinct of the clannish Malayalees that made them gravitate towards the St.Thomas's of their predecessors. Whatever the reason, St.Thomas's Hall was a Malayalee bastion in those days. I made many friends there and among them was Habeeb, the closest to me

Habeeb Marikar, a Ceylon Tamil by background but a Malayalee by domicile, having been brought up in Trivandrum, chose St.Thomas's Hall. His room was next door to mine. We soon became friends. And what a friend he was! Habeeb! It is not for nothing that this Arabic word means 'a dear one'. In the Middle East, '*Yaa habeebi*' or '*Yaa sadeeqi*' is a common form of addressing a friend. 'Habeeb' could just as well have been 'Sadeeq'. With what uncanny prescience must his parents have chosen so apt a name for him: 'a loved one'! Anyone who made his acquaintance warmed to him quickly. It was not surprising therefore that he had a wide circle of friends. In a difficult situation, which was not uncommon in the life of a college student, Habeeb always stood by you. That was more than I could say for his classmates, not excluding me. Sadly, he is not amongst us anymore.

He had an open face and, though the bridge of his nose was a trifle broad, he was handsome in a rough-hewn way. His strapping almost six-foot frame, which would be the envy of any college athlete, he carried with a quaintness that would look strange on someone as young as he was. With his curly hair sleeked back and his shoulders sloping ever so slightly, he moved languorously, with the hint of a list somewhat like a sailing ship on the high seas. But, wasn't this a façade? That he was quite a skilful folk dancer was a well-kept secret until he was prevailed upon to offer an item of his choice for the hall variety entertainment. He did a hunter's dance. His dance brought the house down. And this, on a stage that had earlier featured the virtuoso rendering of a classical dance by my classmate Roy Chaudhary (the son of the legendary Devi Prashaad Roy Chaudhary who was at that time principal of the Madras Government School of Arts)! Many years later, when I had occasion to watch, in a Barcelona nightclub, Flamenco dancers stomping the stage to the accompaniment of strumming guitars and clicking castanets and the banshee wails from the women singers, my mind harked back to Habeeb's performance on that day. It had a certain animal vitality that belied his gentle nature. When innate aggression is to be deliberately kept under wraps by strength of will, gentleness would be the ideal cover. His friends knew him also as a devout Muslim who faithfully kept the observances of Islam. I should have known better than to trifle with such a person's convictions.

The burden of shame that I let down such a steadfast friend, as indeed Habeeb was, has weighed heavily on my mind to this day. I still vividly remember the chain of events that followed my mischievous urge to play a practical joke on him. It did not take a great deal of prompting from my other friends -who were au fait to the projected devilment- for me to execute the plan. At the time it was conceived, it did not appear to be anything more than a harmless act of fun, but, with the callow days of my youth now a distant memory, I am convinced that it was one of doubtful honesty, but of that anon.

The Second World War had ended two years before, and vast quantities of surplus field rations- I believe they were called 'B' Rations- had been disgorged in the open market and sold in cardboard packets for virtually next to nothing. Each such packet would have a tin of bully beef or of ham besides a portion of cheese, a bar of chocolate, a Camel cigarette or two and some biscuits. To the often cash-strapped student, this was a heaven-sent deal that he took full advantage of. Whenever one felt peckish, particularly after a strenuous stint of football or basketball, it was within easy reach. And then there was the toasted tobacco of the cigarette as a bonus. Physical Education, in the form of playing soccer or sundry other games, was a part of the mandatory schedule for freshmen. To many, these extra-curricular compulsions of the timetable were a less than welcome imposition. To me personally, it was very enjoyable, but not to Habeeb. To get back to the story.

I passed off ham as beef and made my unsuspecting friend share with me a packet such as that. When one's appetite is sharpened after 'unwilling exertions' of this kind, one's palate might fail to discern the difference. Habeeb was not any the wiser, but I was in a quandary. On the one hand, some vague prescience would not let me spill the beans. On the other, to keep the butt of the joke in the dark would hardly have served the purpose for which it was played in the first place. Watching the discomfiture of others, not

excluding that of your friends, makes you feel a kind of stealthy pleasure, a curious feeling of *schadenfreude*, but hot on its heels you are liable to feel twinges of conscience. I let slip the secret without waiting too long, lest it lose its intended sting or it fester in my mind. I had hoped that he would laugh it off or at the very least put a good face on it. Instead, his fists clenched and his face darkened for a fleeting moment! It was as if I had peeled off that gentle mask of his. He dropped his head. I became uneasy. Then, he lifted his face and his eyes locked on mine. His gaze spoke of disbelief and disappointment. I could not meet his eyes without blinking! There was now a pained expression on his face, which he slowly turned away even as he got up and left the room carrying wordless derision in his body language. I was to gather later that he went straight to the bathroom, and threw the ‘abomination’ all up.

