



**AYYA**

**M.S.C. Ramaiah Nadar  
(1901 - 1988)**

**R. Devadoss Pandian  
2019**

To  
My loving siblings  
Raja Annan, Varadan, Papa, Mohan  
and  
Chinnasamy Annatchi and Jeya  
Who are no longer with us

Also  
in Memory of  
Thangathai Akka, Thamayandhi Akka,  
Thangapandian Annatchi, and Padmavathi Akka

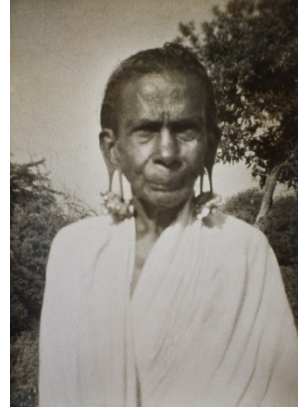
I always admired Ayya, a man of few words, strong will and immense intellect, a great listener, and a man who always was well ahead of his time. Ayya was born in 1901 and passed away in 1988. I began writing his story as a way of celebrating his life. In that process, I also made an effort to narrate what was life like in the region around Mettupatti in the 1900s and the role he played in shaping the socio-economic and political aspects of the region during the pre- and post-independent years.

This is not a biography of Ayya. It is a narrative of Ayya from my perspective—my perspective only—so it will be limited in scope and may not give a full picture of Ayya’s life. Also, as I write about Ayya, I am referring to things that happened many, many years ago, a very distant memory, so there may be some discrepancies in dates and events.

At the prime time of his life, Ayya and I became very close, enjoying each other’s company. He began to share everything with me and I became his confidant. We dreamed together on a multitude of family matters. As I started writing about Ayya, I quickly realized that it was hard—almost impossible—to write about Ayya without interspersing it with my own story and perspectives, as our lives have been intertwined in many ways for years. So, this essay has essentially become the story of two men.

## A GLIMPSE OF EARLY YEARS

Ayya grew up in Mettupatti, a small village near Peraiyur in Mudukulathur Taluk, with barely 50 families. He lost his father, Chinnasamy Nadar, at an early age. He was raised by his maternal uncle, a very shrewd man who was instrumental in Ayya's upbringing. Ayya, the eldest, had two sisters and one brother. Ayya's mother, Guruammal—a smart and a dignified woman—hailed from Sithavanaikanpatti near Vilathikulam, about 70 miles south west of Mettupatti. We called her Ayyamma. She lived with Ayya all throughout her life until she passed away in 1962.



**Figure 1 Ayyamma**

We don't have a good record of Ayya's childhood days.<sup>1</sup> What we know is that as a young man, he grew up at a time when India was struggling for independence. Ayya was 14 years old when Gandhi arrived in India from South Africa in 1915. Soon, Ayya was drawn to the Independence Movement and the Gandhian philosophy of non-cooperation and non-violence. In the 1920s, he became very involved and active in the Indian National Congress (the Congress party) at the regional level.

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<sup>1</sup> During my 2018 visit to Madurai, thanks to my siblings, I was given access to Ayya's diaries. Ayya wrote in his diary every day. The earliest diary available was 1939 and some years were missing. Though he generally wrote very briefly—a sentence or two—the diaries provided some important information pertaining to the early years of his life. The diaries were later buried at Ayya's burial ground.



**Figure 2 Thangathai**

He married Thangatchi Ammal (picture not available) from Semapudur in the Kovilpatti area in his 20s. They had two daughters: Thangathai and Thamayandhi. A few years into his marriage Thangatchi Ammal passed away. He decided to marry again to provide the two little girls with nurture and care and to have his own life. He married Lakshmi Ammal from Kadaladi ca 1931.

Young, energetic, rich and in the prime of his life, he undertook a tour of India along with his friends in 1932 and, as part of the tour, he went to Bombay to see Gandhi. My guess is he wanted to get a feel for the nation—beyond the Madras Presidency—that was fighting for its freedom from the British Monarchy. Among his friends who toured India was V.M.S. Velchamy (V.M.S.V.) Nadar from Peraiyur, with whom he continued his friendship until V.M.S.V. passed away in 1981. In 1934, Gandhi visited Madurai and Ayya was there to see him.



**Figure 3 Lakshmi Ammal**



**Figure 4 Padmavathi**

Tragedy struck again and Lakshmi Ammal passed away ca 1935, leaving behind her two children: Thangapandian and Padmavathi. Now Ayya was left alone with four young children (ages approximate): Thangathai (10 years old), Thamayandhi (8), Thangapandian (3) and Padmavathi (1). Still young—only 35 years old—Ayya married Saraswathi Ammal from Illupaiyur in 1936, his third marriage. Amma was 17 years old then and she arrived in Mettupatti as “Chithi” for three girls and one boy.

We don’t have the details of Thangathai’s marriage. What we know is that in August 1939, she gave birth to a boy—Ayya’s first grandson. Within a span of two weeks, both Thangathai and her son passed away. Ayya was devastated by the loss of his first daughter and his first grandson.

The first legislative elections in British India for the Madras Presidency were held in 1937 and Congress won big. Kamaraj, an ardent follower of Gandhi, was a rising politician from Virudunagar. When Gandhi undertook the Salt March in protest of unfair Salt Acts in 1930, Kamaraj participated in the Salt Sathyagraha in Vedaranyam and was jailed for two years. He contested the Madras Presidency election in 1937



**Figure 5 Thamayandhi Akka with Athan**



**Figure 6 Ayya and Amma**

and was elected unopposed. Rajaji, an elder statesman and confidant of Gandhi, became the Chief Minister. T. Prakasam, a great politician and a freedom fighter, became a minister in his cabinet. In September 1939, there was a meeting in Peraiyur welcoming Minister Prakasam, P.S.Kumarasamy Raja of Rajapalyam, and others. The meeting ended, Ayya wrote in his diary, with Thamayandhi singing

*Desiya Keetham*. It is a fascinating story that Thamayandhi Akka sang *Desiya Keetham* at a minister's meeting in Peraiyur. That says a lot about Ayya's activism and influence in regional party politics. Apparently, music had a place in the family. It is worth noting that Ayya had a "His Master's Voice" gramophone and a number of movie LP records. In 1942, a few months before I was born, Thamayandhi Akka was married to Natarajan from Semapudur area. Chinnasamy Annatchi and Raja Annan were 5 and 2 years old.

It would not have been easy to own a gun during the British Raj but Ayya owned one. I believe it was in the mid-1930s that Ayya got his gun license by making a strong case for his own security and the protection of his property. Ayya wrote



**Figure 7 The All India Tour-Ayya third from the right and V.M.S.V. first from the left, all wearing Gandhi Caps (1932)**

in his diary that he was so happy to walk into the Collector's office to get his gun license and later buy a gun.



**Figure 8 Ayya and 4-year old Thangapandian. Picture taken near "Madam" (1936)**

In my childhood days, one thing that was imprinted on my mind was Ayya's ardent habit of reading the daily newspaper. I do not know at what age he started fixating on reading newspapers but his favourite daily newspaper was *Dinamani*, which started its publication in 1934. The daily paper, I understood, arrived at Peraiyur by bus from Mudukulathur and sometimes by post so it took a few days to reach Ayya. With no

electricity and no radio or television, Ayya was obsessed with his newspaper. It was his companion all his life, exposing him to world affairs and Indian politics as well as science and the humanities. His diaries, where he recorded many significant national and world events (e.g., his recording in his diary on June 22, 1941, that Germany invaded Russia), attest to his broad interest in global affairs.

Gandhi had visited Madurai a few times and it was during his September, 1921, visit when he made his decision to shed his formal dress and begin wearing a loincloth, to identify himself with the common man. Gandhi made yet another visit to Madurai in 1946. This time, Ayya took both Thangapandian (RTP) and Chinnaasamy (RCP) Annatchis with him to see Gandhi in Madurai. He was deeply impressed and



tremendously happy to witness a massive crowd of about 5,00,000 people in the Racecourse to see Gandhi but he was disappointed that he could not see Gandhi at a close range. The next day, Ayya went to his friend V.M.S.V. Nadar—he had a shop in Madurai—and was pleased that he had a close-up *dharshan* of Gandhi. As early as in the 1920s, Gandhi had appealed to the Indian masses to boycott British goods, especially foreign clothes, and to promote khadi—handspun and hand woven cloth. Following his appeal, Ayya switched to clothes made of pure white Khadi—I don't know precisely when—and unwaveringly adhered to wearing them until his death.

In the early 1940s, Ayya had a joint business—a general shop—with Subbiah Mama, Ayya's brother-in-law, in Peraiyur. Ayya slowly lost interest in the business model and he eventually withdrew from it. In 1944, Ayya explored the possibility of establishing a small business in Kovilpatti—a general merchant store—and finally he did so in 1946. Ayya was stationed in Kovilpatti, where he rented a house and hired a cook. He came to Mettupatti periodically, bringing fresh peanut candies packed in a palm leaf box. It smelt so good. When RTP Annatchi did not succeed in his studies, Ayya put him in the business to assist him. Staying with Ayya, RCP Annatchi went to school and finished his S.S.L.C. in Kovilpatti. Around this time, Ayya also contemplated the idea of building a house in Peraiyur and moving there. Eventually, he dropped the idea in part because he felt that many in Mettupatti looked up to him and hoped for his leadership in the region. I think it was an important, consequential decision he made in his life.

## METTUPATTI

In Ayya's childhood days, there was no school in Mettupatti, so he went to a public school in Sengotaipatti, a neighbouring village, for his primary school education. However, Ayya's formal education ended at the third grade, although we don't know why. I remember Ayya telling me that they did not



**Figure 9 Renovated T.E.L.C. School**

have slates to write on, so instead they spread out sand and used their fingers to do all of the class work. In contrast, in my days, there was a primary school from Lower Kindergarten (LKG) to 5<sup>th</sup> grade in Mettupatti, called Tamilnadu Evangelical Lutheran Church

(TELC) school, run by the Lutheran Church. It was a two-room school with two teachers, Mr. Selvanayagam and his wife, Thangammal, who taught LKG to 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Calculating backwards, I could say that I joined TELC in LKG in June 1946 and the following year I moved to Upper Kindergarten (UKG). My memory is that I quickly finished all my UKG work and paid attention to what was taught in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade. Apparently, I mastered the 1<sup>st</sup> grade materials, so after I finished my UKG, I was placed directly in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. But there was a problem. I was only five and a half years old but to be in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade you have to be six years old. That was a simple problem for Ayya; he simply gave June as my birth month—

my actual month of birth was November—making me a six-year old boy. Other than our family, I don't think any other family in Mettupatti area had any idea of their children's birthdays. There were no requirements to register the birth of a child and there were no birthday celebrations. Whenever a TELC Inspector came to visit the school, I would be asked to sit with the first graders. Every day there was religious instruction. The teachers talked about Jesus Christ, the Ten Commandments, and told a lot of Bible stories. I remember distinctly that the two commandments, "thou shall not covet" and "thou shall not kill," did not make any sense to me at all as I wondered why anyone would covet or kill. Christmas was celebrated in a big way, festooned with coloured paper decorations and lights. We were asked to memorize Bible verses and recite them on the Christmas day. I have very pleasant memories of those days.

Another childhood memory of my Mettupatti school days is that every day around 3:30 p.m., the TELC school bell rang for recess. Raja Annan and I rushed home during recess to find Amma ready with hot tea. I remember exactly where Amma sat every day: She sat



**Figure 10** A model villuvandi, thanks to Infomagic.com

near the east side pillar, leaning against it and facing west, rolling a tumbler of hot tea in her palms to cool it a bit. The tumbler would make contact with her ring and produced a tick, tick—tick, tick sound which was music to my ears. Tea time was a ritual every school day.

