

OUR FATHER

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There are multitudes of images of my father engraved on the walls of my mind. Most of them are related to my childhood and adolescent days. Let me recollect those sacred memories that I believe, would help portray his personality.

Like a Bunch of Yellow Ixora Flowers....

'Puthillath house' ('Puthillam' as was generally known) in Ponani had its front-age facing east. There were plantains as well as mango, jackfruit and coconut trees on the east side of the courtyard. Also preserved in the north-east corner of the compound was a Sarpa kavu (abode of sacred snakes) with a platform for Kumkumam plant (the place for the annual worship to propitiate the deity named Brahma Rakshas). The eastern boundary was adorned with golden shower trees and lean teakwood trees. Morning sun rays sneaked through the leaves of these trees to descend on the jasmine and rose plants in our garden, fondly nurtured by father.

It is against this backdrop that an image of my father has got engraved in my mind. He is standing with his left leg resting on the lower half wall of the veranda and is reciting the following lines, his eyes riveted on the yellow morning sun light that welled up in the courtyard, where the sand is still wet with the previous night's dew.

'Nascent dawn and beauty bloomed
Like a bunch of yellow Ixora flowers;
You stood before me, darling
Like a golden ray of bliss!'

(Poem "Manaswini" by great romantic poet Changampuzha)

Shoulder That Assured Comfort And Security....

When I dive deeper into the past, it is darkness all around me. I was four or five years old then and was lying in a room on the south side of the house, stricken with fever. I must have made some feeble sounds of despair; may be because I was thirsty or because I was scared. And then father was near me. He was giving me a glass of jeera water (water boiled with cumin Seeds) with sugar added. It was as if I had taken elixir; not only had the thirst, but even my fears left me. Holding on to the shoulder of comfort and security, I slowly entered the valley of sleep!

Memory Of A Pond Covered With Weeds....

It was long time after, that electric supply reached 'Puthillam'. It was my elder brother Harikumar, who brought cables, switches and other gadgets from Kolkata and arranged electrification of the house. Till then all of us, the children, used to study our school lessons sitting in the portico around a kerosene lamp placed in the middle of the table. A hurricane lamp with its wick turned down would be kept lit in the corridor during the night that spread a feeble light around. Those dark nights have a special quality in my mind.

'Oh dear, darkness is ebbing away,
Quiet dawn's twilight is sneaking up'
(Poem: Wedding Gift)

Above lines from father's poem is taking me to the vast and deep pond on the north-west corner of our compound. Covered with weeds and water lily pads and flowers, that pond always looked lazy to remove the blanket of darkness provided by the night. In my imagination, it was perhaps in this pond that the elder sister in the poem 'Wedding Gift' slowly yet decisively waded into and disappeared. She must have spent hours together lying there in the corridor looking at the turned down wick of the lamp on that fateful night, before....

Private Moments In The Light Of Hurricane Lamp.....

It used to be almost like a ritual for my father to go out for a walk in the night along with my mother, far into the court yard holding a hurricane lamp in his hand. Those outings may at times be to the pond or to collect the ripe mangoes that must have fallen during the stormy night; whatever be the ostensible reason, he did not break that routine. It was only during later years that I realized that it was a routine adopted by him to talk over with mother their disagreements or to resolve issues related to domestic affairs and fine tune the rhythm of life; while discreetly staying away from the probing eyes and ears of the children. Despite their best efforts to conceal such disputes from us, I could somehow sense the tension mounting up in the domestic atmosphere. On such days, when the atmosphere was really tense, father used to spend more time for his daily routine in the courtyard. And when they return, I could see peace on mother's face and happiness in her voice!

At times father enjoyed teasing mother a bit; sometimes even to the extent of annoying her. Father has mentioned about this in the prologue of his poem "Family Discord" that he used to enjoy putting the blame on mother for his own short comings! Nevertheless, such 'enjoyments' were flavoured with compassion.