It was a Friday, a holy day for Muslims, and that must have made Habeeb’s feeling of hurt all the more poignant. For the rest of the evening his room stayed firmly shut in spite of my guilt-ridden entreaties to coax him out of the room. All that while, he was offering prayers to cleanse himself ritually for having broken a taboo albeit unwittingly. The next day, when the residents of the three Halls took the suburban train, as was their wont, into the city for a day out with friends, Habeeb stayed firmly closeted in his room emerging only to visit the dining hall. By this time I had felt sufficiently chastened to decide to stay back in the fond hope that, seeing this act of self-denial on my part, he could be persuaded how sorry I was. If he was, he did not show it even when I sidled up to him, hopefully, first at lunch and later at dinner. I could almost sense his toes curl at my approach. My overtures were frostily fobbed off. How I had hurt him! It was not until a week later that he thawed visibly. It took a while more before I was sure that all was forgotten. As this was going on, my ‘fellow conspirators’ stood unctuously aloof and smirked. So much for fair-weather friends!

As each term was drawing to a close and the countdown to the home stretch had begun, it was a chance for the less inhibited freshmen to let their hair down, regress into childhood as it were and indulge in a bit of horseplay in the evenings. My brother Georgie and Habeeb’s brother Shamsuddin were freshmen of that ilk and were as thick as thieves. Georgie was a year my junior at Tambaram and, having failed to find a place at one of the Halls of Residence, was put up at the Meston Lodge, a privately run boarding house that took in the stragglers. He had earlier joined the Union Christian College, the premier Christian higher educational institution of the then Principality of Travancore, to do Maths and Sciences as the optionals of his choice.

Yet he could not resist the temptation to transfer to Tambaram even though what was on offer was only the ‘last option’ of Humanities, and that belatedly. If one is not clear about one’s future plans, one is somewhat unthinking about academic choices. That was how he pitched up at Tambaram and Meston. On both counts, Hobson’s choice! There, he had his meals and, sometimes, his sleep. More often than not, he chose to stay overnight in the comparative comfort of my room. Such ‘invisible guests’, as they were known, were the exception rather than the rule. In the evenings, when the warden made his familiar rounds for roll call, these nocturnal creatures made themselves scarce. As a rule, they came in late and left early and steered clear of anything that might invite unwelcome attention on

them. My brother Georgie was of a different mould. For him, to be discreet would have been to go against the grain.

Until the year before, the Warden of St.Thomas's was Rev. Macnicol an outgoing Scot of amiable disposition. He was aware of the comings and goings of these shadowy figures, but viewed them with indulgence for, after all, they were not freeloaders and the rooms they slept in had in any case been already paid for! Dr. Thangaraj who succeeded the good reverend was an uncompromising martinet. He was not known to make allowances for the perceived foibles of his wards. He did not believe that the law would lend itself to anything but its letter. I hasten to add that this was a personal opinion borne of a none-too-pleasant experience I had at his hands. There were many who would swear by his friendliness especially when he was out playing basketball with them. True, but I only wish in retrospect that this same friendliness had not been confined to the basketball court alone. The story of my life might have been different then. What is sauce for goose is not sauce for gander, I suppose.

There was two days to go before the end of the Second Term. We could not wait to return to the bosom of our families. Unbeknown to me, Georgie and Shamsuddin were on the prowl criss-crossing the hall quadrangle and chucking water-filled balloons, at random, with unerring aim through the open windows of the senior students on the upper floor. Without exception, the balloons found their mark with pronounced plops, especially as the top windows were without grilles. Most of the seniors put this down to the juvenile high jinks that one could look upon kindly. Not all the seniors, however, were willing to view this escapade with the same degree of tolerance. Some of them were indignant and some hurled choice epithets at the vanishing perpetrators. Not stopping at that, one of them took the trouble to follow their trail and learn of their identity. The matter was reported to Dr.Thangaraj and the cat was out of the bag! He was also told of my brother's nightly slumbering options. By the time I came to know of it, it was far too late to take evasive action.

Early next morning, there was a knock on my door and when I opened it unsuspectingly, lo and behold, who should be standing in front of my door but the warden himself! And there, on a quilt for everyone to see, lay Georgie, blissfully unaware of the warden's presence. After the exertions of the evening before, he was still fast asleep. The warden gave me a dressing-down and a warning. My brother was unceremoniously bundled out. If I had known that I would be hard done by with the events that followed, I would certainly have desisted from the temptation to do what I was later egged on to do.