Amma was a soft and a very kind person. She was not born into a wealthy family, but she was extremely generous, especially with poor people. Ayya used to say that if a stranger asked for water, Amma would give them food. Amma, Ayya, Raja Annan and I (I don't remember whom else) went to Illupaiyur—Amma's native place—a few times during its Panguni Pongal celebration. As there was no bus service to Illupaiyur, we traveled by our own *villuvandi* (a covered bullock cart) driven by our servant; typically, the journey took almost the whole day. Ayya would carry his single barrel gun in the cart. For us, the covered bullock cart was the primary mode of transportation in places where there was no bus service. It was a luxury in those years and I don't think anyone else in the region had one. On our way to Illupaiyur, we would stop by Reddiapatti and have our homemade tamarind rice for lunch before proceeding to Illupaiyur. Amma's house was a modest one where Valathammal (grandmother), Valathayya (grandfather) and Mama (Amma's only brother) lived. Valathammal was unbelievably affectionate with her grandchildren. Words cannot explain how much she loved us and cared for us. Once on the way back, we also stopped by Valypookulum, where one of Ayya's sisters lived.

I remember Ayya telling me something interesting that he would take Amma to ASSM Somasundaram Chettiar Jewelry store in Madurai to buy jewelries. He wrote about this in his diary in 1941. Clearly Ayya was a regular and an important customer as the owner would make all the arrangements for their stay in Madurai, perhaps at his residence.

In the late 1940s, from what I remember as a little boy, buses in Mudukulathur-Peraiyur-Kamuthi route ran on coal fuel. There was a big cylindrical tank, carrying coal, at the rear end of a bus and the conductor of the bus cranked a handle for some time to produce “energy” for the bus to run. The conductor then cranked the engine for the driver to start the



**Figure 11 Bose with Gandhi**

bus. I did not know the science behind these activities but it was fun to watch them. Also, I vaguely remember travelling in a bus which was open on the sides; one could even see the floor.

In June 1951, it was time for Raja Annan to go to Peraiyur to begin his elementary school education starting at 6<sup>th</sup> grade, as TELC in Mettupatti only went up to 5<sup>th</sup> grade. While I could have stayed at TELC in Mettupatti to finish my 5<sup>th</sup> grade, Ayya decided that both of us would go to Peraiyur together, walking a little more than a mile each way every day. So, I joined 5<sup>th</sup> grade in Peraiyur, skipping Mettupatti school, which, I was told, disappointed the teachers as they were losing a bright student. A small tidbit. It was also in 1951 that Ayya decided to sign his name in English as M.S.C. Ramaiah and notified appropriate agencies about his decision.

With no road from Mettupatti to Peraiyur, and mostly paddy fields in between, Raja Annan and I walked to school together every day for three years, bare footed. I don't think any

student in those years wore sandals at any time. We walked on the *varrapu* (the ridge between two fields), zigzagging all the way to Peraiyur. During rainy seasons, our walk to the school was a big challenge, sometimes impossible, so we would be forced to walk on the bank of the reservoir (*kanmoi*) all the way to Peraiyur. I remember counting the scorpions we encountered on the way; it was not scary, just part of our life. There were several other students walking with us to school. We took lunch with us but often Amma would send hot lunch through our servant. Some days we ate lunch with our Mettupatti friends at the Peraiyur Nandavanam, a well-maintained, beautiful resting place. Other days, we went to the house of our Chithappa – Ayya’s brother – and had lunch along with our cousin Hitler who was my classmate. Later his name was changed to Rajagopalan. Here is a little context for the name Hitler, purely from my perspective. Subash Chandra Bose, a great patriot and a freedom fighter, broke ranks with Gandhi and left the Congress Party in 1938, having little faith in the non-violent movement to oust the British. Fascinated by strong leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini, he formed his own army: The Indian National Army. He had met with Mussolini and had gone to Germany to meet with Hitler to seek his support to fight the British. Bose supported Germany and Japan in World War II. He was known as Netaji throughout India, an honorific title meaning a respected leader, ironically given by soldiers of Indian origin and Indian officials in Germany. Apparently, in those days, naming someone as Hitler, Stalin, or Mussolini was not uncommon; it simply reflected the society’s desire for muscular policy and strong leadership.

Ayya was not a religious person, but he was not an atheist either. As children, we did not grow up in a Hindu environment and were not exposed to any of the rituals associated with Hindu festivals. *Panguni Pongal*, a yearly Hindu festival celebrated during the Tamil month of Panguni, was a big deal during my childhood days but I know Amma never did anything special. Ayya never offered poojas to gods—no prayers, no offerings. I remember Ayya telling me that it is the benevolent God who should give him something, not the other way around. There was one interesting incident, in particular, that spoke a lot about Ayya and his approach to religion. The Mettupatti TELC school headmaster had invited Ayya to present some awards to students and make some brief remarks. Remember they were kindergarten to 5<sup>th</sup> grade students. The week following the award ceremony, the students had their final examinations. I was in Mettupatti at that time on my term-break. Ayya and I talked about the invitation and he got some tips from me on what to say on that occasion. After thanking Ayya for his gracious presence, the headmaster, in his remarks, asked his students to pray as they were preparing for the final examinations. It was Ayya's turn and he was doing well with his prepared tips, but all of a sudden, he completely got off the track and told the students to go home and study because prayer wouldn't do anything unless they studied.

On social issues, Ayya was attracted to EVR, called Periyar (a respected elder), who founded the Self-Respect Movement with the aim of eradicating untouchability and the caste system. For EVR, there was no God, no religion, and no Brahmin. Invoking Periyar's message, W.P.A. Soundarapandian Nadar, "the uncrowned king of the Nadar

community,” urged Nadars to follow Periyar’s ideologies: no sacred thread, no Brahmin priests, only Self-Respect marriage ceremonies. Deeply drawn to the Self-Respect movement, Ayya did not have Brahmin priests at RTP Annatchi’s marriage in 1954 and the subsequent marriages of all my siblings, a bold move at that time.

I learnt that when I was a baby, some Christian pastors visited our house—why they chose to visit Ayya and what their purpose was, we don’t know—and suggested to Ayya that I be given the name, Devadoss—servant of God. Ayya readily agreed. I know that Ayya had great respect for Christianity. He had told me that he had read almost the whole Bible. What is the context? Who gave him a copy of the Book? Ayya had written in his diary that when he was in Kovilpatti in the late ‘40s doing business, he had gone to his friend’s house a couple of times to listen to Mr. Chellaiah, a lay pastor and evangelist from Sattur, who spoke on Christian faith. A year later, Ayya himself invited the pastor and some of Ayya’s friends to his place for a Christian prayer meeting. A fascinating revelation! I remember Ayya telling me that he donated a housing plot, east of our house where we lived in Mettupatti, to build a church but it did not materialize. We don’t know why. I also vividly remember one incident that illustrates Ayya’s regard for Christians. There was a dispute among a section of the Nadar community and they requested Ayya to resolve it. There were many witnesses, including a Christian boy, who were willing to testify. Ayya ruled on the case, relying a lot on the Christian boy’s testimony as, in Ayya’s words, Christians do not lie. By the way, Ayya and everyone in the neighbourhood called me Deva, and Amma was the only one who called me Devadoss.



I don't remember RCP Annatchi in his younger days that well as he did not grow up with us. He was in Kovilpatti. What I remember of him is that he was a voracious reader. He read the newspapers thoroughly—every word in it. He would pick up any bits of printed paper and read. We all wanted to read while eating our melas but Ayya only allowed Annatchi to do so. A good story teller, Annatchi had narrated a story to me which he had read from an English novel. I still remember the story. One day, we were playing in *Kottahai*, a very rare event, and he told me that if I went to the States, they would truncate my name Devadoss and call me Dev. So true! I went to the States and all my colleagues in the USA called me Dev.

Raja Annan and I grew up together as did Jeya and Varadan. I remember the birth of Papa and Mohan. We were all born in our house in Mettupatti. There was no medical facility of any kind in the whole region, neither private nor public. Infant and maternal mortality rates were high in our area, as they were, in fact, in all villages in the state. There were no doctors so any ailment had to take its own course.

I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade when Amma became ill. She was taken to the Madurai Vadamalayan hospital, undoubtedly the best hospital in south Tamilnadu. Apparently, the treatment failed. I do not trust my memory fully but what I remember is that Amma was brought to Peraiyur by car from Madurai. She was frail, feeble and weak. She had no hair. She was taken straight to Chellammal (Ayya's sister) Athai's place but after some conversation—Amma did not even alight from the car—Ayya took her to Hitler Chithi's house.

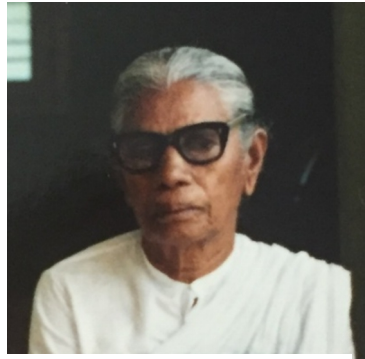
The next thing I remember is Amma in her death bed in Mettupatti. I remember vividly what was it like on the day she died—November 5, 1952. I suspect that Amma died of uterine cancer. People from all over the region had gathered to pay respect to Amma, sitting quietly in the street outside our home. RTP Annatchi was deeply grief-stricken. He could not control himself when Amma's body was lifted for the burial ground. Amma's body was taken to *Sumathu* for burial. I believe that it was a Hindu practice that at the time of burial, the eldest son would shave his head. So, everyone expected that RCP Annatchi, the first born, would go through the important religious ritual but Ayya said no. Although all knew that Ayya was not for religious rituals, they were taken aback by his decision as they assumed that given the significance of this occasion, he would abide by the custom. Ayya's position was that RCP was in high school and he did not want RCP to go through this ordeal. Mr. Rathinam, a contemporary of Ayya and a close confidant and friend, argued politely but rather strongly that RCP must go through this important exercise. Ayya got annoyed and told Mr. Rathinam (we called him Annatchi) that if he felt so strongly then he should shave his head instead. That was the end of the conversation.

Amma was buried quietly, without any ceremony. Later I remember Ayya writing in his daily diary a single sentence: *I lost my Saraswathi*. Days after Amma was buried, distant relatives who couldn't be there on the day of burial started dropping by to express their grief and condolences. In one instance, three or four women—I did not know who they were and where they were from—came to Mettupatti. When they were around the TELC school, they started wailing, their

voice increasing as they approached our house. It was not an unusual practice, but a kind of ritual. In fact, mourning families rather expected these kinds of rituals when distant relatives visited, but not Ayya. Shouting that Saraswathi was gone many days ago, Ayya angrily chided them and asked them to stop the nonsense.

When Amma was alive, I missed Ayya whenever he went to Kovilpatti on business trips. With Amma passing away, I was hoping that Ayya would spend more time in Mettupatti than in Kovilpatti. That is what happened: Ayya stopped going to Kovilpatti, leaving the day-to-day business affair in the hands of RTP Annatchi.

Ayya was 51 years old and Amma had left him with seven children: Mohan (6 months old), Papa (2 years), Varadan (5), Jeya (7), myself (10), Raja (12), and RCP (15). I could not imagine Ayya's predicament. He told me later that there were offers made for him to marry again for the fourth time. He decided against another marriage, fearing that a new wife would bring forth more children that would only perpetuate the problem. He had written about this in his diary, specifically the pressure he got from parents offering their daughters for marriage. He was very distressed



**Figure 12 Valathammal**

about how the society treated men and women differently. "Had I died leaving Saraswathi a widow," he wrote, "the society would not have allowed her to remarry." He asked then why men have so many rights and privileges that are

squarely denied for women. Here is Ayya, born in 1901, educated up to third grade, talking about women's rights in 1953, especially about remarriage for women. At some point, he told me that had he known about birth control, he would have had only two or three children with Amma.

Meanwhile, Ayyamma was perhaps approaching 70. I had never seen her in the kitchen; she was always in the fields managing the workers. I have lots of good memories of Ayyamma but the one that I remember fondly was my reading of the epic *Ramayana* to her. She would borrow from her neighbor—a contemporary—a copy of *Ramayana*, a heavy, thick book, and ask me to read the story as a poem, not as a prose. She enjoyed those moments very much. Padmavathi Akka was young and unmarried. When Amma's health was failing, Papammal, a poor widow with no children, who I think was in her late 50s, used to help Amma with household chores. After Amma passed away, Ayya employed her to do all the household work, including cooking.<sup>2</sup> She would come in the morning, do all the work, assist Padmavathi Akka in taking care of the little ones, and go home in the evening. We called her honorifically Valathammal (grandmother). Ayya felt that Valathammal—he called her Pappu—could be a long-term solution for the family's situation but he had difficulty in dealing with her. Sometimes, upset about something very silly, she wouldn't show up for work. Ayya would send me to make peace because I was the only one who treated her as part of our family, not as a maid. Padmavathi Akka left

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<sup>2</sup> Cooking was done in primitive way. In all the houses in the region, including ours, there was a mud stove and women used dried agricultural products, sticks, cow dung cakes and firewood for fuel. A typical kitchen looked like a dungeon filled with smoke although our kitchen had some natural lighting and aeration.

