

Non-Fiction

Memories of Kerala

JAYA JAITLEY

The completely different way of life practiced in a matrilineal taravad of Kerala became the foundation of childhood memories that defined my identity. It was embodied in many things; mukkei, the gritty black tooth powder wrapped in small squares of newspaper, wedged between teeth, finely-stripped, split lengths of flexible cane used as tongue cleaners. They were laid out on the edge of the veranda with shining brass water containers for us to brush our teeth every morning. The elders and young ones lined up together to brush their teeth and clean their tongues with these home-made toiletries.

The tart flavour of kadugu mango pickle with crisp dosas and freshly set curd or white spongy idlis dipped in podi and melted ghee for breakfast, the delicious soft musli sucked out of the murungyakaya in the sambar, with chunky unpolished red rice, raw banana vegetable, and finally tomato rasam and small puffy papadams crumbled into slightly warm, slightly sweet curd at the end of the meal, mapped out my taste buds forever. The waxy feel of the two foot-long banana leaves on which we ate, the clang of the brass tumbler being put down on a stone parapet, the sweet smell of dark-green body oils and the rasping sound of gas lanterns being pumped to life at dusk to light up the long corridors flanked with huge teakwood pillars, deep-red floors and elaborately carved doorways over thresholds that were a foot-and-a-half wide, are those special markers of Malayali memory. Vengunad Palace in Kollengode, or the imposing Kollengode House on Museum Road, next to the zoo in Chembukavu in Thrissur became the worlds in which I gathered my memories of belonging rather than of transition.

On summer afternoons at Kollengode, as we children played, the elders slept. So did the older servants; out of sight, so that no one would conjure up work for them. Sleepy and lethargic after lunch, they would otherwise be called to press the legs of some of the fatter aunts and uncles who needed to be soothed to sleep. They would do so lackadaisically, often nodding off themselves until they were poked awake by an aunt's toes. At this quiet time, we would commandeer the younger servants to play with us. The boys would play badminton or cycle off somewhere with the young menservants, armed with catapults in search of squirrels or birds. They played in the rice fields and sometimes, unknown to the elders, took a bus to nearby Palghat to eat mutton or chicken curry at a 'Military Hotel' since the food in the household under Brahmin traditions was strictly vegetarian.

Shakuntala was our special playmate. She was a pert, pretty, fair-skinned maid, full of fun and stories and so brisk at her work that all the aunts called for her to oil their bodies and pour water on them in the bath house. We



artwork by amma

too would insist that she help with our baths, which for us was often the main event of the day. There were often elaborate two-hour affairs with time for swimming in the women's side of the water tank with just our knickers on - and tortu mundus wrapped around the upper halves of those who had begun to develop contours. It was a time to be rubbed down with the sweet-smelling neelibhringadi, garnet-red medicinal kuzhambus or pale yellow coconut oil, each with its own distinctive aroma. This was followed by a good scrub with kadalavay which we loved to mix into a paste ourselves. For those under ten, Shakuntala did the scrubbing. We hated it when it was done by the crabby elder maids who put oil in our eyes. Ugly dark green Hamam, melon-red Lifebuoy, or Mysore sandal soaps, only for the elders, were kept there in case any one wanted fashionable toiletries. We had to oil and wash our hair every day; otherwise it was not a proper kuli - the Malayalam word for bath that meant a hair-wash was included. The evening bath, which did not require a hair wash, was melgaruga, which translates into 'a wash of the body'. Malayalam is full of these subtle definitions. We were allowed to avoid a kuli only if we were sick. We considered each other filthy pigs unless we had a bath in the morning and a melgaruga in the evening every single day. When the priest came around to everyone after dusk with the oil lamp from

the family deity for the ritual obeisance, we all had to have finished our melgaruga and settle down to more contemplative play for the evening. Baths gave us plenty of time to chat and tell stories. Sometimes, wrapped in tortu mundus, we would practice dance steps or enact plays in the bath house in which the king and queen were given large-sized 'english' towels to wear as capes. Bathing was an almost complete past-time.

One dull summer afternoon, while the elders were napping, Shakuntala introduced us to the Ouija board. She told us that if we wrote out the alphabet with chalk in a circle on the floor, upturned a glass at the central point, put our fingertip on the glass very, very lightly, decided on a question for which we wanted an answer, closed our eyes tight and concentrated on a dead person, the spirit of that person would come to tell us the answer. We were enthralled. It was scary, mysterious, and fun. It also made us fight raucously, accusing each other of pushing the glass and cheating. That made it even better.

"Did Gopalan steal Venu Mama's pen?" we asked the spirit of Napoleon. There had been a big commotion in the morning about an uncle's lost pen.