As soon as my friends Oommen Iype and George Mathew heard of what happened, they were all for teaching the informer a lesson. I was not sure at first, but I went along for the sheer heck of it. The plan was for one of us to gain entry into the snitcher's room through the open window, after having scaled the back wall and moved along the ledge like a cat burglar, and from inside lift the latch of the closed door to let the others in. We would then proceed to belabour him with pillows in the time-honoured manner. It was to be no more than symbolic 'punishment'. Habeeb was also roped in. I suspect, he agreed to join us, much against his better judgement, only because of the predicament he found me in on account of his brother Shamsuddin's role in the caper. He must have felt he had a vicarious responsibility for what had happened. What are friends for, otherwise? Initially,

the plan went like clockwork. With a three-pice copper coin inserted between a bulb and its holder and the switch turned on, we managed to blow the fuse. It was well past midnight and the whole block was immersed in darkness. Those were days when trip switches were unheard of in India. It would be a while before someone found the switchboard and fixed the fault with new fuse wire.

Oommen Iype, then, climbed the drainpipe barefooted, found a foothold on the ledge and slid along it to effect his entry and lift the latch from inside. We entered the room without waking up the man and took our places around his bed, ready to wield our pillows. Things went woefully awry when, in our attempt to raise the mosquito netting he was sleeping under before giving him the ‘treatment’, he was awakened. He jumped up, parried the first few blows and frantically hit out with his fists in all directions unable to see who his assailants were. When that found its mark, of all people, on Habeeb, instinctively he hit back with his fist with such force that, we were to learn soon, it dislodged one of the front teeth of our intended soft target. There was a sharp cry of pain from him. We retreated in disarray, but soon converged and sat in a huddle in my room wondering what dreaded visitation we could now expect. When nothing happened for a quarter of an hour or so, we ventured to come out on to the corridor.

It was not long before the lights came back on and the ungainly figure of K. Kurian, the General Secretary of the Students’ Representative Council (SRC for short) hove into sight. In a shaky voice that bespoke an age far beyond his years, he berated us for what he had guessed we had been upto. He then turned on his heels and shuffled off in a huff, but not before promising us that we hadn’t heard the last of the matter. We broke for the holidays without hearing anything more about it. Throughout the break I was on tenterhooks.

Sure enough, we were summoned to the Principal’s office the morning after our return to the campus and roundly hauled over the coals. After a severe reprimand, though he let the others off the hook, he ‘gated’ me for a month. In his eyes, I was the first accused. And I was not about to ‘set the record straight’ and tell on my friends. During the period some one is gated, he is forbidden from leaving the campus even on weekends. I could have lived with that, if there hadn’t been a sting in the tail. I was also informed that I would not be allowed to sit the Intermediate exams in March. If I had harboured any illusion that Dr.Boyd’s bark was worse than his bite, this put paid to it swiftly. I had never fancied myself as an academic high-flyer. Nor was I a plodder. If anything, I would work just enough to scrape through. This news knocked the stuffing out of me. My heart sank and I felt weak at the knees both at once. How will I face the folk back home, to say nothing of my facing my classmates who will have stolen a march over me when I returned ‘downgraded’?

Now, what kind of person was Dr. Alexander John Boyd, the principal? No one could have passed through the portals of Madras Christian College, without falling under the spell of this remarkable man. He knew everyone in the college, I mean everyone, by name. He kept open house during weekends, when students, having been invited beforehand in small groups, could visit him for an informal chat over a cup of coffee and biscuits. As a confirmed bachelor, that was the best he could offer apart from a board for playing bagatelle, which to the best of my knowledge he never succeeded in interesting

any of his visitors in. He was good at putting his nervous first-time callers at ease with his effortless informality and friendliness. This was the secret of his success in public relations. He endeared himself to the students with his relatively liberal outlook on campus politics. As a Scot, who had no love lost for the English, he knew where his sympathies should lie.

And yet, there was only so much he would put up with when it came to open defiance of the powers-that-be. I remember an occasion when some of the senior students, my fellow Malayalees Thomas Zachariah and T. G. David among them, under the leadership of the then College Union Chairman, Krishnamurthy Vithal (?), organized a political demonstration (I forget the precise provocation for it). They were marching towards the foyer, where Dr. Boyd was standing, arms akimbo, right in front of the Miller bust that adorned the entrance. He was immaculately clad in his customary rough-textured linen trousers and bush shirt made of the same material. I still vividly remember the four cut-pockets of his light brown bush shirt. As they came closer shouting slogans, he continued to stand his ground and stared them down. And, the slogan shouting slowly grew fainter and the demonstration soon evaporated. He had not uttered a word during this brief encounter. If I remember correctly, this happened just a few months before the country gained its independence from Britain.