Mettupatti after she was married to Natarajan of Kadaladi in 1955. Slowly integrating herself completely with our family, Valathammal stayed permanently in our home. This arrangement brought some level of stability to Ayya's otherwise chaotic life.

## **BOLD, WISE, PROGRESSIVE**

Up to early 1950s, as a *Mirasudhar* (landlord), Ayya was relatively rich and led a comfortable life. He held lands all over the region. The *Kottahai*, a gated tract of land, enclosed by walls on all side, was always bustling with a flurry of activities. We had a bullock cart, a covered bullock cart, a plough, a pair of bulls for ploughing and drawing water (*kamalai*) from the *Nandavanam* well for irrigation, goats, chickens, two or three cows for milk, and a buffalo whose milk we used for yogurt. Within the *Kottahai*, there was a living quarter which housed our servant, who worked all through the year. The major crops cultivated were rice, cotton, peanuts, chillies, maize, millet, ragi, pea varieties, vegetables, and lentil (*thuvvari*). Every year Ayya employed hundreds of workers,<sup>3</sup> for the entire operation, from tilling the ground to harvesting the crops. He would occasionally use his single barrel gun for hunting, mostly cranes. Ayya even allowed me to try the gun a few times—for hunting.

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<sup>3</sup> It was a morning routine for Ayya to walk miles, going from one neighbouring village to another covering 4 or 5 villages, to hire workers—mostly Harijans. One of the reasons for Ayya's good health was, I thought, his daily walk, organic food, and unpolluted fresh air.



**Figure 13 Map of Tamilnadu (Scale: 1"=100 miles)**

The word *Nandavanam* brings back a lot of memories of my childhood days. It is a small piece of elevated land, a kind of mini family park, west of Mettupatti on the banks of *Oorini* where there used to be a water well, built of large stone pillars, bricks and concrete with raised parapet. It had a built-in structure for *kamalai*. Also, there was a *thila*, a mechanical device to draw water from the well using a bucket. There was cemented platform on the ground level, surrounding the well on all four sides, with two small tanks which would be filled for bath. Overall, it was a grand structure. Every morning, it was a routine for my brothers and I to walk with Ayya, like in a procession, to *Nandavanam* to take bath.



**Figure 14 Sumathu**

On another side of Nandavanam, there was a magnificent small building (there still is), a mausoleum – we called it Sumathu, a variant of Samadhi. It is architecturally very unique for a mausoleum and I have never seen such a structure anywhere I have travelled. Built late in 1800, it is more than 100 years old. Its history is lost as we do not

know who built it nor for whom it was built. Neither Ayyamma nor Ayya could shed light on it, so clearly it is not a Samadhi built for Ayyamma's husband or for her brother. Perhaps it is for Subbiah Nadar, Ayya's grandfather. Thangathai, first daughter of Ayya, was buried in 1939 in front of the Sumathu and later Amma in 1952 followed by Ayyamma in 1962. Since then, part of the area near the Sumathu has been used as a private burial ground for our family. Nandavanam had been an informal gathering place and a place of worship for all our family members for many, many years and will continue to be so for generation after generation. The establishment of The Ayya Ramaiah Memorial Trust in 2016 has simply affirmed it.



**Figure 15 The red label: Mettupatti--Peraiyur, one mile apart (scale: 1" = 20 miles)**

For Ayya, knowledge was power. He understood how the government both at the local and the state levels operated, including the police and courts. Ayya was also perhaps the only one in the region who took full advantage of the legal system to protect consumers. Knowing his rights, he would not hesitate to walk into any government office demanding to see the highest official, if his request for action was not addressed in a timely fashion.

Ayya's knowledge commanded respect. A wise man, he was the unquestioned leader of the region. People, both Nadars and Harijans, came to him for advice, counselling, and for dispute resolution. All cases—except perhaps murder—from stealing to sexual assault were brought to Ayya. When a case was brought to Ayya's attention, he would call for a village meeting consisting of Nadar elders to hear the case. They assembled in the "courtyard," the open space in the street in front of our house. Ayya would sit in his easy chair with a stool in front of him and everyone else sat on the floor. He



would listen to both parties. In simple cases, he would give the verdict right away. In serious cases, he formed a group of 3 or 5 elders, who had no conflict of interest with the parties, gave them instructions, and asked them to deliberate the case and report back to him. The assembled members waited until Ayya delivered the judgement. His decision was final and binding. If found guilty, the punishment always involved the defendant seeking forgiveness from the aggrieved and paying a fine, depending upon the seriousness of the case. To seek forgiveness, the guilty was asked to prostrate before the “village,” which meant before Ayya, sometimes up to 100 times. By the time the defendant went through about 20 prostrations, Ayya might say “enough.” It was a sober occasion when the defendant prostrated, seeking forgiveness. Certain cases, for example, sexual assaults, were investigated and decided in closed-door meetings. One extreme punishment meted out was to a person of the Nadar community; he was banished from Mettupatti for three years because he had falsely accused a woman of infidelity. For Ayya, it was a very serious crime.

Ayya’s obsession with the newspaper rubbed off on his children and we also became addicted to the practice of reading the newspaper daily at a very early age. The newspaper became a lens through which we saw the world and we were slowly introduced to world affairs as well as Indian and Tamilnadu politics. Speaking of politics, my first introduction to political activity came around 1952—I was 10 years old—when the first general elections were held throughout free India. My memory is that different political parties were assigned different colours. The polling booths had coloured boxes for each candidate and the parties

campaigned for their respective colours. With no differentiation in the ballots, people cast their ballots in the coloured boxes of their choices. In the next general election in 1957—I was in high school in 10<sup>th</sup> grade—I think colours were replaced by symbols; for example, the Congress party was given yoked oxen and the Forward Bloc Party, commonly known as The Thevar Party, got the Lion symbol. I became a volunteer for the Congress party—my first experience with politics—biking to different villages to cajole people to vote. Caste was a dominant factor in the election, so everyone knew that the Forward Bloc, the party of the Thevar community, would win big in the Mudukulathur constituency. On the day of the election, midway through, there were strong rumours swirling that the Congress party candidate's ballot box was full and that the election board was bringing in new boxes. Suspecting that it could not be true, I asked Ayya what was going on. Ayya laughed. He said that these rumours were intentionally spread by the Congress party workers so as to encourage the depressed Congress voting bloc to go to the polling booths. That was my first exposure to electoral politics.

Congress lost big and the Forward Bloc candidate won handily. I noticed one thing that bothered me. The number of invalid votes was huge, greater than the margin of victory for the Forward Bloc candidate. The electorate, mostly uneducated villagers, did not know how to cast their ballots, resulting in a massive number of invalid votes. I thought that the Election Board failed in its responsibility of educating the general public about the voting process. I believed that the election outcome might have been different had the votes cast expressed the voters' true intentions. I wanted to raise the

issue with some of the top brass in the Congress Party. I talked to Ayya. He suggested that I write to Rajaji, which took me by surprise. Rajaji, a huge national figure and a great statesman with a brilliant mind, belonged to the circle of Gandhi and Nehru. He was the last Governor General of India, the only Indian to hold that office. Until recently he was the Chief Minister of Madras State. I was not sure he would



**Figure 16 J. P. Narayan**

even read my letter. But Ayya spoke admiringly about Rajaji's many positive traits, one among them was that he promptly responded to every communication he received from any citizen. Encouraged by that, I wrote to Rajaji about my concern. He wrote me back advising me that I should talk to the Congress party lawyers. However, that was too much for me so I did not proceed.

On a side note, among many national leaders, I had read with a lot of interest about J.P. Narayan, a Gandhian, a freedom fighter and a follower of Acharya Vinoba Bhave,<sup>4</sup> one of Gandhi's spiritual followers. I believe I was in high school when I learnt that J.P. Narayan was coming to Mudukulathur and would be staying in the Mudukulathur "Rest House." I wanted to visit with him and Ayya readily said yes. I biked to

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<sup>4</sup> Vinoba Bhave led a Boodan Movement, a movement in which wealthy land owners were asked to voluntarily gift lands to the landless poor. Influenced by this appeal, Ayya, a true Gandhian, gifted two acres of land to this movement.

Mudukulathur, about five miles from Mettupatti. I went to his place and he was alone. I introduced myself. He welcomed me with a smile and we had a brief chat. Beyond that I do not remember anything. But what I remember well now was his staunch opposition to the Emergency Rule imposed by former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (ca. 1975). He fought it tooth and nail.

The caste system was extremely prevalent in those years. Mettupatti was bifurcated along caste lines: Harijans, mostly Christians, were in the north and Nadars, all Hindus, were in the south. Harijans completely avoided coming to the Nadar side as they felt unwelcome. They were even forbidden to take their funeral processions via Nadar street. There was a village barber who worked only for Nadars. I didn't know whether he was unwilling to work for the Harijans or whether the Nadars did not permit him to cut hair for the Harijans; my guess is the latter. There was a cattle herder who would come in the morning, collect all the cows and the calves from the Nadar side, take them to green pastures for grazing and bring them back in the late afternoon. Both the barber and the cattle herder belonged to different castes which were, in the caste hierarchy, at the bottom rung. In the evening, both the barber and the cattle herder would go to each Nadar house asking for food—that was part of their compensation—and the housewives would give a small portion of whatever they had for supper. Imagine how the food, collected from different houses in one pot, would look and taste! Notwithstanding this social climate, Ayya had a unique relationship with Harijans and others in the region. While he did not openly fight against the caste system, he showed sympathy for the underprivileged and, for most part, he treated them with dignity.

In those days, Harijans were not allowed to enter into Nadar houses nor were they allowed to touch any utensils. If a Harijan was thirsty, he had to use his palms to form a bowl into which water was poured for him to drink. To the chagrin of Nadars, Ayya did not have any problem in allowing Harijans into our house. Our servant, Muniyandi, a Harijan, had full freedom to roam around our house. He would carry drinking water home—another big taboo—fetching it from either of the two wells, one for Nadars and the other for Harijans. Muniyandi worked in the kitchen, assisting Valathammal, especially in grinding flour for idli-dosai. Ayya did not care what others thought of him in his relationship with the Harijans. The Harijans were very loyal to him and they called him “Mudhalali” (Revered Leader), an honorific title bestowed only upon him. While a rough, literal translation of the word “Mudhalali” is “ruler of wealth,” he was more than a ruler of wealth to them. He was their revered leader. For instance, in all of the villages in the Mudukulathur region, Harijans were expected to remove their sandals, take their towels off their shoulders and fold their umbrellas in the presence of the so-called higher caste people but not in Mettupatti. Harijans did not follow any of these practices in the presence of Nadars. However, being extremely respectable to Ayya, as a mark of respect, they did remove their sandals, take their towels from their shoulders, and fold their umbrellas in the presence of Ayya.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> By and large, things were very different in schools. For example, in Mettupatti I would be treated with undue respect by all Harijan boys but in schools we were equal, just classmates. Caste was not a major factor in our day-to-day interactions in our classes or in the hostel.

There were no doctors or any medical facilities whatsoever in any of the villages including Peraiyur. I believe there were public health centers in Kamuthi and Mudukulathur but their conditions were primitive by any standards. With no trained midwives available, women would deliver babies in their own houses, assisted by other women in their neighbourhood. Infant mortality, maternal mortality, and newborn deaths were extremely high. I sometimes wonder how all of us—six brothers and one sister—survived. We were all born at our Mettupatti house where Amma was assisted by some women in the neighbourhood. Eventually, it cost the life of Amma as she died at the age of 33 after giving birth to seven children.