"No," replied Napoleon through the Ouija board.

"Who did, then?" we wanted to know. "Ammalu Amma," the glass spelled out. "Will Ettamma allow us to stay up all night at Aaraat?"

"Yes," assured the Ouija board. "Where is June's achan going to be posted next?"

"Burma." Of course, we already knew that, and had only asked the Ouija board to check whether Napoleon really knew the correct answer. He seemed to understand Malayalam and no one else knew French except me.

For many afternoons we frowned, concentrated, shushed each other and asked the Ouija board many things. The favourite ones were about the love affairs of the servants or famous movie stars. Shakuntala would feed us the questions. She loved to tell us about who said what to whom in the

kitchen or bath house. She also told us how she and Gopalan, who, according to the Ouija board, was the one who had not, repeat, not, stolen Venu Mama's pen, were, well...going to get married. They had to save up some money first. That got us so excited that we ogled and giggled knowingly at Gopalan every time he walked past us on his way to the Uncles' quarters. He seemed not to notice us at all.

For almost two months we were totally engrossed in this delicious and mystical journey into the unknown, spirit world with Shakuntala as the driving force. Then suddenly things changed. Shakuntala began to make excuses to stay away from the game.

"Where are you going?"

"Why are you not playing with us?"

"Are you going to meet Gopalan on the sly?"

"Have you fixed the date of your wedding?"

"What is keeping you so busy?"

We interrogated her ceaselessly. Her answer was always a vague smile. She would promise to be back in a minute but not return. Sometimes her excuses did not ring true. Now we saw her only at bath time or cleaning utensils and mopping floors. She seemed to be looking downwards in all these chores and not at us. Her spare time was no longer ours. The fun and laughter seemed to have gone from her. Yet we noticed that she put more kohl around her eyes and a couple of extra gold bangles on her arms. Her blouses were getting too tight. The elder cousins speculated. Was her romance with Gopalan so 'hot' that she could not play Ouija with us any more? She's just too fat and getting lazy, we younger lot offered. But by then the game had captured us so greatly that we were lost among an eclectic set of ghosts like Subhash Chandra Bose, Queen Victoria, the mahout of the old family elephant, Kesavan, who had died two years ago, a distant uncle's first wife who had died at childbirth, and anyone else we could think of. The very idea of a glass that lurched a few inches this way or that was enough to make us believe we were in a special world of spirits who would be at our beck and call if we concentrated hard enough. The thrill was often all-permeating. In the evenings I would be scared to go alone up the main staircase to our sleeping quarters in case one of the spirits had decided to stay back and follow me.

One afternoon, during our Ouija session, a cousin went off to the toilet, taking a little-used route through the long outer corridor rather than the usual inside one. She returned, agog. She had just spotted Shakuntala slipping through the half open door, looking about to ensure that no one had seen her. We speculated on this for a bit but it did not hold our interest for long since we were busy coaxing the Ouija board to give us our exam results. As usual, the glass was moving in various directions and giving garbled replies that spelt nothing. When she was around the answers had come quickly and clearly, despite everyone swearing-on-

god that they were not moving the glass themselves.

A few weeks later we heard raised voices from the main verandah where the aunts usually gathered in the evenings to socialize and discuss public problems, family news and administrative matters relating to the retinue of servants. Today they sounded very angry. We crept up along the low parapet wall to see what was going on, but kept out of sight. To our amazement, the objects of our aunts' ire were Shakuntala, standing teary-eyed, and Gopalan, looking sullen as he usually did, and slightly defiant.

"Useless woman! No time for work? Only time to spread your legs?"

This was a common accusation hurled at the young maids from time to time, in which the older maids often joined in.

"I haven't done anything wrong. Gopalan and I are getting married." Shakuntala's voice quivered but she was trying hard to defend her dignity.

"So, Gopala, when do you intend to marry her?" asked aunt Radha.

"Why should I marry her? I do not know for sure that she is carrying my child." Gopalan became more distant and surly.

Shock among the aunts.

"Girl, what do you have to say to that?" asked aunt Thangam.

Quietly, Shakuntala replied, "Thamburati, this is his child. He is refusing to own it. It was he who told me to earn more money so that we could set up our home sooner. Ask more superior menfolk why they call me to their rooms in the afternoon," she spat out bitterly. Deathly silence among the aunts.

"Who will touch her?" asked Gopalan quietly, with a sneer, and no change in his sullen expression as he walked away.

Shakuntala was ordered to leave immediately. Gopalan stayed. The elders never discussed the subject in front of us.

There were only a few days of that holiday remaining before my mother and I set off for Burma to join my father and a new school.

