

I Chapter 3

Lowering One's Academic Sights

Having been given the brush-off by the Brass Hats of Bangalore, which put paid to my romantic visions of some day leading a swashbuckling 'cavalry charge', I could think of nothing else to do but to sit the Intermediate exams held at Tambaram in the September of 1949. Not that I was particularly looking forward to it, but I could hardly have disappointed my parents either. My friend, C. Madhavan, of the 'tender coconut' fame at the University Officers' Training Camp at Salem, was also taking the same exams at the same time. We thought we had in common something of an inverted pride in being pedestrian in our academic attainments for the sheer heck of it in order to set ourselves apart from the high-flyers. Was this only a pathetic attempt at hiding what was really our 'sour grapes'? We pretended not to know that our disinclination to work hard would only be to our disadvantage. Or, perhaps, we were simply partners in distress, suffering from a general achievement deficit syndrome. Either way, it did not bode well for us.

Our biggest bugbear was Physics. When we heard that our External Examiner for the Practical Exams was a certain Prof. Mary Punnen of Travancore University, we perked up and decided to use a ploy to attract her sympathetic attention during the practical exams. We turned up at the Physics Lab. on the day in question dressed in typical Malayali fashion, each in a white *mundu* (an ankle-length wraparound like a Sarong) and a white *jubah* (a long-sleeved, collar-less shirt worn with its tails hanging). Sure enough, she noticed us, came around, took in our plight and unobtrusively deciphered the rubric of the paper that she had correctly guessed was flummoxing us. We managed to muddle through the experiment, but only just. As I recall, it was an experiment with the Pendulum. The second experiment was not so hard.

As for the written paper in Physics that followed a day or two later, the story was not very different. Again succour came to us from an unexpected quarter. Strange are the ways of providence! More likely by sheer coincidence, we learned that the University Moderator for the Physics theory paper happened to be Vijayaraghavan's father. Vijayaraghavan was our senior, then a resident of St. Thomas Hall at Tambaram. Could it be that fate was intervening on our behalf? It was then that we decided to wheedle our friend into contacting his father to find out how badly we had fared, which he reluctantly agreed to do. Knowing his father, he had grave apprehensions about the outcome of his quest. In the event we could not find out whether he spoke to his father or what transpired between father and son if indeed they had met, for we went our different ways back home soon after the exam.

We passed the Physics examination, but never did find out whether it was in fact under our own steam or was the sequel to a silent act of kindness. Either way, it must have been by a whisker. That was how much beyond our limited grasp the abstractions of Physics were. The desperate need to overcome an academic hurdle, on which my future would turn, far outweighed the nagging moral qualms that I had felt at the time in disingenuously employing such stratagems. I cannot speak for my friend, but I have often

speculated on what might have become of my future if these ‘providential interventions’ had not materialized. I might have just as soon given up speculating, realizing that a *fait accompli* could not be undone to make a retrospective moral choice.

What do I do next? I had entertained the idea of doing medicine, but I knew that my aggregate grades in science subjects would not be adequate enough to persuade any medical college to offer me a place. It was about that time that Dr. Madhava Pai (?) of Mangalore had started a private medical college at Manipal and was ready to offer seats to all comers including compulsive under-achievers like me for a consideration of five thousand Rupees as, what was euphemistically called, Capitation Fees. In effect, this would be a punishing decapitation of hard-earned money. In those days this was a considerable sum of money, which, however, I thought at the time was within my father’s means to cough up. But as a matter of principle, my father would not hear of spending good money for a bad investment. You either shape up or ship out.

As the next option, I wanted to go back to Tambaram if I could gain a place for an Honours course either in Zoology or, failing that, in English, but I had reckoned without the redoubtable principal, Dr. Boyd. I received a letter from him on 24th March, 1950, which *inter alia* said, ‘I am enclosing herewith a prospectus and application form, but I think that you would do well to limit your ambitions to a B.A. Economics. After you had started it, you would probably find an Honours course much heavier than you expected.’ Going by my track record, he could not have drawn any other conclusion. Much as I would have loved to go back to Tambaram, I did not relish the idea of reading Economics. At that time, the discipline had not gained the stature that it later did as far as I knew.

To have waited till the end of March to apply for a college place was cutting it rather fine, but I had banked on securing admission at Tambaram for a subject of my choice. In the event, I drew a blank at Tambaram only to realize that my remaining options were considerably limited. Most other established institutions had closed their admissions by then.