On a day-to-day life, when we suffered from common ailments such as fever, stomach pain, diarrhea etc., Ayya would seek the help of a local *nattuvaidhyar*, an old man who had practiced, I guess, herbal medicines for a long time. I had observed his routine: He would ask a few questions, check the pulse, feel the body for fever, and gently drum the belly with his fingers. He would then recommend some kind of house-made medicine consisting of extracts from things like, ginger, dried ginger, neem leaf, and other exotic herbs which I could never recognize. If the situation did not improve, Ayya would send word to his friend Mr. Natarajan, L.M.P. (Licentiate Medical Practitioner), who had his practice in Kamuthi, a small town 8 miles from Mettupatti. Compounder Natarajan, as he was popularly known, would bike or take a bus to Mettupatti to treat us. For more serious illnesses, one had to go to Madurai, not something that poor villagers could afford to.

There was also no electricity. We used kerosene-hurricane lamps at home. The sun would set around 6:30 p.m. every day and it would become very dark, leaving Mettupatti looking like a ghost village. At about 7:00 p.m., everyone would go to bed. At dawn, women would begin their daily routine by fetching water from wells. Often setting the alarm at 4:30 a.m., we woke up to study by the light of the kerosene lamp. Thievery was very common, especially during harvest seasons. During pitch-dark days, burglars from neighbouring villages—not Harijans—would stealthily enter into houses by making big holes in the walls—most houses were mud houses—and steal whatever they could find. I was told that the burglars would pray to the god *Karuppunasamy*, situated on the outskirts of Mettupatti, before entering the village.

Superstition and irrational beliefs were rampant in those years. To cite an example, as a young boy, I witnessed a terrible scene which is still etched in my memory. A cobra, beaten to death, was hung upside down, its tail tied to a branch of a tree. There was a man, apparently bitten by the cobra, lying down on the ground; he was alive. Gathered under the tree were a group of villagers praying to some snake god for the man's life. Shockingly there was no attempt to give him any medical care, even *nattuvoaidhyam*. I didn't know why they did not take him to the Mudukulathur government hospital. It would have taken an hour by bullock cart to reach Mudukulathur but at least there was a small chance of his survival. Instead, the villagers were focusing on the cobra, looking for some sign of the snake god's intervention.

It was gruesome to watch so I left the scene. What I found was that the villagers believed that if venom started dripping out of the cobra's mouth, then their god had answered their prayers and the man would come alive. If no venom oozed out, despite their prayers, they would sadly accept the fact that their god was not merciful and the man would die.

I knew at that time that it was an irrational belief. In later years I learnt that not all cobra bites were lethal; some of the bites were dry in the sense that no venom would be released. In the above scenario, if the bite was dry, then the unreleased venom, due to gravity, would drip-out of the upside-down hung cobra. Of course, in this case the man would be safe and it has nothing to do with a snake god. On the other hand, if the bite was not dry, then there wouldn't be much venom left-out to ooze and the man would die because it was a lethal bite.

There had been talk of electricity coming to the region for some time. But finally, in 1957, under a plan conceptualized by the state, Peraiyur, a bigger town, would get electricity. However, neither Mettupatti nor any of the neighbouring villages would, because, I assumed, it was not economically viable. This was one of the biggest challenges Ayya faced: He wanted electricity for Mettupatti. He got into action by touching base with politicians, leaders, and government officials. He was told that if five or more wanted electricity to pump water from wells for irrigation purposes, then the government would give a connection to Mettupatti. Ayya knew it was not a solution because there were no other persons in Mettupatti who had adequate lands to irrigate or the resources to buy pump sets. But the officials, who knew



Ayya had the resources and was ready to sign on, said they needed four more people just to express interest in having electricity for irrigation purposes, even if they did not have the needed resources at that time. They added that after the electrical connection was given to Mettupatti, the government would give the individuals a grace period to dig wells and fit them with pump sets. They cautioned that after some point, regardless of what the individuals had done, they might begin to receive notices from the government to pay bills for some miscellaneous expenses and for minimum electricity use. Should that happen, their advice was that the individuals should write to the government that their financial circumstances had changed and that they were not able to take advantage of the electricity for irrigation purposes. The government would understand and waive all of the fees permanently, thereby leaving the individuals free from responsibility. It sounded as though the government was deeply committed to setting up electrical connections even in small villages like Mettupatti at any cost. Ayya talked to all Nadars in Mettupatti and clearly explained the situation to them. Four Nadars came forward and agreed to sign on. Ayya bought a pump set and it was ready to roar, and Mettupatti got electricity.

What a day it was when the electricity was turned on ceremoniously! I was there to witness the historic day. But after several months, there was a hiccup. As expected, the four individuals got notices to pay some dues and the notification frightened them. They did not have the sophistication to understand the nuances of the arrangement. Despite Ayya's repeated assurances, they got paranoid and ran to Peraiyur Nadars complaining about the situation. The

Peraiyur Nadars arranged for a meeting of the so-called affected parties and asked Ayya to attend. I went with Ayya to Peraiyur to attend the meeting. The Peraiyur Nadar leadership understood the issue completely and asked the “affected” parties to be patient. Ayya was proved to be right and the rest is history.

Later that year, following the Mudukulathur Assembly by-election held to fill the seat vacated by Muthuramalinga Thevar, there was widespread, caste-based violence all over the villages in Mudukulathur area, primarily between Harijans and Thevars. Scores of people died. The District Collector called for a peace conference in Mudukulathur, the Taluk Headquarters, which was attended by Muthuramalinga Thevar and Immanuel Sekar, representing the Thevar and Harijan communities, respectively. Ayya’s friend, V.M.S. Velchamy Nadar of Peraiyur,<sup>6</sup> also attended the meeting. It did not produce any viable result. The next day, Immanuel Sekar was murdered in Paramakudi by a group of Thevars, triggering an uncontrollable cycle of violence between the two castes. One thing was clear. In the pre-independence period, the British government mostly stayed out of caste-related conflicts but in the post-independence period, the Tamilnadu government began forcefully addressing all conflicts, especially caste-driven conflicts. Encouraged by the moral support from the government for the downtrodden, the Harijans started asserting their rights and fought against discrimination and suppression by the so-called upper caste people. Ayya supported them in their struggle. Every day, we

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<sup>6</sup> Velchamy Nadar was a close friend of Ayya. Whenever he visited his home in Peraiyur-I understood he spent most of his time in Madurai-Ayya would visit with him. Ayya would take me with him when I was in Mettupatti.

heard horrible stories of killing. Terrible rumours spread like wild fires, begetting violence that had a domino effect throughout the Mudukulathur taluk area. The whole region became tense. There were also reports of police atrocity. They were accused of being partial and subjective in dealing with conflicts which made things worse in some situations.

One day, the violence hit close to home. Around 5:00 in the evening, people were running helter-skelter, shouting that Sendakottai, a Harijan village, just a couple of furlongs south of Mettupatti, was about to be raided by Thevars from a neighbouring village. Everyone in Mettupatti ran up to the multistoried “stone house” for safety. From the terrace, we could see men from a neighbouring village marching toward Sendakottai with all kinds of weapons. They started torching the thatched houses. Fearing that they may next come to Mettupatti, we all ran to Peraiyur for safety. However, Ayyamma refused to come. Ayya tried to cajole her to walk with us to Peraiyur but she did not budge. I believe she was the only one who stayed put in Mettupatti. We went straight to Chellamal Athai’s place to stay. Ayya was entertaining the idea of sending us to Thamayandhi Akka’s house in Kovilpatti but wanted to assess the situation before his final decision. After a couple of days, he felt comfortable with the children staying at Peraiyur, dropping the idea of sending us to Kovilpatti. The day after the massacre, young boys ran to Sendakottai to see the aftermath of the bloodshed. Ayya, to my surprise, did not object to me joining them. It was a horrible sight—4 dead bodies, 3 men and 1 woman. I don’t want to describe the conditions of the bodies. We found the bodies, face down, facing north, strewn between Mettupatti and Sendakottai, which obviously meant that they were

chased and murdered from behind. There was no Sendakottai village, as all the houses were burnt to ashes. We went further south and saw a number of dogs being slain. Apparently, the dogs had chased the invaders and they had fun in killing them. Despite the fact that the riot had occurred almost 15 hours ago, there was no sign of police yet. The conditions in those years were so primitive.

Ayya's biggest concern was how to prevent further escalation of violence in the region. What I remember was that the government, influenced by Ayya and other regional leaders, decided to station a posse of policemen in the violence-prone area. Ayya told authorities that strategically and logistically the best place for the police to be stationed was Mettupatti and he promised that he would do everything to provide them with the facilities they would need. A squad of about 20 policemen arrived at Mettupatti; they spoke Telugu, not Tamil. The government wisely had arranged for an out-of-state police force and, this squad, I believe, came from the neighbouring state of Andrapradesh. For local conditions and guidance, the Inspector of police constantly consulted with Ayya. I was at home as the schools were closed, and occasionally, I was asked to translate what the Inspector said in English to Ayya and vice versa.<sup>7</sup> It was a challenge for me. In those days, we first started learning English in 6<sup>th</sup> grade with the introduction of the alphabets. Tamil was the medium of instruction through High School. As a second language in the curriculum, there was less emphasis on learning English. Further it was taught poorly, especially in rural areas, in part because of a lack of good English teachers.

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<sup>7</sup> Educated only up to third grade, Ayya read newspapers voraciously and wrote fluently in Tamil. He was very good at numbers and arithmetic. He understood simple English conversations.

Proud and dignified, Ayya was a powerhouse. He was feared while at the same time well respected. During the pre-independence period, occasionally, white British officers on horseback used to visit Ayya—I don't know the purpose, it could have been about law and order or collecting taxes. He would be sitting majestically in his traditional easy chair with a stool in front of him. For me, the easy chair and the stool symbolized his wisdom and power. Typically, people, as a mark of respect, would stand up as the officers, especially white men, approached them. Ayya was too proud to stand up and greet them. He would simply offer them the stool.

The year was 1962. I witnessed an incident that has been transixed in my mind all these years. Minister Kakkan, a member in Chief Minister Kamaraj's cabinet, visited Mettupatti to campaign for the Congress party. He chose Mettupatti, of course, because Ayya could influence the population in the region. It was planned that Kakkan, himself a Harijan, would address the gathering in an open space on the Harijan side of Mettupatti. It posed a challenge as to where Kakkan would meet Ayya. After some negotiations, it was agreed that Kakkan would walk toward Ayya, and Ayya would get up from his easy chair and take a few steps to greet him. It was power politics on display.



**Figure 18 RTP Annatchi and  
Anni**

Going back to the 1954-1955 academic year, I was in my final year in the Peraiyur elementary school doing my E.S.L.C. (Elementary School Leaving Certificate). RTP Annatchi, who was running our business in Kovilpatti, was getting married. I remember something interesting. Contrary to the practices in those years, the bride, Pushpa Leelavathi from Vilathikulam Pudur, was not at all related to us in any way. Ayya intentionally made an unorthodox decision to go outside of his relative circle as he learnt somewhere that consanguineous marriages—that is marriages among blood relatives, even distant ones—are not genetically good. That was Ayya in 1954. With Annatchi getting married, Ayya had to make a decision as what to do, at least for a week, with the business in Kovilpatti—either close it for a week or put someone in charge. Ayya asked me to go to Kovilpatti—I was about 12 years old at that time—to be in charge of the business, primarily taking care of cash transactions. He had complete confidence in my ability and was not at all worried about me missing school for a few days.



**Figure 17 Picture taken in  
Kovilpatti**

On a lighter note, I had always wondered why, when Amma was alive, Ayya did not take me and Raja Annan to Kovilpatti. Ayya had told me in later years that he really wanted to take both of us to Kovilpatti but Amma objected to that idea as she feared that Raja Annan would fall behind in his studies. Interestingly, according to Ayya's diary, one year after Amma's death, he did take me to Kovilpatti. He writes that he and I watched the movie, *Anbu*, in the Popular Theater in Kovilpatti in 1953. While I do not remember watching the movie *Anbu* with Ayya, what I remember clearly is the kernel of the story—the struggle of a young widow in society. I remember a plot involving the widow that illustrated the virtue of the Tamil proverb: *kannaal kaanbathum poi, kaathaal ketpathum poi, theera visaripathe mei*. An annotated, rough translation is: "what you see could be false, what you hear could be false, only a rigorous inquiry would lead you to the truth." This episode struck a chord with me and has remained in my mind forever.