Rarely, if ever, did he let his guard down when discussing Indian politics with his students. Even so, I remember an occasion when, in a moment of levity, he could not resist referring to the Congress Party leader C.Rajagopalachari by his British-invented nickname, 'Ruggerball Charlie'. I should know, because I was there. One could be charitable and argue that this must have been a harmless, tongue-in-cheek crack meant to raise a laugh. Or, that it was a tactless repetition of a poor joke by British Expatriates at the European Club for a local 'Gunga Din'. I could detect an undertone of condescension in that bit of wordplay. Catching the mood of his audience, he recovered himself quickly, with the observation that Rajaji (an affectionate abbreviation of his name) was an old boy of MCC held in the highest regard by his alma mater.

The man had an uncanny knack of turning up at the wrong place at the wrong time or at the right place at the right time, depending on which side of the fence you were on. Many a time, when a student cut classes and tried to slink away to wherever his incipient 'mischief' was to take him, Dr. Boyd would, as if from nowhere, materialize in front of him to his dismay. He would then add to the misery of the culprit by imposing an on-the-spot-fine that he never failed to collect promptly before sending him back. Anyone he caught going to class late also suffered the same ignominy. The fine was invariably a token two Annas, and no more. What hurt one's pride was not so much the fine as the thought that one could not get away with it. His pervasive presence was not confined to the college alone. He could be seen, some evenings, in one corner of the extensive playing fields with his golf club, swinging at a golf ball to match his 'skills' against himself, as one would in a game of Patience. In the meanwhile, his roving eyes would be taking in who was playing what game and how well. He did not miss much of what went on around him.

Nor did I escape his eyes on that day, as ill luck would have it. Having cut classes, I was driving my friend Newton Devasahayam's Chevrelet station wagon, if a little tentatively,



along Velacherry Road, when what should I see but Dr. Boyd's Vauxhall, with the great man himself, driving-gloves and all, behind the wheel, looming in front of me. I could not very well do a disappearing act with a Chevrelet station wagon, nor could I duck, for obvious reasons. Sure enough, when he saw me next, the first question he asked was whether I had a driving licence. He had guessed rightly that my denial would only compound my guilt, so even before I could answer he asked me if I had any money on my person. I nodded and he asked me to cough up a Rupee, a princely sum in those far-off days when a Rupee would buy you a Dress Circle seat at the Elphinstone Cinema or the Globe on Mount Road or the Minerva on Broadway, leaving enough small change for an ice cream at the Soda Fountain or a Masala Dosa at an Udupi Café. That brings to mind the old Bristol Café, the Chinese Restaurant –I forget the name- and the Irani's along Mount Road, each of which offered us its own variety of tasty morsels.

In March 1949, when the rest of the Senior Intermediate students were anxiously waiting to sit the final exams to be held at Tambaram, I returned to Quilon (now called 'Kollam'), where my parents were stationed at that time, to prepare for the next exams. It was to be a long wait until the September exams, held every year for those who could not make the grade in March, for one reason or another. Then there was to be another long wait till June of the following academic year. The tedium, to say nothing of the ignominy, of the wait before taking the exams was somewhat relieved for me when I was called up to appear before the 11<sup>th</sup> Services Selection Board in Bangalore. I had earlier sat and passed the Union Public Service Commission tests at Fort St. George in Madras.

There were 36 candidates in all drawn from various parts of India. Those who made the grade would be sent for a three-year training spell as Officer Cadets at the Indian Military Academy at Dehra Dun. Like me, the other candidates had also appeared for the Public Service Commission exams and passed, and hence the call-up. The President of the Board was a certain Col. Thornton, one of the last remaining British officers in the Indian Army then. For five days, we were put up at the Cantonment Barracks. Each candidate had a room to share with another like him and an orderly to attend to their needs. He brought us our bed coffee, polished our boots, pressed our clothes and performed sundry other services for us. Spit and polish was a given. Indeed, we were treated like officers for the duration of our stay there. And every day, there would be some tests to measure our physical endurance, our intelligence quotient, our initiative, our leadership potential, our communicative skills, both oral and written, or what have you. One had the uncanny feeling that Big Brother was constantly watching our every move. We had to have our names boldly displayed on tags, back and front. On the fourth day, eight of the candidates were short-listed and I was one of the eight. I was on a roll!

That was when I started entertaining hopes of not having to go back to college after all. On the fifth day, the eight hopefuls were interviewed, one at a time, by an Army Psychologist. Imagine my surprise when I saw a comely young woman sitting behind a desk as I entered an otherwise bare room to face the 'grilling'. She greeted me pleasantly enough, but then went on to ask me questions that to my untrained mind appeared to be rather harmless. My responses, caught with my guard down, bordered on the facetious. That, I thought at the time, was the smart thing to do. To cut a long story short, only two of the eight were chosen to appear before the medical board, the last hurdle, and I was not

to be one of them. Looking back, I suspect I fell at the penultimate hurdle only because of my ill-considered levity. The wages of levity is comeuppance. Hindsight, they say, is a perfect science.