This was a disappointment. True, fatalism acts as a convenient sop to your failure, but I could not thus leave matters to chance. Not to have a handle on the situation would have meant leaving an empty hole in my life. Yes, my past was coming home to roost. But, I would not accept it. Circumstances thus compelled me to lower my academic sights.

I had to settle for an undergraduate course in Zoology at the relatively new Sree Narayana College of Quilon. Even that did not prove to be easy. My father had to request R. Shankar, the manager of the college, to intercede with the principal on my behalf. As it happened, R. Shankar was also the Legal Adviser to the Harrisons & Crosfield Staff Union of which my father was Secretary at the time. Incidentally, this same R. Shankar was to become, for a short while, the Chief Minister of the State of Kerala. If I remember correctly, he died in harness.

For the first time, I unwittingly found myself in the thick of student politics almost against the run of my life hitherto. As an excitable schoolboy in the years just before Independence, I had on a few occasions impulsively joined demonstrations organized by

the Travancore State Congress Party protesting against the police excesses under Sir C.P., the Dewan of Travancore. On those occasions I remember wearing, along with the other demonstrators, a white Gandhi Cap- remarkably similar in appearance to the caps worn by those who take orders at American fast food joints like Dunkin' Donuts or Kentucky Fried Chicken. To the Police, anything that remotely smacked of Gandhi was like a red rag to a bull, but, thankfully for us, there was safety in numbers at these rallies. Although my father, like any other Indian, yearned for an independent India, he would not be seen overtly advocating the cause, what with his having British employers. And yet, in 1936, or was it 1937, when Gandhiji visited Quilon and addressed a mammoth crowd that had converged from far and near on the old Cantonment Parade Ground, I remember my father hoisting me on his shoulders to help me get a glimpse of the great man. That had been the sum total of my political 'antecedents' before I joined Sree Narayana College in the June of 1950.

The college was named after Sree Narayana Guru, a great social reformer whose fight against the injustices of caste system and Brahmin monopoly on priesthood was the high-water mark of the period that straddled the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries. His pioneering works for the emancipation of the downtrodden provided the motive force for the launching of all the progressive social movements of Kerala that were to come after that. These movements later merged with the larger struggle for national independence. The struggle became two-pronged: the long-term one against Colonialism and the more pressing one against the insidious forces of feudalism and religious obscurantism. Prior to Independence, India was led by the Indian National Congress, which had in its fold people of all political hues from the conservatives to the progressives. When the need for presenting a common front against the Colonialists was obviated with Independence in 1947, quite naturally erstwhile allies parted company to form their own political groupings. The Communist Party of India had been in existence in an embryonic form even before 1947. Since Independence, it had been gaining support among certain sections of society and especially among the students. Sree Narayana College had been in the vanguard of student politics since its inception in 1949.

When I joined the college in the second year of its existence, the whole college was in a state of ferment. The Communist Party of India had made deep inroads into campuses in the State with the help of their surrogates who were nominally students, but whose immediate concern was winning the hearts and minds of the students in general and infusing them with Marxist ideology than with clearing academic hurdles. S.N. College in particular had become a hotbed of dissent against Congress Party rule in the State. In fact, the year before saw many pitched battles between the students and the baton-wielding Police whenever striking students tried to disrupt classes, and often for the flimsiest of reasons. Invariably, the students got the worst of it. Local wags had it that the college high jump record was being constantly broken, by the minute as it were, by fleeing students who sailed over the college perimeter fence –barbed wire, no less- as they tried to outrun the cops who were in hot pursuit. Not all were so lucky. And some who were not so craven stood their ground, knowing what to expect but ready to face it. Many bones were broken, or worse. Many were jailed and were subjected to torture. I was told that a student leader, O. Madhavan by name, had had tufts of hair pulled out from his scalp when the cops gave him 'the once-over' at the local jail. O. Madhavan

later became the leading light in a theatre company of great repute, acting, directing and producing plays that reflected his continuing commitment to the Leftist cause. He is no more.

The Communist Party of India had its student wing in the form of the Students' Federation. College Unions in the State were highly politicized. The main political parties regarded the campuses as training grounds for future leadership. Especially the leftist student unions would have their baptism of fire by being thrust into the forefront of the agitation. The older leaders brought up the rear and egged the younger ones on. To them the so-called independence of India in 1947 was a bourgeoisie conspiracy to continue to keep the working classes in bondage. They constantly harped in the same breath on Imperialists and Capitalists as being class enemies.