The decade of the 1950s had a lot of ups and downs. Through it all, for me, Ayya looked calm and stoic but it was clear from the diaries that that was not the case. Amma passed away in 1952. He missed her dearly and grieved the loss over a long period of time. His anguish over the loss was further compounded by the fact that Amma left him when the children were too young—Mohan was just 6 months old. Valathammal was a solution to some extent but soon she became a burden and a huge liability for Ayya. In the late '40s and early '50s, as much as I remember, our agricultural yield was good; our *Matchu veedu* would be filled with bags of rice and cotton. Ayya would ship bales of cotton and sacks of chillies to trusted merchants in Virudunagar who would sell

those products when the market was in favour of these commodities. But in the late '50s, the agriculture started slowly faltering and the cash flow became occasionally acute. The business in Kovilpatti also did not fare well so Ayya had to close it. Moreover, he was vice-president for the Congress party at the Taluk level and he could have easily moved up to the district level but things took an emotional toll on him and his interest in politics slowly faded away. As we would see later, he had high hopes for RCP Annatchi which did not materialize. Padmavathi Akka remaining unmarried well past the typical marriage age for a girl was also a source of great concern for Ayya. In addition, Mohan, Papa, and Varadan had an uncommon disease—episodes of fits—an acute convulsion followed by unconsciousness. Ayya consulted with many doctors but in vain. He became frustrated and these traumatic episodes lasted for many years. In a nutshell, it was a tough decade for Ayya.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> On a side note, Ayya suffered from severe headaches for many, many years—even in the '40s. He took the standard pills—Anacin, Aspro, a brand name for aspirin—almost every day. During the summer months, the headaches were excruciating and, to reduce the pain, he would apply *chenthatti*, a stinging nettle, at the place where the headache hurt most and tie the plant with a cloth band around his head. The plant was scarcely available, especially during summer.



## EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION



**Figure 19 With Hitler**

E.S.L.C. examinations, common for all students in the state, were centrally administered. All students took the examinations on the same day and at the same time throughout the state. We had to go to Mudukulathur to take

the examinations. There were 21 students in my E.S.L.C. class, 19

boys and two girls. Hitler, my cousin, was my classmate. The results would arrive in mail in the form of certificates and Headmasters would celebrate if their schools produced higher percentages of students passing the examinations. I was told that when my school result came in the mail, the Headmaster felt the package to see how thick it was—a thicker package meant more certificates. It was thick but there was only one certificate. I was the only student who passed the E.S.L.C. examinations that year. The package, apparently, was padded to protect a single certificate. Hearing the result, I went to Peraiyur to collect my certificate. Near my school, I saw Chithi with a pot on her hip, going to fetch drinking water in a well. She stopped me and put a black dot of ash on my face to fend off evil eyes. It was a very gracious gesture, given that her son Hitler—my cousin—had failed the examination.

I went to Board High School, Kamuthi, situated in Kottaimedu on the bank of Gundar river. High School was a three-year program, 9<sup>th</sup> form, 10<sup>th</sup> form and S.S.L.C. (Secondary School

Leaving Certificate). Ayya put me in the Poor Boys Hostel, along with Raja Annan. The hostel was a small, tiled, one-room building, adjacent to the high school. Meant for poor boys, it was subsidized by the government, and I think, the monthly boarding bill was around Rs. 12 a month. With their massive egos, area Nadars didn't send their sons to the Poor Boys Hostel, but not Ayya. Following his lead, some Mettupatti Nadars also chose to send their sons to the hostel.

There were about 15 students in the hostel and the facility was so small that we couldn't live there. Instead, we put our belongings, ate our meals, and used the high school building for study and sleep. Breakfast was always *pazhaya choru* (cooked rice soaked in water overnight). Lunch and dinner were standard meals with rice and some *kozhumbu*. Everything was rationed. I did not like the meals so I always gave a portion of mine to someone else. Dinner was usually



**Figure 20 Board High School, Kamuthi—2017, same building even after 60 years**

served around 5:30 p.m. so that the cook, a senior man, could go back to his home, crossing the Gundar river, before dark. In retrospect, my three-year high school period, 1955-58, was one of the best in my entire

student life. I was young and small. With Raja Annan on my side, I was very comfortable in the midst of the big guys. The Mettupatti hostel boys had lots of fun. Kamuthi did not have a permanent movie theater so Touring Talkies would set up temporary thatched tents and run movies for six months before moving on to another place. They had three ticket

levels: the floor, the bench and the chair. The only one we could afford was the floor ticket, which cost 3 and a quarter anna (sixteen annas were equal to one rupee). When there were no Touring Talkies in Kamuthi, we went to Abiramam, a small village about six miles from our hostel, to watch movies. Of course, we walked both ways. Typically, we started around 8:00 p.m. for the 10 o'clock show and returned to our place by 3:00 a.m. Sometimes on a weekend, we would make a flash decision to go Mettupatti, about 8 miles from our place, again by walking.

It was 1956, my second year at High School. A tragedy that I distinctly remember was the Ariyalur train accident in which more than 140 people died and many more were injured. There were heavy rains for a few days and the Ariyalur river had apparently crested and the railway tracks on the bridge were mangled. The train from Madras Egmore, approaching Trichy, plunged into the river. The vividness with which I remember the tragedy is, in part, due to the fact that my mathematics teacher, Villumaran, was one of the victims. The whole school mourned his death. I remember him as a stylish, young fellow and a dynamic teacher. Another reason why I remember the tragedy is that Lal Bahadur Shastri, who was the Central Minister for Railway, resigned his position, taking moral and constitutional responsibility for the accident. It was big national news. Influenced by Ayya, I had developed deep interest in government and politics. For me, Shastri's resignation was a monumental decision and I just admired him for it.

I think it was during 1957 October-November monsoon season that Kamuthi experienced incessant heavy rains for

three continuous days. Raja Annan and I were in our final year, doing S.S.L.C. The whole area was flooded and normal life came to a standstill. The Poor Boys Hostel building was wiped out without a trace, leaving the hostel boys homeless. The school was closed. The Kamuthi Gundar bridge collapsed. Kamuthi was disconnected from the Peraiyur-Mudukulathur route so there was no bus service to Peraiyur. After the rain stopped, the Mettupatti gang attempted to go to Mettupatti by walking but couldn't cross a fierce creek so we retreated. The Poor Boys Hostel building was never built again and the hostel was permanently closed.

After the flood receded, the school reopened. Ayya arranged for a place for us to stay and a restaurant to eat at in downtown Kamuthi on a monthly rate. Crossing the Gundar river, we walked to the school every day until we finished our final year of High School. I passed the S.S.L.C. examination, securing just 403 marks out of 600, but came first in the school. Overall, in retrospect, assessing our educational experience in Kamuthi High School, it is fair to say that we received very poor education. The biggest problem was that we often had no teachers to teach certain subjects. For example, in my 10<sup>th</sup> form I remember that there was no English teacher and the school asked the science teacher—I vaguely remember him as a chemistry major, a brand-new young fellow who had failed his B.Sc. final examination—to teach English. There were no laboratories for any of the science subjects and the list goes on and on. Realizing the poor quality of education in Kamuthi High School, Ayya entertained the idea of sending me to one of the High Schools in Madurai but dropped it as RTP Annatchi could not accommodate me in his house as they lived in a very small space. But, when all is said and done, I

am grateful that at least we had a school in Kamuthi providing access to high school education for many village boys and girls.

I am going to digress here. In 1957, the government of India announced that it was decimalizing its currency, moving from one rupee = 16 annas = 64 paise = 192 pies to a simple form: one rupee = 100 paise. The government introduced new coins and gave plenty of time for the transition. However, in rural areas where people were mostly illiterate, the transition was very painful. I remember that the Communist Party opposed the move saying that the trauma people would go through was not worth the change. Annas were the most commonly used coins. One could buy lots of things for one anna. For four annas—one fourth of a rupee—one could buy two idlies, one dosai, and a cup of coffee or tea.<sup>9</sup> For uneducated people, that is, for most of the people, the conversion formula that one anna equaled 6 new paise (actually 6.25) was a challenge. After a few months of distress and hardship, life returned to normal. People, especially villagers, who suffered the most, rose to the occasion with their patience and resilience.

RCP Annatchi did his two years of Intermediate study at American College, one of the most prestigious colleges in the Madras state, founded by Christian Missionaries in 1881. In those years, it was two years of Intermediate study followed by two years of B.A. or B.Sc. I remember that Annatchi did not do well in his second year at the College and he wanted to

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<sup>9</sup> This reminds me of one of Ayya's routines. Ayya had a habit of briskly walking to Peraiyur every afternoon. Whenever I was in Mettupatti during school holidays, I would go along with him to Peraiyur. He would straight go to Subbiah Mama's shop and sit there for about an hour relaxing. He would order a cup of strong tea from one of the tea shops for one anna.

discontinue his studies. Ayya was deeply distressed and he knew Annatchi could do it. I think it was 1955. I was doing my E.S.L.C. Putting Annatchi in his lap, gently patting his back, Ayya tried to cajole him to continue his education but Annatchi, an tears, said he couldn't. Ayya was devastated. He had high hopes for Annatchi, the first born, but it all came crashing down. Ayya worried that it could be a harbinger of bad things to come for the family. Annatchi discontinued his studies, went for a secondary teacher education certificate, and became a teacher at Kamuthi Nadar Elementary School.

Raja did not do well in his final year and he left High School without completing his S.S.L.C. Ayya put him in an elementary school teaching certificate program but Raja left the school in the middle, as apparently teaching was not to his liking. There was no Amma to provide moral support to Raja and to understand what he really wanted to do in his life. Raja became a free spirit and literally disappeared from our life for almost a decade. Ayya became dispirited. I could not imagine Ayya's pain and predicament. I often wondered how he managed to live through these sad chapters.

After I completed my S.S.L.C., Ayya put me in Virudunagar Hindu Nadars' Senthikumara Nadar (VHNSN) College in Virudunagar for my Pre-University Class (PUC).



**Figure 21 Flanked both sides by my mathematics professors; the rest are Annatchis**

When I joined it in 1958, it was a very new college, just 11 years old, with a few buildings for classrooms and hostels. Named after the philanthropist Senthikumara Nadar, the College was founded in 1947 by Virudunagar Hindu Nadars, great visionaries with an unbelievable zeal for education. For me, the transition from a rural high school to an urban college where the medium of instruction shifted instantly from Tamil to English was a big one, but I quickly adapted to the new environment. Sometime during the academic year, the College ran an oratorical contest in Tamil for PUC students. I put my name in, stepped into the big auditorium with a huge crowd and delivered my speech. I do not remember the topic. I won the second prize. I enjoyed mathematics and physics, getting distinctions in tests. I consistently got A grades in chemistry. World History was not my favourite subject; I got only a B or B plus on all of the tests. In fact, in the first quarterly examination, I got 55% in World History and interestingly it was the top score in my class. After the year-end government examinations were over, I expected to pass PUC in first class with distinctions in mathematics and physics, an A in chemistry and a B or a B Plus in world history. I wouldn't have been surprised if I stood first in my PUC class.

The results came where I was marked "F" in World History. To this day, I don't know why. Now I had to retake not only World History but also other subjects in the third group: mathematics, physics, and chemistry. Ayya and I discussed some options. Finally, I joined a Tutorial College in Madurai and stayed at RTP Annatchi's house. Annatchi had three sons: Ravindran, Kannan, and Jayaseelan, a toddler. I stayed there for about three months until I retook all the examinations. Now I had several months to while away before joining a

college for my B.Sc. degree. At Ayya's suggestion, I went to Kovilpatti and joined Thamayandhi Akka's lorry service. They had a fleet of lorries, serving several cities from Madurai to Kollam in Kerala. In Kovilpatti, I stayed at the lorry office and ate at a restaurant. I was mostly doing clerical work but occasionally was in charge of cash. One day Athan—Akka's husband—gave me a new assignment: "inspecting" all the major offices between Madurai and Kollam. I spent several days in each office: Virudunagar, Sankarankoil, Tenkasi, Sengottai, and Kollam. I would travel from one place to another by lorry. One or two drivers even allowed me to drive the lorry. During my long stay at Kovilpatti, I had been to Akka's house only once or twice, that too at her request. During one of these visits, Akka talked to me at length, trying to convince me to discontinue my studies and join the lorry service permanently. I just listened and did not say anything to her.