After joining St. Thomas's Hall in 1947, I had joined the University Officers' Training Corps in the hope that it would be a useful preparation for a future career in the armed forces, which I had been enamoured of. My personal tutor, K. M. George, our lecturer in Malayalam who also happened to be a lieutenant in the UOTC, had given me all encouragement. Let me mention in passing that Mr. K. M. George, through many incarnations, became Dr. K. M. George, a famous comparative linguist known all over India. I may add here that he had earlier tried his hand at publishing a literary magazine, *Loka Vaani*, in Malayalam. That did not prosper. But, I am digressing. Captain Parthasarathy of the Psychology Department was in charge of the college UOTC unit. He was an uncompromising disciplinarian and a hard taskmaster. Although I was, by nature, averse to taking orders without being told why, I gladly carried them out, no questions asked. In fact, I enjoyed the drills on the parade ground, the route marches, the shooting practice at the Firing Range and all the rest of it that helped lick the rough recruit into shape. It was the final month-long camp on the outskirts of Salem in 1948 that I enjoyed the most.

From day one, the training schedule was, to put it mildly, punishing and unremitting. Salem sun was harsh and unforgiving. The scrubland around the camp through which we often had to crawl during exercises was just as unkind to our unbranded skins. When we repaired to our tents after the day's exertions, we were too exhausted to do anything but collapse into our bedrolls and sleep like a log until the reveille was sounded the next morning. After the last post was sounded to signal lights out, it was a rare man who would venture out for 'extra-curricular' activities of any kind. My classmate and friend C. Madhavan Nair was that rare man. He was not above attempting some dare-deviltry at odd hours. As a sergeant in the UOTC, he was expected to be an exemplar to the rest of us in matters of discipline. That he certainly was, most of the time that is. He would put his foot down if any one strayed from the straight and the narrow.

Occasionally, however, his 'feet of clay' would give him away. One day in the second week of camp, late at night, he had scaled a coconut palm to pluck a couple of tender nuts to quench his thirst. He could hardly have dropped a nut from that dizzy height without making a sound. It seemed unlikely that the camp commandant should be on the prowl at that late hour, but that was precisely what happened. Madhavan was caught in the act. He knew what was in store for him. He was promptly confined to the guardhouse. The next day, he was court-martialed for this 'offense' and stripped of one of his chevrons and demoted to the rank of a corporal. Sadly, I was the camp commandant's stick-orderly for the day and had the unenviable task of marching my friend Madhavan in and out of the commandant's presence. And, I was only a lowly lance corporal then.

Let me change tack a little here. Madhavan always had an eye to the unconventional. Regardless of his being a high caste Hindu Nair, he gallantly wooed and married Radha, a girl from a lower caste, who besides was two years his senior at college. As day scholars, every day they had taken the same electric train into Tambaram and back. Love between them was thus a 'moving' experience. In the train, that is. To his cosmopolitan

mindset, caste was irrelevant. So was age! Later in life, Madhavan, who had become a captain in an airline, gained the dubious distinction of having tried to be airborne too early and, as a result, of having ploughed into a field near the airport. He staggered out of the cockpit unhurt. Grapevine had it that he had consumed vast quantities of spirits before going into the cockpit. His employers grounded him and set in motion an enquiry into the incident. I do not know what the sequel to that was. But I am getting ahead of my narrative.

When we struck camp at the end of our training, we found that without exception everyone's skin had grown several shades darker under the scorching Salem sun. We also learnt that a bayonet was found missing from the armoury. This was serious business! All our stuff was searched and then we were asked to fall in to suffer the ignominy of being frisked. When they drew a blank, they threatened us with dire consequences if the missing item was not retrieved. We fanned out in all directions to look for it. Finally, it was located, of all places, in a bucket in one of the latrines into which we had been emptying our bowels every day! A 'lascar' stooped to retrieve the bayonet. The poor man had the unenviable task of 'scraping' it all off to restore the blade's pristine glint. We heaved a sigh of relief.

My stint at Tambaram did not go beyond the Intermediate class, which took me three eventful years to complete. Although more than half a century has elapsed since I first set foot there, I still vividly recall my extra-curricular involvement at college, like vignettes whose edges have faded but little. My favourite sport was Basketball. It also happened to be the top sport for the residents of my Hall, St.Thomas's, which I represented in the Inter-Hall competitions throughout my stay. Also, in 1948-49, I was the Sports Secretary on the Students' Representative Council of my Hall in charge of organizing sporting activities, including Basketball. I do not recall the Hall ever losing to others in Basketball. It was a proud moment for me when, in the same year, I was also inducted into the college Basketball team. I was the youngest member of the team.