Among my coevals at S. N. College were two student leaders who made a name for themselves, in their different ways, later in life. One of them, O. N. V. Kurup, became an academician and retired as Professor of Malayalam. He is also the foremost poet in Malayalam now. His poems reflect his social commitment, but are also endearingly lyrical. The other, Veliyam Bhargavan, made Politics his vocation in life and is presently the General Secretary of the State Wing of the Communist Party of India. His avuncular looks belie his steely resolve in fomenting trouble for the powers-that-be.

It was into such a turbulent state of student politics that I was reluctantly thrown by some of my friends at college who, either because of the political persuasions of their parents or because they were anti-communist by conviction, fielded like-minded candidates for the College Union elections to choose office bearers from. Among that band of carefree youth, who were willing to swim against the current, come what may, were A. A. Majeed, brother of A. A. Rahim who was to become a Union minister in the Indian Union Cabinet, George Joseph, the son of the Chief Engineer of Travancore, and Yasodharan hailing from a prominent Ezhava family of Pathanamthitta. We were as thick as thieves.

My political beliefs were still amorphous, so I was putty in the hands of my persistent friends who were looking for students with gumption enough to campaign for their candidates against heavy political and no less physical odds. We campaigned for *Unichakkamveetil Gopi* who was running for chairmanship of the College Union. Except that he hailed from a well-known Nair family and had money to splurge, Gopi had not much to recommend himself either in the way of personality or of oratory in the eyes of others. His opponent was the aforementioned O.N.V. Kurup, who the year before had lost in the college union elections to O. Madhavan. His oratory combined with his talent for writing evocative poetry, either of which qualities would have drawn the impressionable youth of the college to him, worked in his favour. To cut a long story short, our candidate lost badly in spite of our best efforts in the face of sheer talent, not to speak of dark threats, both verbal and physical that the hoi polloi of the college hurled in our direction. We licked our wounds and moped for a long time afterwards.

However, this reluctant foray into the rough and tumble of student politics earned me a certain grudging recognition as an adversary to be reckoned with when facing off against each other. Thus it was that I was invited to join a student delegation, under the

leadership of Veliyam Bhargavan and O.N.V. Kurup, going to express solidarity with the striking students of the N.S.S. College, Pandalam. At the instance of the college authorities, the police had laid siege to the college complex after violent demonstrations had disrupted classes in the wake of the arrest and incarceration of their student leaders. Students of different political hues, having been incensed at police highhandedness, closed ranks. I had tagged along not so much out of conviction as for a dare. I was not disappointed, for we were able to stand up to the threats of the police who had initially denied us access to the college. We refused to budge until they let us in. I still remember the rush of adrenalin that coursed through my veins as I stood facing a policeman. Will the police take me in with all its attendant forebodings, or will I return unscathed? In the event, we returned in good time to attend the last lecture and my folks were none the wiser about this escapade.

Apart from the thrill of having survived the perceived threat, I had the privilege of meeting and interacting with the youthful, all-India student leader, Devaki Panikkar, the daughter of the well-known diplomat and statesman, Sardar K. M. Panikkar. She had accompanied us to Pandalam. She was as intelligent as she was comely. With a lineage such as hers, that was but natural. Later on, she became the wife of M.N. Govindan Nair, the undisputed leader of the undivided Communist Party of India. Her persuasive arguments in favour of a socialist dispensation for India, coming as they did from an open and beautiful face, did sound very convincing at the time.

Regardless, I never could take kindly to the dogmatic claims of the communist ideologues. Later in life, I came to be a liberal in thinking with strong socialist leanings, but I could not see eye to eye with the Hegelian insistence that ongoing change could only be sustained by a constant conflict between opposites arising from the inherent contradictions of society as a whole. Hegel's Theory states that 'History progresses through a dialectic or clash of opposing forces'. This meant perpetual confrontation and not compromise between opposing ideologies. I could not subscribe to that view because that would negate the relatively saner option of peaceful co-existence, regardless of all its socio-economic shortcomings in the short term. Rigidity is the bane of extreme ideologies. Nor could I subscribe to the survival-of-the-fittest economics that led to unbridled acquisitiveness, mendaciously called initiative and entrepreneurship by those who enjoyed an unequal economic advantage.

If S. N. College got me mildly interested in differing political ideologies for the first time, it helped me no less in getting to grips with the intricacies of the Malayalam language what with being unwittingly exposed to the fiery oratory of campus politicians. That these stormy petrels may have sowed the seeds of discord on the campus is one thing. But, that their eloquence consciously or unconsciously paved the way for my taking greater interest in the study of the language is quite another. Looking back, I feel grateful for that gratuitous exposure. My initial disdain for these scruffy-looking classmates of mine –the scruffier they looked the stormier their politics was, one could be sure- slowly gave way to grudging respect. The college Malayalam faculty, too, helped me in my struggle to pass muster in the eyes of the examiners. This was a quantum leap from my Tambaram days when the best I could offer to exemplify the contributions of a great

Malayalam poet in answer to an examination question was that, 'He was a great man of letters etc. etc. and more inane padding in that vein.