Memory of two books

Many valuable books and selected copies of old periodicals like Mathrubhoomi, Harijan, Aruna etc. were kept in father's Almirah. It was our home library. The position of librarian was adorned by us children starting from my eldest brother Satheesh up to my youngest sister Usha; the last being my niece Anupama. Two books that I found in that almirah calls for special mention - One is the Malayalam translation of 'Abhigyana Sakunthalam' by revered poet Vallathol. That book was given to my mother as a wedding gift by the renowned literary critic Kuttikrishna Marar, who was held in high esteem by father. He had scribbled in the opening page of the book a few lines from the same book; Sage Kanwa's words of advice to Sakunthala as she prepared to take leave of him and the hermitage to live with king Dushyantha, her husband by 'gandharva wedding'.

The second one was a scientific book, "Birth Control." I think that father had intentionally kept that authentic book among all other books to provide us children with the necessary information about sex, a subject which was a taboo in normal family conversations.

The relationship between father and mother was not limited to sharing of responsibilities. That relationship in fact was full of love and passion. Despite their best efforts to conceal that love and passion from us, many a time it did sprout through the enigmatic smile of mother and the laughter of father. Father made it a

point to take mother along with him while attending public functions. When the group went to Chennai (Madras) to perform the drama "Koottukrishi" and when father went to Delhi to receive National Academy Award, mother accompanied him.

Those were the days, when a boy was not expected to participate in kitchen chores. But father never disapproved of us boys, helping mother in the kitchen.

When new poems were written, it was mother who would be the first to read it. Also, it was mother who used to recite to father the Malayalam translation of "Mahabharatham" by Kunhikuttan Thampuran till late in the night. I still recall those nights when mother in her sing song voice recited Mahabharatham and also the poems written by father.

Writing Of Documents Is What They Wanted.....

Father was the centre of solace for the multitudes of ordinary people in Ponani from whom he drew solace reciprocally. He never refrained from helping friends or accepting help from them. Since we did not have a radio at home during those days, we had to seek help from others to listen to father's recitals of his own poems over the 'All India Radio'. We could listen to father's poem recitals broadcast by the 'All India Radio' through the big speaker connected to the public radio at 'Krishna Panikker Library and Reading Room' or at times, at the house of the Congress leader Mr. 'Choyunni'. Once when we were listening to a poem through the radio at the reading room, my sister exclaimed, "Even the smell of the Beedi (local cigarette that father smokes) is spreading here"!

People who visited father included those who loved literature and those who had problems related to litigation only. Father had to take writing of documents seriously, with the same importance that he gave to writing poems.

Recollecting his document writing, I still remember his usage of ruler to draw straight lines and columns while preparing title deeds. Watching father deftly drawing the vertical lines of tables on the thick document paper using the ruler, I had the feeling that the ruler was exhorting me to be 'straight and perfect'!

We were witness to occasions in his life when he would have preferred to enter into a deep reverie in his 'work shop' responding to his creative cravings, but had to run around with his clients, forgetting his passion. At times it was right during the writing of a poem that someone would come and take him along. Such detours may be to a nearby place to witness the survey of a plot of land or to a house to resolve a family dispute. Many a time I have seen him coming back in the afternoon totally exhausted after the hard work and the travel on foot through paddy fields under the scorching sun. Quite often he had to divert his mind from creative writing due to his job-related contingencies.

Great People Who Are Atheists, Personal Gods....

It was my duty to recite prayers at dusk sitting in front of the sacred lamp and also to recite them to my younger siblings Diva, Asok and Usha for them to repeat after me. Rather bored with this routine, one day I pretended to be unaware of the sacred lamp at dusk being lit and continued with my play. Father, who was sitting in the courtyard discussing with friends must have noticed this. Immediately after the visitors left, he called me and said; "Nobody will insist that you recite the prayers. M.C. Joseph does not recite hymns. But he is a great man. You can also become like him. But that conviction and courage should come from within you." His advice had an impact on me. From that day onwards I started reciting prayers daily and without fail.