The others were all under-graduate or graduate students. Ivachen of Tiruvalla was our captain. The one match that I shall never forget was the one we played against the Union Christian College team, the winners of the Travancore University Inter-collegiate tournament. They were on a tour to pit their skills against the best teams of the Madras University. Their team was captained by no less a person than Joseph Sam, who was soon to become a national player. (Subsequently, he went on to become the Chief National Basketball Coach under the Sports Authority of India.) We beat his team hollow, and I played my heart out for the full forty minutes without being substituted! I may add here that this prompted Dr. Thangaraj to see me in a new light. Not that it made any difference when, later, matters came to the crunch and I was overtaken by the events that I have already alluded to.

As for other sports, where others excelled, I dabbled. Despite my belonging to the ranks of the vertically challenged, -I ascribe it to my genes- I would pass muster in field events like the long jump and the discus throw. In fact, I represented the Hall in Long Jump and did not disgrace myself. To be placed third in the Long Jump event, representing the University College at Trivandrum in the Travancore-Cochin Olympics a few years later, in 1953 to be precise, was the high water mark of my athletic career. The year before that

I had represented the Travancore University in Football, but we lost by a solitary goal to the Osmania University in the preliminary round. I had not exactly covered myself in glory on the occasion. In 1953, again, I played for the University College Basketball team that won the trophy beating the Medicos by an impressive margin. But I suspect I am getting carried away.

There are other reminiscences that I must mention in passing. Soon after India gained independence, Pandit Nehru visited the city of Madras and, wherever he went, he travelled standing up in an open car. The people lined the streets in their tens of thousands to catch a glimpse of their beloved leader. Whenever his motorcade passed by, the waiting crowd would surge forward, often breaking the police cordon and forcing the convoy of cars to slow down to a crawl. From time to time, to the despair of his bodyguards, he would climb down from his car to rub shoulders with the crowd and greet them with folded palms. Not infrequently, someone would bend down and try to touch his feet in a typically Indian sign of respect, which, the iconoclast that he was, he truly detested. I witnessed one such episode. Nehru, whose face had turned crimson-red with rage, lifted the poor man by the scruff of his neck and pushed him back into the crowd with all his strength.

In contrast, there is something in the way our present day leaders expect as their due their simpering followers kowtowing to them. By the same token, there is also something of a character flaw in the masses in the way their knees turn to a jelly in the presence of these leaders. There is an element of truth in the aphorism that a people will get only the kind of leadership they deserve. Sadly, we in India have in recent times had a rash of such self-seeking leaders to prove that point. Dr.(?) J. Jayalithaa alias *Puraitchi Thalavi* (revolutionary leader), now off and now on Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, at whose feet men grovel, is the least adorable of that tribe. Nehru would have turned livid at the sight of such undignified feet kissing, had he been alive today.

During the same visit, Nehru found time to address a large crowd of students at the Chepauk Stadium, which revealed another side of his character; that he had a quick temper. Each college was apportioned a separate enclosure at the stadium. The so-called 'gentlemen' of MCC and the so-called 'rowdies' of Pachaiappa's were seated in adjacent enclosures. The great man was to speak from a raised platform. In the first flush of independence, he thought it would be in the fitness of things to deliver his address in Hindi. The antipathy of the Dravidians towards the imposition of Hindi on Dravidian South India had been well articulated even in those early days of independence. He knew it, but was taking a calculated risk. There was a howl of protest from all round the stadium. The protest was the most vociferous from our two enclosures. Nehru smiled and held up his arms as though to say that he was sorry. He promptly switched to English, but the commotion did not die down as promptly as he might have wished.

The next thing we knew, he virtually jumped off the dais and sped full tilt in the direction of our enclosure, with the surprised security men awkwardly falling over each other trying to keep up with him. The City Police Commissioner who was quicker off the mark than the rest was already in front of us. Only the security fence separated him from us. No sooner had he started hurling dark threats at us than Nehru caught up with him, elbowed him out of the way as he snapped, 'You keep out of this!' Then he turned to us

and gave us a tongue-lashing, stabbing his accusing finger at us with each insistent expression of reproof. A hush fell over the whole stadium. That was when Jacob (?) Friedman, a German Jew studying at MCC, stood up and nonchalantly aimed his camera at the apoplectic face of the enraged man to freeze-frame that image for posterity. The picture duly appeared in the American illustrated magazine, 'Life', soon after.

If the college had its Semitic German, it also had its Nordic counterpart in the person of Alexander Barth. If the bespectacled Semite was short and chubby with a cherubic face and a shock of curly hair that bespoke a recently taken Bar Mitzvah, the bespectacled Barth was tall and athletic with a finely chiselled face and a mane of gently wavy hair. His arrival at the college hardly a year after Nazi capitulation in 1945 did not in any way adversely affect the other students in their appraisal of the man. He was accepted for what he was, an athlete and a gentleman; traits the less well-endowed sometimes imagined they too had, especially standing in front of a mirror. He had a good number of friends and was well regarded for his prowess as an athlete by C. A. Abraham, the Physical Director of the college. He excelled in the throws and won kudos for the college.