The college also offered me opportunities to hone my skills in sports and games. In fact, I represented the college in Basketball, Cricket and Football in inter-collegiate tournaments as also in field events in athletics.

It was also on the grounds of S. N. College that I became briefly drawn towards Susan Thomas, a student three years my junior at college. What attracted me to her were not so much her looks as her athletic skills. She too liked me, I believe for the same reason. We occasionally met on our way to college, away from prying eyes. I would stop my bicycle, my left foot resting on the tarmac, for a brief moment to exchange greetings with her and then pedal on. In our typically young and foolish way, we merely exchanged billets-doux. We never spoke much on those occasions, but our eyes did. Before this could develop into anything more serious, my father got wind of it and 'read me the riot act'. He thought that she was, and I quote, 'a shameless hussy' and asked me to stop the affair forthwith. I could not muster enough courage to tell him that she was nothing of the sort and to defy his stricture. I felt constrained to meet Susan and tell her of my dilemma. She had the good grace not to call me a cad and we parted company. The shame of it all still nags me.

Now, let me get back to the main story. In 1951, I went on to represent the University in football. I continued to entertain hopes that all this would stand me in good stead when I applied for admission to the Trivandrum Medical College after completing my undergraduate studies. In the eyes of the college authorities, however, the sum total of my achievements was not up to scratch. Thus it was that I eagerly accepted the offer of a place at the University College, Trivandrum, to do a Master's in English Language and Literature. The words of Phillip Marshall, the Chaplain to the Eisenhower White House, came to mind then: 'In life, if you cannot get what you like, then, you must start liking what you get' or words to that effect. In other words, set your sights lower if need be.

My Trivandrum days were eventful in many ways. In the first year, I was put up at the University College Hostel. I saw no reason to change my cavalier attitude towards academics that I had stubbornly maintained over the years. The cliché about birds of a feather flocking together was never truer than it was then. Soon, I made friends with like-minded students. K. U. Thomas was one such friend with whom my association endures to this day. Glib of tongue and quick at riposte, he always kept his audience in splits of laughter. He was as easy going as I was. We also shared a weakness for card games, especially the locally popular '56'. As for studies, we did not exactly cover ourselves with glory. It is uncanny how anyone bitten by the '56' bug finds academics tiresome. Later, he too like me was to settle for a teacher's job. Although we went our different ways in April of 1954 after completing our studies, our paths were to cross again eighteen years later in Zambia.

At Trivandrum, I had continued with my games and sports with renewed vigour especially since the college gave a great deal of encouragement for extra-curricular activities. I also took keen interest in college dramatic and debating society activities. I remember playing the part of a youngish 'old', not so haggard looking King Lear to

Gwendolyn Miranda's Cordelia. I cannot recall who played Goneril and Regan. I remember the college athlete, Susie Paul, being in the cast. I did not fare too badly, although I do not remember having brought the house down. Anyway, there were no catcalls; of that I am sure. At the inter-collegiate extempore speech competition, I had to be content with second place. I missed the A. M. Varkey Memorial Gold Medal by a narrow margin, I was to learn later to my dismay.

I was also associated with the activities of a city drama club patronized by such cultural leaders and savants as *Jagathi N. Achaari*, *Poojappura Gopinathan Nair* and Professor *S. Guptan Nair*. On one occasion I was invited by All India Radio to broadcast a poem of mine, in retrospect a sort of namby-pamby ode to a nameless lover, that fetched me my first ever earnings in life; a princely sum of fifteen Rupees! At least, that was enough to enjoy many times over the fragrant coffee and snacks that were on offer at the India Coffee House. It was a familiar student haunt, which also let its young customers give the YWCA girls, next door, the glad eye. It was a harmless pursuit that the girls did not appear to dislike very much. On the whole, my first year in Trivandrum had expanded my horizons in more ways than one. Trivandrum, the capital of the State, being the centre of political activities, it was but natural that my political views too became less woolly and more clearly formulated.

Having been once bitten, however, I was twice shy of student politics and gave it as wide a berth as I could. Yet, I found nothing amiss in locking horns with the Warden of the College Hostel, the autocratic Dr. Bhaskaran Nair, in the matter of how much the residents should be involved in the running of the hostel. He would not brook anything that even remotely smacked of standing up to him. The result was that at the beginning of the second year I was shown the door, compelling me to look for new lodgings to stay until the year was over. The urgency of the need prompted me not to act impulsively against this arbitrary act of injustice.