I wanted to join American College for my B.Sc. degree programme and Ayya was fine with that idea. I applied for a physics major. Instead of an admission letter, I got a note from the American College principal's office asking me to meet with the principal, Mr. Savarirayan. On the appointment day, I was waiting for my turn to see the principal when I noticed another student also waiting to see the principal. Precisely at the time of appointment, the clerk ushered both of us into the principal's office. Seated majestically at his chair, Mr. Savarirayan, after some small talk, explained the situation. He told us that both of us had applied for physics but there was only one seat available in physics, but he quickly added that there was one seat in mathematics too. He asked whether one of us was volunteering to take mathematics as major. Hearing



no response, he wondered whether we should make a decision by tossing a coin but he himself dismissed the idea immediately. Then he started perusing our grade sheets. He seemed to have found a solution, as he looked at me and said, "Pandian, you got distinction in both physics and mathematics, and he got distinction in physics but only an 'A' in mathematics. It is clear that you could do well equally in both subjects whereas he is not as good as you are in mathematics so I am putting you in mathematics and him in physics." A fascinating logic! It did not disappoint me as I liked both subjects. He also assigned me a seat in Washburn Hall. With that arrangement, I started a remarkable, 3-year academic journey at American College, a journey that had a transformative effect on my life.

It was 1960 when I joined the American College. I believe Mohan was still in TELC school in Mettupatti and that Papa had finished her 5<sup>th</sup> grade and was ready to go to Peraiyur for her 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Ayya was determined that Papa should not only complete her high school education but also continue beyond. Please keep in mind that this was at a time when all of the girls in the region, including the Nadar community, stopped going to school when they reached their age of puberty and were married within a few months after that. Ayya did not want Papa to go to Peraiyur for her middle school education; he wanted her to go to a place which had middle school and high school as well as a girls' hostel. The nearest one was Manamadurai (see map, Fig. 8), about 35 miles from Mettupatti. It had a girls' hostel, called the Kasturiba hostel, named after Gandhi's wife. My memory is that the hostel was primarily for Harijan girls. Ayya joined Papa—she was 10 years old—in a school in Manamadurai and put her in

Kasturiba hostel. That was a very progressive and perhaps a revolutionary decision Ayya made at that time.

As far as Varadan, he completed his elementary school in Peraiyur and was getting ready for High School. The natural choice was, of course, the Kamuthi Board High School but there was a problem. There was no Poor Boys Hostel.

However, there was a hostel in Kamuthi called Rajaji Harijans Hostel. As the name suggests, it admitted only Harijan students. But Ayya knew better. After talking to some officials,



**Figure 22 Abandoned Rajaji Hostel–  
2017**

Ayya found that based on a certain percentage, two or three non-Harijan students could also be admitted into the hostel. Ayya made his case and Varadan was admitted into the Rajaji hostel. On the surface, Ayya's decision to put Papa in the Kasturiba hostel and Varadan in the Rajaji Harijan hostel might seem like a simple story but it says so much about Ayya and his bold, unorthodox and consequential decisions of that era. I believe Jeya continued his high school education in Peraiyur. It is in this broader context that I began my academic life at the American College.

The American College campus looked beautiful. The institution took a lot of pride in keeping the campus pristine. It was nicely maintained, the trees kept well and the bushes carefully trimmed.



**Figure 23 Washburn Hall**

I remember RCP

Annatchi once telling me that he was awestruck by the way the bushes were manicured and that one bush looked like an elephant. As I imagined, the campus was stunningly elegant. I was thrilled to become a Washburnite. The Washburn Hall building looked rugged but majestic and beautiful. The red bricks made the building look bold and proud. I lived there for three years until I graduated and loved every minute of my stay. B. Gunaraj, professor of mathematics, affectionately called B.G., was the warden of Washburn Hall. In those years, “ragging” – an event in which seniors harmlessly teased first-year students – was prevalent in hostels. I was told that as part of the ragging tradition, the seniors would start with ragging the warden and they did. They asked warden B.G. to be dunked ceremoniously in a small water tank inside the Hall at the south-east quadrangle. He obliged. That signaled the beginning of the ritual of seniors ragging the first-year students. What a sight it was to see a well-respected senior professor and warden dunked into a pool of water by students! He was a good sport. It was a lovely event, emblematic of the character of Washburn Hall: bold, respectful, disciplined, freedom- and fun-loving.

We came from many parts of the state (a small but a significant student population came from Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka) with different socio-economic backgrounds, belonging to different castes, different religions, and different political ideologies yet we learnt to live harmoniously, tolerant of different views. The hostel mess was run on a dividing system, and it was managed by elected student representatives. Following the College guidelines, the warden monitored the menu closely to control the cost so the poor parents would be able to afford it. I vaguely remember that the mess bill was less than 30 rupees a month. The Hall built our characters. It was a multi-dimensional village where we lived as brothers and learned what the textbooks did not teach us in the classrooms. My academic journey in American College would not have been complete without my Washburn Hall life.

There was college union—a powerful student organization—consisting of elected student representatives. In my first term at the College, I ran for the Student Representative position that represented all first-year students at the College. It was a two-person contest. I lost big. The American College gave incredible freedom to students while adhering to strict code of conduct. The campus was vibrant and full of energy. Students intensely debated social, political, and on- and off-campus issues. On one or two occasions, students



**Figure 24** College Chapel

even struck work – refused to attend classes en masse – which resulted in the College being closed for an indefinite period and the hostels vacated.

Every morning before classes started, there was chapel service where all students were welcome to attend. Since the Church of South India (C.S.I.) did not have its own church building, it used the College chapel for Sunday worship services for its congregation. On Sunday mornings, I used to sit on the water fountain just across the chapel building listening to the music, the singing of hymns by men and women in chorus. The music was addictive. I have never been drawn to such a beautiful music.

During my second year the College, back at home, an incident occurred in which I had a big role to play. A proposal was floated, I believe, by Meenakshi Anni's family, for an alliance between RCP Annatchi and Meenakshi Anni, who were both teachers in the Kamuthi Nadar school. Initially



**Figure 25 Annatchi and Anni**

there was some enthusiasm for the idea but soon it got derailed, although I did not know why. Knowing my influence over Ayya, I got a briefing from Anni's side and being in the know of things, I talked to Ayya. After weighing different factors, Ayya allowed the proposal to be on track and Annatchi married Meenakshi Anni.

A new chapter began in my life as I entered my third year at the College. Jeyakar, a third-year chemistry student, who was a day-scholar (commuter student) during his first two years of study, became my roommate in Washburn Hall. His good friend, Edison, another day-scholar, would visit Jeyakar frequently. I had known both of them casually but now I ended up getting closer to them. Some of Edison's friends were my friends and they all talked very fondly of Edison's family, especially about his mother, a school teacher, and his elder sister, Hannah, who was a lecturer in Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow. At the beginning of the academic year, friends told me that Edison's mother had become ill and was admitted to Dr. Thangaraj's hospital. Dr. Thangaraj was Ayya's primary physician for many years so I had known him personally. I accompanied Edison to visit her in the hospital. As we approached the hospital, I saw a double-braided girl sitting at the entrance. Edison said that was his younger sister, Oli, doing her 10<sup>th</sup> form. It was around September in 1962.

During my American College days, Ayya and I had discussed about my future. Ayya had asked me whether I would like to take a job after finishing my B.Sc., particularly a position such as an Inspector of Police. For one, he liked the post as it carried so much power, and also, he was confident that he could get a post for me. I told Ayya that I would like to think about a job after pursuing higher education. So,

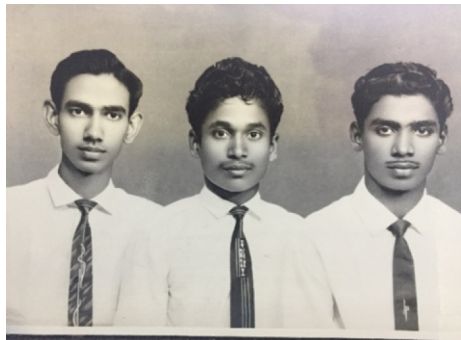


Figure 26 With Jeyakar left and Edison next

after finishing my B.Sc. programme at the American College – there was no M.Sc. in mathematics at the College – I applied and got admission into Madura College for my master’s degree in mathematics. While at the American College, at Ayya’s initiative, I also applied successfully for a Nadar Mahajana Sangam scholarship, which provided a decent amount to offset some expenses. The year I joined Madura College, the Central Government announced a new interest-free loan programme – to be repaid over a period of ten years – for students who had passed their B.A./B.Sc. degrees in first class, wishing to pursue a master’s degree programme. The loan would be waived if one taught in a college for 10 years. It was 900 rupees each year, for two years. I got the loan which was, of course, a big help for Ayya. In those years, it was a large amount that covered almost all of my college expenses. I remember somewhat vaguely that it was during this period that Ayya asked me to buy a radio, not a transistor but one with a roof antenna, using the loan money. I did and set it up in our Mettupatti home. It was a huge moment for Ayya as, we all know, how much he loved to turn on the radio for the daily news.

Another digression. I always – *always* – had so much self confidence that I would tell myself that if someone could do it, I could do it. For me, nothing was beyond my reach. For example, I remember one incident very distinctly. A group of young boys – elementary school age – were chatting one day when the topic turned to God. If God appeared before us, the question was, what would each one ask God to give him? When we went around the group, the responses ranged from a bicycle to gold and on my turn, I said that I would ask God simply to give me good health. I was so confident that if God

could take care of my health, then I could do whatever I wanted to do. In high school, when debating a topic, my friends would often quote statements made by, for example, Thiruvalluvar or Socrates to boost their claims. I would retort by saying that I would not give credence to those statements just because they were made by some big figures. I argued that any statement should be critically analyzed regardless of who made it, be it philosophers, saints or prophets.

While in college, among all of the social issues, the one that concerned me most was the life of widows—especially those women who lost their husbands when they were too young—and unmarried young women with disabilities. I watched a scene in Madurai when a widow, before her husband's body was removed for burial, was led to the street across her house by a group of women. They covered the widow—dressed in what seemed like full wedding paraphernalia—with a blanket and performed some ritual. After some time, the widow came out looking terrible—flowers plucked out from her hair, her thali removed, colour saree changed into a white saree. The scene was abhorrent to watch. By this ritual, the society-at-large was basically telling her that this was it and she was done for ever. My deep concern for young widows was that they ended up without leading a full life. The notion of widows remarrying was a taboo in the society. Even if it were acceptable in society, in practice it would have been almost impossible for young widows to get remarried. The simple reason was that as almost all marriages were arranged, the parents had no reason to look for a widow for alliances for their sons. I told myself that when I grew up, I would definitely marry a widow or a disabled girl. I was obsessed with that idea for a long time.



## A CHALLENGING TIME

As I was wrapping my days in American College and getting ready for Madura College, Varadan, just finishing his S.S.L.C., was getting ready for his PUC study. Jeya was still in high school. American College was the natural choice. He applied but did not get a seat on his merit. I spoke to Mr. Savarirayan, the principal of American College, whom I knew fairly well from different contexts. He assured me of a seat but asked for patience. I was so confident that Varadan would get a seat in the American College that we did not apply to any other college in the region. A long story, but at the end—due to a mess up at the clerical level—Varadan did not get a seat. By this time, all of the other colleges in the area including VHNSN College, Virudunagar, had closed admission for PUC. Ayya was very unhappy. In all of my life, I had never seen him so upset and a bit angry at me, not only because Varadan did not get a seat in American College, but also because in this process which dragged on forever, he could not get a seat in *any* college of our choice. Finally, we put him in Sivaganga College, the only place where there was a seat available. With Varadan finishing high school in Kamuthi, a seat was vacated in the Rajaji hostel and Ayya moved Mohan to Kamuthi for his 7<sup>th</sup> grade, putting him in the Rajaji hostel. Papa was in her fourth year in Manamadurai. I believe Jeya continued his high school studies in Peraiyur. RCP Annatchi moved to Kokarasankottai with his family taking up a headmaster position in an elementary school.