I remember vividly my travel along with father to Guruvayoor temple for the first time rice-feeding ceremony (Choroonu) of our younger sister Usha at the age of 6 months. Other than that, I do not have any memories that could connect father with temples. Yet, father was a believer. I think that a near visualisation of God, to him, could be in the form of the 'Great Provider of Food' described in his poem 'In Praise of the Ocean.' Whatever be the case, visiting temples in style wearing a silk dhoti was alien to him. It may be this cold approach that discouraged us children from making compulsory visits to the temples and making offerings to deities. At the same time, we the children used to visit the three temples in Ponani on a yearly basis - Thrikkavu Saraswathy temple during Navarathri festival, Kandakurumbakavu temple and Kandankulangara temple for pooram festivals. Lighting divine lamp in the house at dusk was done daily and performing the rituals at the abode of snakes and for Bramha rakshas* were done once in a year without fail. Ghosts and spirits were also worshipped at 'Puthillam'. Father was keen on performing rituals connected with the ghosts and spirits associated with the house. As a prelude to the rituals, the priest would draw columns and figures using rice powder, turmeric powder and coal powder. 'Guruthy', a blood coloured liquid prepared by mixing turmeric and lime powder in water would also be kept ready in a vessel. These rituals were mostly performed late at night and we used to witness them through sleepy eyes. The special magical lights from the flames of 'Pandams' (special torches made of cotton cloth wrapped around sticks like a ball and immersed in coconut oil) must have made an impression about those superhuman powers in our minds. Whether these were performed by father on his own volition or whether it was done to respect the sentiments and faith of our grandmother; I am still unsure of.

But what I understood for sure is that his psyche had harmonised the contradiction of rationalism and fantasy without difficulty.

Like Fire That Produces A Hundred Flames When Divided As Many Times.....

I was very happy on that day. On his return from Calicut, father had brought along with him my cousin Karunakaran (son of Uroob) who was very close to me. As soon as they reached home, father summoned our farm-hand 'Paraman' who was working somewhere in the courtyard and asked him to fell a few tender coconuts and bring them immediately. Father elaborated; "when the train reached Tirur station, Unni (Karunakaran) drank the sweet water from a tender coconut. By the time he was about to get the soft white kernel from inside, the train moved and he couldn't eat it. And he was very sad." Father wanted to resolve this issue as a priority! Many people, especially children had the opportunity of receiving this abundance of love from father. He made 'Puthillam' a lovable home to live in, where visitors were welcome. My uncle's sons had completed their high school education staying at Puthillam. Renowned painter Mrs. 'T.K. Padmini' had stayed in our house to undergo her initial courses in drawing and painting under Devassy master followed by artist Namboodiri. Even the frequent visitors to our house got special care and love from father - Krishna Warriar master (retired head master, A.V. High school), Raman master, Devassy master, Balabhaskaran (my cousin), N.P. Kumaran, Balachandran, John, Paul, George, and Gopala Menon, to mention just a few.

Father's innate quality of love for everyone, justified the idea in the following lines.

'Love... is it gold that depletes when shared, or
Fire that replicates a hundred times, when divided?'
(Poem: Subhadrarjunam by Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri)

Crime And Punishment.....

Father wanted children to maintain certain standards of ethics both at home and outside and this ethos seemed to have guided his norms of discipline for us at home.

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That was a fine morning - the New Year's Day - and I had a quarrel with my younger brother Divakaran. It was followed by a fistfight resembling the fight between Bali and Sugreev in the epic Ramayana! In between, I heard father calling me in his deep voice, "Madhu, come here". That was followed by interrogation. My elder brother Unnikrishnan was asked to fetch a stick. The crux of the judgement was this: Being the elder of the two, I had the moral responsibility to prevent an argument from deteriorating into the low level of a duel. Since I failed in that, I got five beatings in my palm. Diva got away with just three! While I was sitting, feeling ashamed being subject to the punishment, father called me again. This time it was to share his breakfast! Father never limited his 'administration of discipline' to punishment alone, but rounded it off with a sweetener! Punishment was intended for making us better human beings, but invariably coated with love.