"There was a letter from Kollengode today," my mother said some weeks later as we sat at the end of the veranda of the Indian Embassy residence in Rangoon. I was in the midst of doing my homework.

"Remember that poor and young maid Shakuntala? They say she hanged herself from a tree outside town."

The next summer holidays we gathered at Kollengode again. One afternoon, a cousin remembered the Ouija sessions. Someone thought we should call Shakuntala's spirit. After all, she taught us the game; surely she would return to play with us. But the glass refused to move and we soon lost interest. We were also a year older.

Jaya Jaitley is a social and political activist from an eminent family of writers and public spirited persons in Kerala. In addition to writing and publishing, she is the founder of Dilli Haat, a popular crafts marketplace in Delhi, and has served as the president of the Samata Party.

Encouraging Emerging Talents: Year 4

KHADEMUL ISLAM

First Proof: The Penguin Book of New Writing, Volume 4 began its life in 2005, with the expressed wish by the publisher, Penguin India, that it represented an attempt to "showcase emerging talent and writers who have enjoyed acclaim but not as wide a readership as they clearly deserve." In that inaugural volume Penguin took the decision not to publish or approach authors who had published more than two books, or those who had received exceptional notice with their debut works - the latter condition, for example, automatically ruled out an Arundhati Roy or Aravind Adiga. That particular opening book did indeed impress readers and reviewers with its exceptional collection of pieces and authors who tended to inhabit the lesser-lit spaces of Indian writing in English.

Penguin additionally had hoped that First Proof would go on to be an annual anthology. First Proof: The Penguin Book of New Writing, Volume 4, published in 2008, offers convincing proof that it has indeed established itself on its own merit. Though originally envisaged that the collection would consist of short fiction, essays, reportage, travel pieces, memoirs and selections from works-in-progress, the volumes have tended to be divided into straight fiction and nonfiction sections, where the longed-for diversity in the genres have yet to be fully attained. That said, the volume makes for exciting reading, as one moves pleasurably among writers and authors who perhaps form the second tier of Indian English writing, but whose zest and talent for venturing into areas and choosing topics that are not on the usual 'beat' is second to none. In this volume, the nonfiction section is especially appealing, as Indian English authors tackle this particular genre (with its current market cachet, of course, not hurting at all) and explore an Indian space, reality, and culture that seem unbundled and infinitely complex.

The collection is made up of a total of 12 nonfiction pieces, 11 short stories, and to my surprise, nine poems by 3 poets - surprise since the first volume had not contained any, and not having had the opportunity to go through the next two volumes in 2006 and 2007, I was unaware when the publishers had decided to include poetry by 'emerging talents.' That this series has been conceived and shaped differently from the usual run, however, was apparent when the first volume included a selection from Samath Banerjee's graphic novel. In volume 4, too, one nonfiction work, 'Tsampa on My Shoulder' by Vidura Jang Bahadur, an account of a trek in Tibet, is accompanied by some starkly beautiful, black-and-white photos. Among the short stories, 'The Train'

(Sunanda Krishnamurthy), 'Nina Awaits Mrs Kamath's Decision' (Salil Chaturvedi), 'The Room with the Lamps' (Prem Nath) and 'Thubten Returns' stand out. The poems contain translation of Viky Arya's Hindi work, and English ones by names I have yet to come across in other contexts: Avik Chanda and Yumlam Tana, the latter a member of the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, who writes in English. The nonfiction contingent is a strong one, and aside from Jaya Jaitley's piece reprinted above (whose cadences catch the wet, distracted passage of a privileged Kerala childhood), 'A Day in the Life of a Delhiwalla' (Mayank Austen Soofi), 'Back to Where I Never Belonged' (Kishalay Battacharjee), 'How I Accidentally Wrote an Indian Cult Novel in Swedish' (Zac O'Yeah), 'Journey to Dindigul' (A. Revathi), and the unintentionally hilarious 'Body-building in Kabul' (Sandeep Kumar) give ample notice where perhaps the next generation of Indian English authorial talent is going to focus on.

While the rest of the South Asian pack pantingly lag far, far behind, stuck with misfiring national education programs, and archaic debates about English versus the mother tongue.

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Footnotes*

Avik Chanda

It was mostly during the summer months, when arriving early before class we'd dart across from college, ducking under the sun that made the street glisten and shimmer like cathode heat,

into a dark building. Then up the stairs, past the first morning whiff at the coffee house, towards the bookshop. But before that, the room on the left where he sat, large spaces around him

stacked with books. A proof-reader, I thought. Or small-time editor; his white head bent over the text, adding a note here and there. Never looking up. Light settling like the thick dust on his shelves.