As I began my postgraduate work at Madura College, my friendship with Edison continued to grow. I would often visit him in his house in Narimedu. He had visited our house in Mettupatti along with Jeyakar and stayed overnight so did Prince, Edison's only brother.

Prince's visit to Mettupatti was a solo one. Even after more than 50 years, I remember one small incident. In preparation for Jeyakar and Edison's visit, I wanted to keep our house neat and tidy like some of the Christian homes I had visited in Madurai. I made the long



**Figure 27 With Prince**

west side *thinnai* (front porch) look good but the challenge was to keep the small east side *thinnai* tidy. As I attempted to move things around, Ayya said gently but firmly, "Look Deva, ours is a farmer's house and the *thinnai* simply reflects that." He did not say a word more and I did not touch the *thinnai*.



**Figure 28 With Ayya—Ancestral Home in Mettupatti**

As I started my second-year study at Madura College, Edison who worked for one year as Demonstrator in American College, began his Master's program at American College in chemistry, while Prince began his in biology. Oli began her PUC study at

Lady Doak College where Hannah was in her second year as a lecturer after having resigned from Isabella Thoburn College. I think it was in October that year, that tragedy struck: their mother passed away, leaving all of her four young children parentless.

Ayya and I were becoming much closer, periodically engaging in conversations on small and big family matters. Serious conversations would always take place in Nandavanam. We would dream together for the best things to come for the family. Ayya would often tell me that if he could be alive until Mohan finished his S.S.L.C., then he would rest in peace. Apparently, he feared that life was fragile and anything could happen to him at any time. Later, in another serious conversation, we both felt comfortable in bringing up the topic of burial. It bothered me to think about how – following traditional Hindu practice – Ayya’s body would be lowered directly into the ground and covered with dirt. Having witnessed Christian burials where the body is first laid to rest in a casket and the casket is then buried, I was wondering whether we could do the same thing with Ayya. Not sure of Ayya’s reaction, I suggested a Christian burial for him where his body would be placed in a casket which will then be lowered into the ground. To my surprise, Ayya readily said “Yes.” Today, in retrospect, I think that was not a good advice. I strongly believe that the dead, maybe with a shroud over the body, should be directly placed into the ground, not in a casket, and covered by dirt, allowing for the quick, natural decomposition of the body.

After completing my two-year postgraduate study at Madura College, I got an appointment as a Tutor in Mathematics at

American College, a full-time position and a timely appointment, effective August 6, 1965. I was looking for a Hall Superintendent position at the College that would also offer me boarding and lodging, preferably at Washburn Hall. There was an opening but the Warden, I think it was Professor Harris, said that they were looking for a Christian Superintendent for a wing who could lead the students in the evening in brief Bible reading and prayers. I told professor Harris that I could do it. I was genuine and serious in my offer but later it became clear to me that as far as the College was concerned, even entertaining the *idea* of a Hindu leading Christian worship would be blasphemous. Washburn Hall was a tough resident hall to manage. I learnt that the College very much wanted me to be a Hall Superintendent as I had the experience of living there for three years as student. I believe, by rearranging the workload of other Superintendents, the College found a way to solve the problem and, of course, I was thrilled to begin a long journey at Washburn Hall as my home. Two years later, I became a lecturer, a permanent position.

The dawn of the decade of the 1960s did not bring any relief for Ayya and the late 1960s and early 1970s posed a different kind of challenge for Ayya. Things changed dramatically as Mohan, Papa, and Varadan, all pursued higher education. Tuition, room and board, travel, books and miscellaneous expenses—they all piled up. Agricultural income remained flat. My employment at the College came at a very critical time, providing both moral and physical support to Ayya. Supporting Ayya's deep commitment to higher education for his children, I gave Ayya every paise I earned. In fact, most of the time, to meet some of the challenges Ayya faced, I would

have to borrow money in advance from my colleagues, such as professors K.J. Rajan and B. Ramasamy. I am ever grateful to them for their big, timely help. At times, on the day I drew my salary, I would return the money I borrowed the previous month and again borrow money immediately. There had been occasions when I went to Professor B. Ramasamy's house in West Chitrai Street late in the night, asking for money. He would carefully wrap the money in a piece of paper and throw it from his balcony bedroom—I would be standing in the street. As a side note, RTP Annatchi visited me one day when I had been in my job for, say, four years. To deal with a temporary financial situation, he wanted to borrow some money from me for a short term. He assumed that as a bachelor, having worked in the College for four years, I would have a decent savings. When I told him that I had no savings—nothing—he was shocked and as he left, advised me that while it was noble to help siblings and Ayya, I should also think about my own future and plan for it.

It was early 1965. Anti-Hindi agitation was rocking college campuses across Tamilnadu. Varadan had joined VHNSN College in Virudunagar for his B.Com. degree work and was in his first year of study. One day Ayya received a letter from Varadan, complaining that Congress hooligans attacked a procession of students who were protesting the imposition of Hindi. Apparently Varadan was part of the procession. Ayya was very much upset and wrote a 4-page letter blasting Varadan for, among other things, calling Congress people hooligans. Congress had been part of his life since his 20s, so for Ayya it was like Varadan calling Ayya a hooligan. Ayya was anguished that Varadan was ignoring his studies, instead participating in agitations. He was saddened that instead of

having a lofty goal of becoming an IAS or an IPS officer, lifting the name of our family to a higher level, Varadan led a misguided life. With DMK spearheading the anti-Hindi agitation, Ayya wrote that he did not care about Hindi or Tamil or any other language becoming the national language nor did he care about DMK coming to power, assuming the Chief Minister position or even the Prime Minister position. For him, education was the top priority and he wanted his children to complete their higher education first, become earning members and *then* become involved in public life, if they desire. For Ayya, it was all about education.

Finishing her S.S.L.C. in Manamadurai successfully, Papa completed her PUC in Virudunagar Women's College, and joined St. Mary's College in Tuticorin for her B.A. degree programme in 1967. Mohan was in his final year (S.S.L.C.) in High School in Kamuthi. Why St. Mary's College in Tuticorin for Papa? Hannah was a lecturer in St. Mary's after having resigned her position at Lady Doak College. Ayya and I felt that she could be a good mentor for Papa. We knew that Varadan did not get admission for PUC at American College but, perhaps to make it up, Principal Savrirayan gave admission to Jeya (1965), who had a poor academic record



Figure 29 With JCBA ca 1992

from high school. Within a short period of time, he ran into some disciplinary issues but with the intervention of two of my colleagues—professors Solomon Papiah and Stephen Samuel—Jeya was spared. Despite the reprieve, he did not complete his

PUC successfully and left college altogether. With Jeya not pursuing higher education, RTP Annatchi got a job for Jeya in a company in Madurai. It seemed things were going well for a while but one day the company accused Jeya of some misdeeds. It became a big case when Professor Stephen Samuel, who knew the owner, offered to help us and mediate the case. The result was a devastating settlement in which we were to pay thousands of rupees in cash within a few days. Ayya was overwhelmingly distressed. We paid the settlement amount but I do not remember how.

I enjoyed American College life as a lecturer, hall superintendent, and NCC officer. Teaching was fun. Students were motivated. Departmental colleagues were wonderful. The staff room, where teaching staff gathered for relaxation, conversation, and preparation, was majestic. One word that would describe American College life in those years was “freedom.” You could enjoy it if you fulfilled your responsibilities faithfully. Dr. M.A. Thangaraj, the new principal, was a great addition to the College. It



**Figure 30** Charlie in Mettupatti ca 1967

is hard to list all the senior professors with whom I became close but I will single out Professor J.C.B. Abraham (JCBA). We enjoyed each other’s company, watching movies, dining at Jeya Vilas Club, and engaging on social and political issues. A mutual friend of us was Charlie Ryerson, an Oberlin Representative to American

College in the late 1950s. He would visit Madurai quite often, I believe, in preparation for his Ph.D. thesis work at Columbia University in New York. In the seventies, he had come to Mettupatti and stayed with me for a couple days. We had biked together to Mudukulathur area, visiting Veerambal, a small Harijan village. I knew about Veerambal and he had read about it; it was the village that was ransacked during the Mudukulathur caste riots, where many were killed by bullets when they took asylum in St. Paul's Church. Leading a Summer Studies Program for school teachers in the United States, Charlie brought groups of teachers to Mettupatti as part of their educational experience. On one occasion, the group visited a High School in Aruppukottai en route to Mettupatti where Mr. Deva Singaram, Hannah's maternal uncle, was the headmaster. On another, JCBA also came to Mettupatti, accompanying Charlie and his group. JCBA very much wanted to see Ayya. The group interviewed Ayya and JCBA was the translator.

## AN AMAZING FAMILY

Slowly I got drawn into the life of the four: Hannah, Edison, Prince, and Oli. I found that their life was deeply shaped by their Christian faith, not by any pragmatic, worldly calculations. I was fascinated by their beliefs and practices. I began to gain some understanding of basic Christian theology. Hannah, the eldest, had absolute faith that God would provide them with their daily bread. When I wondered about their way of life where nothing was planned, even for the next day, she would quote me a Bible verse: *Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns: yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than*



they? (*Matthew 6:26*). I remember one incident very vividly as it lodged in my heart forever. On one late afternoon I was visiting Edison at his house when their Aruppukottai Singara Mama showed up to say hello to his nieces and nephews. After a brief visit, as he was about to depart, he said “let us pray.” We all bowed our heads. I don’t have the capacity to explain how deeply I was touched by his eloquent prayer. He started by asking God to provide comfort for the poor, destitute, widows, weak etc. WOW! I was almost in tears and was so moved that I do not remember the rest of his prayers. All of my life I had heard people supplicating their gods, asking for personal favours for themselves and their families but in my entire life, I had never heard anyone praying for others, especially for the poor, destitute, widows, and the weak.

As Edison and I became close friends, I began to participate in all of the important family events. Attending Sunday services with him became part of my routine, although Edison and I never discussed religion. Prince had his own friends and Oli was too young. It was Hannah with whom I had intense conversation about religion. I wondered with her about those crores and crores of Hindus who didn’t know anything about Jesus Christ but were followers of Him in the sense that they led their lives in ways consistent with the teachings of Christ. I would tell her that they might be Hindus by birth but they were “Christians” because of their way of life. She would vehemently disagree. She would tell me that one cannot be a Christian by simply following the teachings of Christ; one has to believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and His death on the Cross and resurrection. She would add that the only way for anyone to go to heaven was through the blood of Jesus

Christ. She would tell me that one should become like a child to receive God's grace. It is the childlike faith – without an iota of doubt – that would open the door of God's Kingdom. Childlike faith! That was an incomprehensible phenomenon for me, perhaps because, I was not born and brought up in a Christian family. It was stunning to see how Hannah and her siblings led their life, truly witnessing for Jesus Christ. That, more than anything else, brought me closer to Christianity. Moreover, I knew all along that this – my fondness for Christianity – wouldn't bother Ayya, given his indifference to religions and his warmth for Christianity.

Not content with my master's degree, I always wanted to do something in mathematics if an opportunity arose. It did in the summer of 1969, when the department of mathematics of Madurai University announced a Summer Institute in Analysis. I applied and got admitted into the programme. As I began to participate in the institute, I realized how the department was an exclusive club of Brahmin professors. Every single faculty in the department, starting from the head – Prof. M. Venkataraman – was a Brahmin. It seemed to me like a clique. One day, in an informal gathering, professor Venkataraman shared his orthodox view of caste and education. What he told us was that education was not for all and that people should enjoy what they are good at and try to get better at it rather than going after higher education. A rough translation: education was primarily for Brahmins. I was immediately reminded of Rajaji's *kula kalvi thittam* proposal, the one he made when he was chief minister of Tamilnadu. This episode was an added motivation for me to work for the M.Phil. in mathematics, a relatively new degree programme. After the summer Institute, I met with Professor

M. Venkataraman a few times to convince him that I belonged to the programme. In the following academic year, I got admission. I was the only non-Brahmin student in my M.Phil. class. I completed my M.Phil. degree successfully but it was a challenge for me.