Another instance also comes to my mind. All of us were having our night meals sitting in the dining room. We were sitting on the floor on wooden planks cut to size as per custom prevailing at that time. I had a feud with my elder brother Unnikrishnan earlier that day. Even though the issue was resolved, anger was fuming inside me. My brother had forgotten that incident and unaware of my ulterior motive, was lying on an arm chair in the veranda reading a weekly. After washing my hands from the well side I returned to the veranda and with vengeance I toppled the armchair along with my brother who was cosily resting in it. He was astonished and despite the pain that was inflicted asked with compassion, "What happened to you, Madhu!" My father who was strolling in the court yard must have heard the commotion and he called me. As usual, trial was held followed by Judgement. Essence of the judgement was this. I bore hatred towards my brother and allowed it to grow inside me and when an opportunity arose, I reacted. Bearing hatred is a wrong thing to do. Punishment was as usual. I think this time my elder brother Harikumar was employed to fetch the stick!

New Blankets.....

Before the house was renovated, we boys used to sleep in the attic. After allotting the north side of the attic to a spirit called "Kadungunni", we were sleeping on the south side! Our impression was that father never visited us when we were sleeping in the attic. Those were the rainy days and we were really miserable with the cold and the mosquito bites. One morning when we woke up after a rainy night, we couldn't believe our eyes! We were covered with new blankets. Looking at the financial situation prevailing at that time, I am sure that father must have really toiled to purchase those blankets.

Years later I learned about the sad plight of my father in his youth; that he could not provide a blanket to his mother when she needed it the most. The sigh of the shepherd, "my life is an eternal debt" in father's poem, "The shepherd of King Bimbisara" is his own experience.

Precious Daughters.....

Father had special affection towards his two daughters Girija and Usha. And I have reasons to believe so! Father once ruthlessly scolded me for entering into an argument with my elder sister. This could only be because of his special affection to daughters, as the 'punishment' did not match the 'crime'! He could not send Girija to any college, but took keen interest in arranging home tuition for her to get a diploma in Hindi language. And it was father who encouraged her to join A. V. High school as a Hindi teacher. Usha enjoyed utmost freedom with father. He was interested in playing chess with both Asok and Usha.

Narayanan Vaidyar And The Indian Chess.....

Whenever it was possible for him to come home early from office, father would bring along with him his friend Narayanan Vaidyar. Even though Vaidyar was adept in Ayurvedic medicines he was not a man with business acumen. He was the one who taught my mother Sanskrit language. He was also our family physician. On reaching home, Vaidyar would go straight to the courtyard to cut a full plantain leaf. And then he would cut all pieces of Kings, Queens, Knights, Bishops and the pawns for both sides from that single leaf stem. It was an amazing feat to watch Vaidyar making all the thirty two pieces from a single leaf stem without the need for any colour coding! Using a chalk, the chess board would be drawn on top of the half wall of the veranda. Then both of them would get engrossed in the play till evening. Later father had to stop this entertainment due to lack of time.

Son Who Had To Go Far Away.....

Father and mother had grieved very much over their son Harikumar who had to go far away to Kolkota in search of a job when he was still very young; in fact he was only sixteen when he reached Kolkota. Communication facilities during those days were very poor, mostly through letters which would take around ten days to reach and telegrams which were very costly. Making phone calls were practically impossible. The trauma that he felt on this child going far away in search of a job is well depicted in father's poem 'A Mother Sings.' Later his eldest son Sathish also joined Harikumar. Unnikrishnan also had to stay away from home; but that was for his education and later related to his job as a scientist. In his case, the consolation was that the anxiety was mixed with pride that his son is working as a scientist.

