

## **The wonder years!**

by P. Ravi Shankar

The house was old but had personality! The small space in front paved with red rectangular tiles, the arched doorway with red bougainvilleas growing in riotous profusion, the well by the side and the small garage filled with sand. White jasmine bushes wafted their heady scent into the night air filling the house with an intoxicating fragrance. The drawing room and the kitchen, the nerve centers of the house adjoined each other. My father used to always say that this arrangement ensured that the ladies of the house could keep an eye on the main entrance from the kitchen. The drawing room had wooden windows with colored glass panes. Dark blue, green, and violet panes tinted the entering light in rich colors. The roof had wooden rafters and the floor was a dark, warm, rich red. There was a wooden showcase encasing a beautiful image of Lord Krishna which used to dominate the room. In the modern era the LCD television has pride of place in most drawing rooms and sadly the same has occurred in my father's ancestral home.

My grandmother was a remarkable woman. She was small, around five feet one; as she aged her spine gently curved dragging her closer to Mother Earth. She was always immaculately dressed in white and was perpetually busy with household matters. She was a matriculate under the old British system and used English precisely and succinctly. She had studied in Moyan Girls High School in Palakkad, Kerala during the 1920s and 30s and it was a strange quirk of fate that over sixty years later I appeared for the medical entrance exam successfully at the same school where my grandmother had studied.

Adjoining the drawing room was a store room, a place I used to dread as a child. Palakkad was still an agricultural town and we used to keep our pesticide spraying equipment there. The bright copper container, the long snaking tube and the wide spraying nozzle used to terrify me. I remember quickening my steps when passing nearby and turning my head to the other side trying my level best to avoid looking into the dark and dangerous room. Inside, the house was dark and cool like old houses everywhere. I had heard my grandmother describe her purchase of an old mud house in the 1940s and remodeling it to the present structure. In the center of the house was a room surrounded by verandas. The room had a large circular table and some shiny old trunks which my grandmother had bought back with her on her return from Malaysia. The room had a hinged trapdoor in the roof which opened to the dark attic.

I was both fascinated by and scared of the attic. It was dark, low and filled with soot. There was a musty odor. The attic was full of old 'things' which my grandmother had collected over the years. There was a rich and eclectic collection of books and odds and ends. The dark rooms had wooden almirahs with glass mirrors. These were painted a rich, chestnut brown. The doors in the house were thick and heavy requiring considerable expenditure of ATP to open and

close. The doors had wooden doorsteps and you had to high step these while going from one room to another. I often forget about this impediment to progress and used to crash heavily against the doorsteps.

The 'other side' of the house was my favorite with two large rooms and a dining room and kitchen. The two bedrooms had wooden windows which opened on a small coconut grove. The high wooden beds were richly carved. I have always been fascinated by coconut trees which I subconsciously associate with Kerala, God's own country. The green fronds gently swaying in the breeze, high above the ground is a sight for the Gods.

The dining room had three glass tiles in the roof through which sunlight slanted into the room. I have fond memories of hot afternoons when I used to enjoy fragrant, parboiled rice and rich, spicy fish curry seasoned with coconut. The meal was tasty but 'hot' and I used to get up from the dining table drenched in sweat! Palakkad is one of the hottest places in Kerala and the mercury used to rise above 40 degrees Celsius routinely during summer. The kitchen with its wood burning fire places was an endless source of fascination. The room was dimly lit with only two light bulbs and in those days Kerala used to suffer from chronic low voltage. The orange flickering flames used to project strange shadows on the grey walls.

Childhood was a time of wonder. We used to visit Kerala during the summer holidays. It was a long train journey and we used to pass through the burning heat of Andhra Pradesh en route. The Sun was red, the soil was red and barren and a hot wind used to blow turning the train compartment into a hot air oven! We used to reach Palakkad in the early hours of the morning and Kerala used to spread her welcoming mantle of green. My mother used to awaken me from a deep slumber and the magical land stretched on both sides as the train entered God's own country. The monsoon used to arrive with a bang in early June. In those days the rains used to be heavier than today. There was thunder and lightning. The rain began with the crack of dawn and continued throughout the day and often during the night. The rain was heavy and accompanied by strong gusts of wind. The water dripping down from the roof used to form small puddles on the ground. I enjoyed scampering among the puddles much to the annoyance of my parents.

It was the age of wonder. I remember watching a series called 'The wonder years' on television. As I grew up, slowly the wonder started to disappear. The area also began to modernize. New large houses were built, terraced roofs began to replace tiles and the National Highway 47 was constructed passing right behind our house. The author Peter Matthiessen writes in his book 'The snow leopard' that as we grow up we begin to lose the sense of wonder with which we used to view the world when we were young. The child is one with the world around him and the sense of a separate 'I' has not yet formed. As we grow we retreat into defensive walls and crannies away from the grand stream of life. It is ironic that as we begin to take greater control of our life we lose our sense of wonder. We begin to resent this loss either consciously or subconsciously which is richly expressed in our art and culture. Writers, poets and painters have long grappled with it.

I am aware that my sense of wonder, of being one with the universe may never return. The sense of grief and loss is palpable. As an adult there are only brief and infrequent episodes when I can unite back with the universal Soul. These episodes are to be cherished and treasured!

Dr P Ravi Shankar was born in Kerala and spend his childhood and teens in the megapolis of Mumbai, India. He was educated in medicine at Kerala, and Chandigarh and in medical education at Coimbatore in South India. He has always been fascinated by nature and mountains and after his post graduation journeyed to the lakeside city of Pokhara, Nepal in the foothills of the Annapurna Himalayas where he taught at the Manipal College of Medical Sciences. He started a voluntary medical humanities (MH) module at the institution. Later he shifted to the historic city of Lalitpur in the southern part of the Kathmandu valley where he conducted a MH module, Sparshanam for all undergraduate first year medical students at KIST Medical College. In addition to MH, small group learning and medical education Dr Shankar is keenly interested in promoting rational use of medicines and has been closely associated with the Discipline of Social and Administrative Pharmacy at the Universiti Sains Malaysia at Penang, Malaysia where he is a honorary lecturer. Dr Shankar journeyed to the Caribbean enamored by his friends' description of pristine white sands, azure blue seas and warm sunshine. At present he is at the Xavier University School of Medicine in Aruba, Kingdom of the Netherlands where he is a Professor of Pharmacology and Chair of the Curriculum Committee. He has been facilitating a MH module for first semester medical students at the institution since February 2013. The module is conducted in small groups and uses case scenarios, paintings, role-plays and activities to explore different aspects of MH and has been well received by students. Email: [ravi.dr.shankar@gmail.com](mailto:ravi.dr.shankar@gmail.com)