And today the heat returns to another summer, with nothing but these lines to stand in for ten years, his white memory, for our lost innocence. And all forgetting.

*From First Proof. Avik Chanda is a management consultant who writes both in English and Bengali. His first collection of poems, Footnotes, came out in 2008.



SAYEEDA JAIGIRDAR

"Whose woods these are I think I know. His house is in the village though; He will not see me stopping here To watch his woods fill up with snow"

My backyard has transformed overnight into a wintry wonderland. As I peer through my dining room French windows, rubbing my nose slightly along the frosted pane, misting it with my breath, I can see the woods beyond, the trees dusted with the silvery tinsel lights of frost. Here and there, I spot little footprints in the snow, a rabbit, perhaps or a little fox, venturing out for any kind nourishment that it may find. I miss my little friends, the garbage scavengers - the black-eyed raccoons with which I have sworn enmity during the warmer months but as the days begin to cool, and so do our differences.

Winter and snow enthrall me even without the promise of spring in the distance. It's a time of inner thoughts, a time of reflection and finally a time when words come alive on paper in a manner they do not in spring. I try to keep a full agenda in the winter with a good round of friends to entertain and warm homes to go to. I put my children in for skating, piano, swimming lessons and enlist myself for the mind and body healing that Yoga brings about. We have lots of hot chocolate and cuddle up with books to read to pass away the winter evenings. The children tackle books such as "The Tiger Came to Dinner" and the latest "Gears of War" game journals, while I ponder away with the Russian giants such as "The Brothers Karamazov" and "Anna Karenina". I see the snow, but I look beyond, through the eyes of others, through the written word, through music and through my little Russian paintings with St Basil's Cathedral and Russian pristine landscapes that hang on the wall.

I miss a small set of Russian miniature paintings that I had on my dining room wall a long time ago, but misplaced in the scuffle of changing countries, homes and lives. My mother gave this set to me when I

Death by Landscape



came to Canada, a lifetime away. The oil paintings were exquisite one portrayed a bare tree in the winter-its branches spiked with hard frost. The manner that the painting was drawn appeared to be a grim reminder by the Russian artist that winter was harsh and that one could die by exposure to the landscape in Russia. Or for that matter here in Canada. On the other hand, the other oil painting was that of a country cottage set in a spring setting with a profusion of vivid colours symbolizing life itself. "Place them side by side on the wall", my mother said to me. Paintings were a source of comfort to her, I knew not why then.

They were showing re-runs of Boris Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago* on TV on Christmas day and as I watched this movie with its freezing landscapes and the eternal struggle of human beings for the possession of another's mind and soul and the utter futility of it all, it occurred to me, by looking at the credits, that most of the movie had actually been filmed in Saskatchewan, Canada. The Russian and Canadian landscapes and temperatures are similar, and in that era it must have been easier to film here rather than in the Cold War climate of the U.S.S.R.

There sat my favourite protagonist, Dr. Zhivago, trying to write poetry, but only succeeding when the temperatures plunged and he was in a frosty wonderland, away from revolution and responsibility. He hopes for the promise of spring and it eventually returns to the Russian landscape but his time is spent on this earth.

Margaret Atwood, a leading Canadian novelist, feels that death in Canadian fiction is almost always a

negative part of the loser/victim syndrome and Nature-as-monster theme. The reality for Canadian writers and their protagonists is that they pit themselves against the harsh landscapes that they live in. A short story that she wrote, called "Death By Landscape" in which two young girls go camping and one girl simply vanishes into the landscape. The camp counselors think that the protagonist Lois is actually

partly responsible for her friend's disappearance and Lois grows up with a sense of guilt. As an adult, she surrounds her self with paintings of Canadian landscapes drawn by the famous Group of Seven* painters. Her paintings give her a sense of comfort as she tells herself, "Every one has to be somewhere, and this is where Lucy is. She is in this apartment in the holes that open inwards on the wall, not like windows but like doors. She is here. She is entirely alive". In Lois's mind, Lucy did not die-she is there lost somewhere in the landscape.

Though I have lost my Russian miniature oils, they still simmer in the mind's eye in the wintertime, on my wall. Who hides behind my landscapes, who plays hide-and-seek behind the birch trees that glisten in the sunlight? Is it my little brother? A lost friend? Whoever they are, they bring me fleeting joy as I turn from one painting to another and know not the difference between winter and spring.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep But I have promises to keep, And miles to go before I sleep And miles to go before I sleep.

*The Group of Seven was a group of Canadian landscape painters in the 1920's who were famous for their paintings of the Canadian landscape. This group of painters was influenced by European Impressionism of the late nineteenth century based in Paris.

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