Only when my turn came, did I know of father's concern and anxiety of sending his sons to far off places. It was year 1971 when I started working in Delhi. I was aware that back home father was undergoing a lot of stress due to financial problems. Despite those problems, father used to write lots of long letters to me. He wrote about the delivery of our cow (we call her 'karambi' as she was all black), about Usha running after the calf, agricultural activities that were going on in the homestead, meetings related to Sahitya Pravarthaka cooperative society and his travels to attend meetings, health conditions of mother and grandmother - he wrote everything in detail. Also, his letters were full of concern towards me. Despite father not having a wrist watch, he insisted that I buy one for myself from my first salary. He had his reasons for asking me to do so - those who do not wear a watch are travelling backwards in time, he wrote! Now I regret that I did not have the presence of mind to offer the same advice to him or rather disobey and buy a watch for him first.

Dreams And Realities.....

Father maintained a cordial relationship with my maternal uncle. Father has written in his poem, "Though sun is considered father of all, we love our uncle moon more." My uncle respected poems and poets, but he was of serious nature and practical minded. I still recollect a conversation between them about dream and reality. Father was of the opinion that there is absolutely no difference between the memory of a feast that we relished the previous day and a dream to that effect. Uncle refuted. He said "How can it be? One out of this is actually experienced." I remember that, such conversations always ended with a loud and good-natured laughter from father. Father cherished talking to likeminded people for any length of time.

I used to listen to such conversations sitting in the corner of veranda, resting my back on the half wall. I was only eleven years old and not at the right age to understand many things; still it was a great experience to listen to those conversations between father and V.T. Bhattathiripad (social activist), Uroob (P.C. Kuttikrishnan - novelist), Vylloppilli (poet), Akkitham (poet), M. Govindan (poet and humanist) Kadavanad Kuttikrishnan (poet), N.N. Kakkad (poet), Cherukad (novelist and social activist), T. Gopala Kurup (activist), T.V. Soolapani Warriar (famous astrologer), P. Krishna Warriar (Head Master, A.V. High School), C. Choyunni (Congress Leader), C. Radha Krishnan (novelist) etc. to name a few and many other famous personalities from different walks of life.

Special mention is needed about the conversations between father and Uroob. Nobody could help but listen to their conversations as they were always informative and engrossing. In between such conversations Uroob would be standing up and acting a scene he would be explaining, walking around and laughing loudly. And father would be joining him in his laughter. Their loud laughter had the beauty of innocence and open mindedness. It is a scene etched in my mind - the fleeting movement in father's face as he settled in position with his tongue, the artificial teeth which got dislocated by the force of such loud laughter.

The Common Man.....

Father was a common man, one could say. His motto in life and what he preached and practised in life was to rise above the 'commonplace' by serving people. Selfishness doesn't find a place in such a life. His son Harikumar sent his first anthology of short stories named 'Cockroaches' to S.P.C.S for publication by them. Father was the chairman of the committee of the board that was considering the books for publication. Since some of the committee members wanted to give preference to another book, 'Cockroaches' was sidelined. If father had even discretely indicated that Harikumar was his son, that book would have been considered for publication. But father stuck to impartiality and after the meeting was over, he went to collect the manuscript of the book from S.P.C.S secretary Madhavan Nair for returning to Harikumar. Only then did the secretary know that Harikumar was his son; and as such did not oblige father in his resolve. S.P.C.S president, C.P. Sreedharan who happened to come to the secretary's room at that time persuaded father to leave the manuscript with them. And in the next meeting that book was considered for publication; and that was a great solace for father. Father had many such occasions in his life where he had to show sympathy to others and cruelty to self.