That was how I moved to 'Mohanlands', a place that offered board and lodging to all and sundry but mainly students. We had a doctor and a couple of engineers in residence with us, if my memory serves me right, but most of the residents were students of the Engineering College. I made many good friends, the closest of them being John Isaac of Palathinkal family, Aymanam. Incidentally, it was his sister Mary Roy's daughter, Arundhati Roy who was to make Aymanam famous through her book, "God of Small Things" which won her international fame. Sadly, John is no more. Then, there was George Joseph, affectionately called 'Samson' because of his close resemblance, dimples and all, to Victor Mature of the 'Samson and Delilah' fame. Occasionally, we run into each other when I visit Kottayam where he works now. There was also George Kuruvilla of Tiruvalla, AKA Georgekutty, who died young, of a mysterious affliction. Abraham Mathew of the Mulamoottil family of Kozhencherry was also there at that time. He was an undergraduate at the University College. We still meet quite often.

Between reading for a Master's degree and expanding my co-curricular horizons, inevitably, my keenness for continuing with my games and athletics had come under great strain. I went through these periodic bouts of burying my nose in my books and sloughing off games. Not that it did much good to my studies, for I could not sustain it for long periods. There were times when I felt almost fatalistic. My classmate Gopinatha

Kurup was a godsend. He would help me with his notes and hints on how to beat the system or, to put it differently, how to outthink the examiners. Thanks to this last minute comradely intervention, I believe I was able to shift gears from a possible failed exam to an upper third class! Cold comfort! At least, not making the best use of those two academic years made me realize, however belatedly, that my yen to excel in games did not augur well for my future. Sports and games can lead to the total undoing of one who is an academic slouch anyway.

Yet, my interest in games had also had its positive side. Whenever I returned to Quilon for the holidays, my friends back home would cajole me into playing soccer for this team or that in the local tournaments. I cannot say I did not enjoy them, but it was exhausting. And, if I tried lamely to excuse myself with the plea that constraints of time did not allow me to keep myself in good, physical trim, they would compel me to don the referee's shirt. To my great delight, I found that I could acquit myself quite creditably in controlling a game. Besides, it gave me an exhilarating sense of power the like of which I had not experienced before. To be in control with the aid of only a whistle, for ninety minutes or so, over a situation that could at any moment descend into a brawl and yet did not even once, made me look at myself in an entirely new light. I began to believe I had what it takes to be a mediator or a trouble-shooter. Besides, I also learned that if you are in authority, however temporary it might be, the exercise of power came naturally to you, for others looked up to you as a leader.

In the June of 1954, I joined St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry as lecturer in English. The college is only five miles away from Kumbanad. Every morning, five days of the week, I would commute by bus. I would be ready and out at our gate by half past nine for the Kunnil Motors bus to pick me up. If for some reason I was not ready, the driver would pull up, sound his horn and wait for a signal from inside the house that I was on my way. And, if the bus happened to be crowded, as it often was, the driver would make room for me at the edge of his bench seat, on his right! Drivers of Kerala are quite cavalier in their attitude towards traffic rules. The drivers that plied our road were no different.

Of that lot, I remember one Kurup, whose constant stream of wisecracks at the expense of someone or the other made the passengers nearly fall about with helpless laughter. Once, I remember, on seeing a passer-by with an affliction of the skin, splotted with a mosaic of white and brown, he said with a straight face, 'Look at that man! Having sat the '*Saaipu Pareeksha*' (the exams to become a White man), he has only managed to pass two parts. He has yet to pass the third'. The reference was topical, and anyone who knew that college exams would require a pass in all the three parts (English, Second Language and the main Discipline) before obtaining certification would relish the oblique dig, especially since 'white' (read 'Caucasian') had an outlandish connotation in a 'dark' milieu such as ours. The 9.30 bus was always full of college students who could see the joke, never mind if it was rather racist.

The eighteen months I spent at St. Thomas College was all too brief to put down roots professionally or to leave a wide circle of my students behind me. Yet, the few I managed to teach still fondly recall my contact with them whenever I run into them, all of them senior citizens now, and hark back to the old days with nostalgia. I would like to believe

that, in some small way, I had contributed to the all-round development of my students in the classroom as well as on the playing fields and on the stage. Much as I would have liked to continue to serve the college, the wages on offer was too little to make ends meet. I left for Africa.

Chapter Four >>