Another collegian that I remember was Michael Kagwa, a Ugandan of noble lineage related to the then Kabaka of Buganda, one of the kingdoms that Uganda had at that time comprised. His dignified bearing set him apart from the stereotypical cliché about the none-too-intelligent African. My sojourn in Africa later in life was to dispel this myth once and for all. Kagwa, as every one knew him, was a popular cricketer. He was always expensively turned out on the cricket pitch in full-sleeved silk shirts and smooth flannels. Even off the field, his sartorial taste was much admired. Later in life he became a distinguished judge in the Ugandan judiciary and a member of the *Lukiko*, the Ugandan parliament. Sadly, during Idi Amin's dictatorship, his goons murdered him in a particularly grisly manner. He was bludgeoned senseless, lashed to the steering wheel of his Jaguar and together made a bonfire of!

The mention of cricket brings to mind some of the other stalwarts who made a name for themselves, wielding the willow. Cricket in India in those days was the preserve of gentlemen of leisure, a game for the princes and not for the proletariat. As a junior still far from being worldly-wise, I had initially looked upon these college icons with some degree of awe. These men, by and large, kept themselves to themselves for they thought they were a class apart, like the patricians who keep their distance from the commonality. Among that snooty lot were the likes of Balu Alagannan, George Abraham, William Bywater, B. S. Wilson, C. D. Gopinath and Chinnadurai, the heir-apparent to the principality of Pudukottai, to name but a few.

As I became more attuned to the college ethos, I came to form a dim view of the supercilious airs that they gave themselves. If you closed your eyes for a moment and transmuted them to the 'killing fields' of Champaner as in the film *Lagaan*, you might easily have pictured them sitting in the pavilion, in their immaculately creased flannels and their rolled-down shirtsleeves, biting their lips with helpless rage while Captain Russell and his teammates were being roundly thrashed by Bhuvan and the village louts. My one-time heroes' superior ways began to strike a less responsive chord with my slowly-evolving egalitarian mindset.

In contrast, there were a host of other sportsmen who each excelled in his field of sport and yet managed not to have a swollen head. Of that number, I remember Ronnie Matthews the hurdler, Stephen D'Silva the sprinter, Laaji Joseph the high jumper and Roy Fewkes the boxer. Then there was my friend Easwariah the all-round athlete, and a man after my own heart for his easy-going ways.

If my recollections of my days at Tambaram appear rambling in style, I confess it is because I cannot organize my memories of those far-off days either in a sequence or in a logical flow, for time has taken its toll on me. Every once in a while, quite without warning, they are heaved up through the swirl of my thoughts, to be spun around teasingly and just as soon sucked in.

I have occasional flashbacks of the things we did for pleasant diversions. One such was taking an evening stroll with like-minded friends along the path that led off from the station road to the railway colony that had been built by the British to house Eurasian railway workers and engine drivers. To ogle at the girls there, who had a reputation, rightly or wrongly, for being forward and fancy-free. One such was Pamela who each of us imagined would give only him the glad eye. She generally wore short-sleeved flowery skirts that set off her good looks, her well-rounded calves and her slim ankles. It added to her allure to see her walking by, from time to time casting backward glances in our direction. At least so we thought. None of us ever got within sniffing distance of her to find out which one of us she fancied, if at all.

Sometimes, of a dare, we would skulk out of the Hall after roll call for a cup of 'decoction' at the coffee stall on the station platform. I cannot recall ever tasting such wonderful coffee either before or since. And, if fancy thus took us 'beyond the pale', we would also take in a late-night Tamil film at the travelling talkies to the north of the Chingelpet Road. Gemini Vasan's 'Chandralekha' in which Ranjan, the swashbuckling matinee idol of the time, inevitably falls for the *femme fatale* is one such film that I still vividly remember. T. R. Rajakumari was the heroine. Her drum dance sequence in the company of scores of dancers, each with her own drum to cavort on, was sensational. Its choreography was perhaps the forerunner to the cinematic dance that has since become the staple of every silver screen extravaganza in this country. For two Annas it was good value for money for the 'groundlings', the discomfort notwithstanding. Sitting cross-legged in a sandy pit, looking up at the screen for three hours at a stretch was a trying experience. Scaling the high fence to get back to our rooms at that late hour without being seen was even more trying!

A defining moment for the country was the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in January 1948. I remember the shock with which we received the news of that 'fell deed'. And everything ground to a halt. We could not get even a cup of coffee for love or for money. We wished, hoping against hope, we could be reassured that the news was not true.