I remember an incident which pained me a lot to witness. Father had to attend an urgent meeting arranged by S.P.C.S at Kottayam. During those days, there were

no buses to Kottayam starting from Ponani. We had to wait for a KSRTC bus coming from Kozhikode via Ponani and father waited at the bus stand. When the bus arrived, the bus conductor shouted loudly "no one shall try to get in; there is absolutely no vacant seat." Since it was important to attend the meeting, father pleaded with the conductor to allow him to get in and said "I will stand all the way and travel. I need to reach Kottayam as it is very urgent" for which the conductor shouted sarcastically. "Good enough! He has agreed to travel standing. Did he expect me to vacate another passenger to allot him a seat?" However, he allowed father to travel in that bus. But later when I mentioned about this incident, father did not show any grudge towards that conductor. He must have considered this behaviour as one among the several misdemeanours coming from persons who wielded power, which had to be tolerated by the common man!

House Construction.....

As his children grew, it was a huge responsibility for father to find space in 'Puthillam' for all of them. Even with the help of his elder sons, it was a feat that lasted for seven to eight years. Because of the abiding love towards animals that all the three had - father, mother and grandmother - the cow shed was renovated first. Actually, it was not a renovation; a new cow shed was built. It was spacious and built of red laterite stones with a tiled roof; all designed by a senior carpenter. When the house where we were staying was to be renovated, father entrusted the work with the same senior carpenter. I recall an incident that reveals the compassion father had towards the people who were working for him. It was planned that the first floor would have ten windows with twin-shutters. The senior carpenter prepared ten frames and twenty shutters in good wood. The problem came to light later when it was time to fix the shutters in the window frames. Calculation had gone awry. Each shutter fell short in width by about half an inch. So there were twenty gaping slits! But father did not shout at the senior carpenter. The senior carpenter silently added half inch piece to each shutter and made good the gap. May be it was father's silence that the senior carpenter must have felt more as a punishment than a shouting.

I don't think that it was only compassion towards a fellow person that was behind his silence. When I ponder over that incident, I feel that it was the reflections of my father's nobility of mind which, while seeking perfection, was also acknowledging the existence of human imperfections. His poem "Purappani" (Building a House) is in fact the philosophical essence of such of his experiences during the renovation of our house.

Sixtieth Birthday Celebrations.....

During those days, completing sixty years was considered a mile stone in one's life and was a cause for celebration. Father never used to celebrate his birth days. But his friends and admirers wanted this landmark of sixty years (Shashtiabdapoorthy) to be marked by an elaborate function. The celebration committee was formed with famous personalities like Uroob, Akkitham, V.T. Bhattathiripad, M.T. Vasudevan Niar, Koladi Govindan Kutty Menon, Raman Master etc. as members. These celebrations revealed the respect and love Edasseri enjoyed not only from the literary world, but also from the ordinary people of Ponani. The celebration was planned as a three day programme. Father had his own reservations against celebrating his birthday with such pomp and glory, but finally had to yield to the loving compulsion of his friends and well wishers. With

the accompaniment of traditional lamp and drum beat, father and mother were brought to the stage arranged at A. V. High School, in a procession that proceeded through areas like Thrikkavu and other important places in Ponani. It was followed by literary celebrations witnessed never before by the people of Kerala at the sixtieth birthday of a poet. Many leading men of letters from Kerala like G. Sankara Kurup, Vylloppilli, P. Kunjhiraman Nair, Mundasseri etc. participated. It was during this celebration that the committee published his anthology of poems 'Selected Poems of Edasseri' and a book titled "Itha Our Kavi" (Here is a Poet!). The latter book was a compilation of articles written by people who were associated with father, both from the literary world as well as friends circle.

Once the celebration was over, father again became the old Govindan Nair and Govindettan of the people of Ponani. It so happened, that in a couple of week's time father had an attack of flu. I remember the cynical comment made by father's assistant Sankara Menon, "That day itself I knew that something like this will befall Govindettan. What a commotion! Drum beats and traditional lamps and what not!" That was typical of the ordinary folks of our place! Nevertheless, the celebration was a befitting acknowledgement for a poet, from the civic society of Kerala and a stamp of love by his friends.

**It is believed that Brahmins who had unnatural death turns into Brahmarakshas, or Brahmin Ghosts. They had to be appeased by offerings once a year.*

Translated by Edasseri Trust Team