The one memory that still rankles is that of the St. Thomas Hall Day in 1948. Succumbing to the common human failing of doing one better than the next man, like many another resident of the Hall who would enjoy female company, I had invited my friends from the Women's Christian College, for the function. I was excited; for this was going to be the first time that I played host to the fairer sex. Trouble was, in my eagerness

to look self-possessed for the occasion, stupidly as it turned out, I gathered some Dutch courage with a shot or two whisky that my friends had obligingly offered me. It was Vat 69, no less, and it was smooth. Of course, the whisky had earlier been clandestinely brought in for a convivial start to the evening. Rather foolishly, instead of sipping it, slow by steady sip, as I should have done, I flung back a large whisky in my hurry to be ready at the Hall entrance to usher in my guests. I felt suitably elated for some time. If I felt slightly woozy in the head, I was sure I could handle it with dignity. Little did I realize then that the delayed effect of the tittle would 'do me in' most inconveniently.

The guests arrived in time and the alfresco dinner soon got underway. My guests were seated on either side of me. As my luck would have it, Dr. Boyd was seated just across from where I was at the adjoining table. He saw us and smiled in our direction even as we were into the soup. As the warm soup worked its way down more and more, my stomach started to churn. I began vainly hoping that the chicken roast and beetroot salad that followed the soup would help settle the bilious welling up from my innards, but it became worse and I must have turned green about the gills. One of my companions thought I was looking decidedly peaky and said so to me. Was Dr. Boyd smiling obliquely at me? If only I could keep a clear head! I excused myself, got up and with a great deal of effort managed to keep my balance, and carefully walked, with all the dignity I could muster, down the nearest corridor in the direction of the toilets. Please God let me not make a spectacle of myself in front of others, I prayed. I had just gone out of their line of vision when I lurched sideways and made as though to fall. Luckily, a pillar arrested my fall. I desperately held on to the pillar and threw up! More nausea, more hiccups and more pukes! I was exhausted by the effort, but I felt a lot better. I reached the toilets, cleaned up as best I could, went back to my room, changed my clothes and soon returned to rejoin my guests, only to find that the dinner was already over and my guests were being escorted by one of my friends to the quadrangle for the next item on the programme. How woefully I found myself wanting!

By the time I caught up with them, they had already found seats for the customary Variety Entertainment, the grand finale of the Hall Day. My friend had the 'effrontery' to be seated between them! Did he fancy his chances? Could he be flirting with them? As these thoughts passed through my mind, I began to wonder if he was trying to queer my own pitch. In the light-headed state in which I was, I could not look upon with equanimity at what to me appeared to be brazen 'poaching'. Yet, what would my guests think if I asked him to yield his place to me? In the event, I did not have the gumption to do that. Instead, I had to be content with kicking my heels in the unseeing shadows at the back of the audience until it was time for me to escort them to the Tambaram Station to see them off. It would have appeared ungentlemanly to act otherwise. I do not recall what precise excuse I offered them for my leaving the dinner table. Could they have guessed what had transpired? I never found out. When I ran into Dr. Vimala Sreehari in London, twenty-six years later, she only gave me a sphinx-like smile in answer to my anxious query.

Looking back, although I feel there were times when I could not have covered myself in glory during my Tambaram stint, least of all in my academic pursuits, I am sure my three years there taught me many things that stood me in good stead later in life. I do not know

if I can spell them out clearly or quantify them in terms of their impact on my life. I was not academically disposed. Therefore, although I had disappointed those who had expected more of me, I believe my Tambaram experience on the whole had helped to 'polish the pebble' in me, if nothing else. Tambaram also helped me gain the confidence, a certain kind of chutzpah, if you like, which helped me cope with the later challenges of life. If I have any regrets, firstly it is that I could not continue my studies there and secondly that I would secretly feel somewhat like a counterfeit coin whenever I happened to be in the company of the 'fully minted' alumni of Tambaram.

My state of mind was no different when I tagged along with K. T. Thomas, known to his friends as Appu -an alumnus of MCC of an earlier vintage than mine- to an MCC Europe Alumni get-together at the Barham Park Lounge on Harrow Road at Wembley in North East London on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> July 2002. To my surprise, I felt completely at ease as soon as I had mingled and interacted with the invitees. At least four generations of MCCites had assembled there, from the sprightly Dr. S. Menon of Teddington, showing none of his 91 years, to Appu in his late seventies to Jacob Tharakan to Ruth Kattumuri to Tinny George et al. Seeing the quiet confidence they radiated, I was reminded of the concluding part of the College Prayer for the Alumni: *'and may they ever without fear of man follow steadfastly where duty, right and honour lead'*. My initial misgivings vanished and I felt thankful for the gift that the college had bestowed on me in some small measure.

### Chapter Three >>