Raja, the prodigal son, who had a tumultuous life in the past decade, showed up and we settled him down in Sellur, Madurai, with a decent grocery shop. He did rather well. He



**Figure 32 Raja Annan with Anni**

got married to Saroja Anni of Kamuthi in 1970. I understood that he was very close to Anni's father and when he passed away, Raja moved to Kamuthi and started a grocery store, the primary purpose of the move was to assist Anni's sisters and brother. Varadan finished his B.Com. degree in Virudunagar in 1967 and

we put him in A.M. Jain College in Madras for his M.Com. work (1967-1969). He ended up staying in Madras for more than a year beyond 1969, trying to complete his arrears, a term used to indicate the subjects that needed to be retaken. In the meantime, Ayya found him an entry-level job at M.S.P. Plantations in Yercaud. RCP Annatchi, through his



**Figure 31 Jeya with Rajamani**

Kokarasankottai connections, arranged for a job for Jeya in a grocery store in Madras. I think it was in 1971 that Jeya got married to Rajamani, one of the relatives of the owners of the grocery store, and settled in Madras. Papa completed her B.A. degree work at St. Mary's College in 1970 but had some arrears. By the way, Hannah left St. Mary's College and joined Madurai University to pursue her doctoral work. She was back in Madurai at their Narimedu home. We put Papa in a ladies' hostel, one in the Narimedu area, for boarding and lodging so she could finish her B.A. degree. The hope was that Papa would continue to be mentored by Hannah. Taking full advantage of the situation, Papa visited Hannah very frequently, and so did Mohan, who was a student in American College working on his B.Sc. degree (1970-1973). I remember that Ayya visited Madurai quite often, in part for medical checkups with Dr. Thangaraj. In those days, it would take almost the whole day by bus to get from Mettupatti to Madurai. Often, while I was Superintendent of Washburn Hall, he would stay with me in my room. Occasionally, he would stay in the Nadar Lodge on Vengalakadai Street. Whenever he visited Madurai, he made it a point to visit Hannah, and of course, Papa. Interestingly, Oli, Prince, Edison, and Hannah—all called him Ayya.

At the same time, on Edison's home front, after completing her master's



Figure 33 With Oli

degree in Holy Cross College in Trichy, Oli joined Lady Doak College in Madurai as a lecturer. It was my sense that Hannah's desire to get married was receding and that she seemed determined to remain unmarried. I know that both Edison and Prince, as boys, could take care of themselves. My concern was about Oli. I liked her a lot and I had a special affection for her. I wanted her to get married to an exceptional boy. With no parents to guide them, I wasn't sure how the three would go about finding the best alliance possible for Oli. With my paternalistic attitude, it became a deeper concern for me. As days, weeks, months and years passed by, jealousy overcame me and I could not imagine Oli being married to someone else. I decided to marry her. I talked to Ayya at the same Nandavanam, our favourite place—I know exactly the spot. I told Ayya that I would like to marry Oli. Without any emotions, he said fine. Next, I told him that I had to change my religion to Christianity to marry Oli. He said that was all right and asked me not to change my name. He reminded me that we didn't have the kind of money that would be necessary to solemnize my marriage. I said I would manage. I believe it was the very next day, he dropped a postcard to Hannah, formally asking her to give her sister, Oli, to become part of our family. The marriage was solemnized on October 20, 1972, at CSI Holy Immanuel Church, Aruppukottai.

I began my life in Narimedu after seven long years of service as Washburn Hall Superintendent. Mohan had finished his B.Sc. and we put him in Madras Law College in a three-year degree program. Papa stayed in the ladies' hostel for almost three years, during which period she not only completed her B.A. work successfully but also finished a typing course. I

continued to provide support to Ayya.<sup>10</sup> As I was contemplating Papa's future, I learnt that Madurai University was starting a new diploma course in library science. I thought that would be a perfect career path for Papa. I asked her to apply, knowing full well that getting admission would be a Himalayan task. Dr. M. Varadarajanar (popularly known as Mu.Va.) was the Vice Chancellor of Madurai University. I had read his book, a novel, 'Petra Manam' (the book was given to me as second prize for an oratorical contest I won in VHNSN College) wherein he advocates for the advancement of women. I wrote a letter to Mu.Va. in which I cited his book, made a brief reference to Papa's slight physical disability, and implored that Papa be given admission. I walked straight into his office and handed over the letter. He read the letter intensively and with a gentle voice said, "for 15 seats there are hundreds and hundreds of applications; also, there is heavy pressure from government Ministers; I will do my best." Papa got admission and her name was on the top of the list. I attribute this huge achievement to the lessons I learned from Ayya and to Mu.Va.'s commitment to women's progress.

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<sup>10</sup> Earlier in my career, I had told Ayya that I would provide full monetary support for our family as long as I remain unmarried and that, once married, the support would understandably diminish. Working for 7 years, I am glad I was able to support Ayya at a very critical time.



**Figure 34 Varadan with Indra**

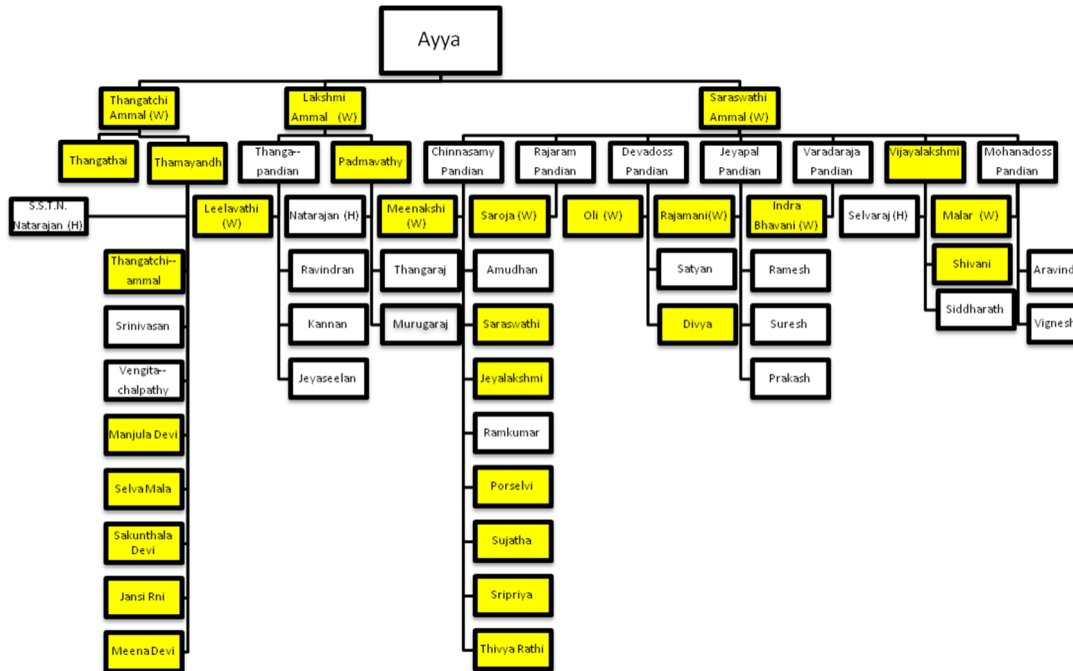
Satyan was born in November 1973. The following year the College offered me the position of Warden of Washburn Hall. I readily accepted it, and Oli and I, along with baby Satyan, moved into the Warden's Bungalow on the College campus. Divya arrived in 1974. Mohan left the Law College in 1976, completing the degree work but with some arrears. I thought that the best option for him was to stay with us to complete his degree, however long it took. He stayed with us 1976-1978 (January), studied well, and completed his law degree. During his stay, he was very helpful, providing support to our nanny in taking care of little Satyan and Divya. He then enrolled as an advocate but took a position in Tamilnadu Mercantile Bank in Tuticorin in April, 1978. In 1975, Varadan got married to Indra Bhavani, a native of Aruppukottai and a lecturer in Parasakthi College, Courtallam. Papa, after a year-long stint at Nirmala College, took a permanent position as Head Librarian at Parasakthi College. Not being brought up in a religious environment, Papa was not used to wearing tilak on her forehead. She never did and Ayya did not care. Moreover, with her close association with Hannah for more than six years, wearing tilak would not have even crossed her mind. Apparently, this did not go well with the principal as she expected every Hindu staff to wear tilak, though she didn't say this openly. Ayya, who understood Papa's reluctance to wear tilak, told her that, if wearing tilak was that important to the principal, then Papa should wear tilak, not one, but dozens of them all over her face.

Papa was in her mid-20s when she joined Sri Parasakthi College, and Ayya and I began to think about her marriage. Oli and I entertained potential alliances for Papa at our American College residence. There was a pleasant visit by Mr. Selvaraj's family. I was very impressed by Mr. Selvaraj, especially after he met with me privately to have a brief conversation. I told Ayya that if he had no concerns, then we should proceed with this alliance.

Mohan, Papa, and Varadan had finished their post graduate degrees and settled down in their jobs and Ayya had begun to lead relatively a peaceful life. I began to think of pursuing a Ph.D. degree in mathematics with loss of pay and leave of absence from American College. The next chapter "**Mettupatti to Washington, D.C.**" deals with my pursuance of a Ph.D. programme in mathematics and a decade of life (1978-1988) in the U.S.A. As such, it will be a major detour from the original focus of the essay on Ayya so readers can skip it and go straight to the last chapter "**Farewell**" without much loss of coherence. It is during this period that both Mohan and Papa got married and sadly, I had to miss both of these important events.



Legend: W-Wife, H-Husband, Others-Sons and Daughters



## METTUPATTI TO WASHINGTON, D.C.

I knew that there were many good mathematics Ph.D. programmes in India, including the one in Madurai, but strangely, I wanted to go to a different country for my Ph.D. work. Part of the reason for my interest in a foreign country was that I wanted to be with the people of a different country, to understand their culture, their ambitions, their way of life, and their government. I did not want to go to the USA as I thought I had some knowledge of the country and their people. I very much wanted to go to China, or the USSR or one of the European countries. I soon learnt that I might get admission in these countries but not fellowships, which meant I had to pay for everything. Whereas in the USA, I understood that in most cases admission into Ph.D. programme came with a fellowship and waived tuition.

On the home front, Oli was confirmed in her position at Lady Doak College and I was confident that, should I go to a foreign country for my Ph.D. work, I could make a good supporting arrangement for Oli so she could manage day-to-day life with the two little ones in my absence. I don't remember particularly discussing with Ayya my intention to go to the USA for higher studies but I know full well that Ayya would be least surprised about my interest in higher education and be extremely happy if my efforts to go abroad bore fruit.

I had a sense that everyone from American College who went to the States did so through arrangements such as the College Oberlin programme. I was not interested in that path and I

wanted to be on my own. Starting from scratch, my first step in this process was to send a letter to American Consulate in Madras asking them to send me a list of universities that offered Ph.D. degrees in mathematics which they did very promptly. Just using common sense, I chose a few universities from the list, including George Washington University in Washington D.C., and sent in my enquiries. One could not imagine how tedious the application process was in those days: no one with expertise to consult with, no internet, no online applications, no Xerox machines, no phones, etc. In regular mail—no courier service—it would take more than a month to get a question answered by a university in the States. Additionally, I learnt that I had to sit for the TOEFL and GRE examinations rarely heard of before. I did both of them in Madras.

I believe sometime in early 1978, I got a notification from George Washington University (GWU) in Washington, D.C. that I was admitted into their programme. I was informed that my tuition would be waived and an annual fellowship of \$3,000 would be paid and I would be asked to teach four courses over two semesters. Of course, I gladly accepted it, but there were problems. The university had to issue a form called an “I-20” for me to get visa at an American Consulate. One requirement in the issuance of the I-20 was that I had enough resources in dollars, \$6,310 in total, a threshold established by the State Department, to live in the States, which meant I needed an additional sum of \$3,310. I wrote to GWU making a strong case that I could very well live within the GWU-offered fellowship. GWU wrote me back saying that regardless of whether or not I would be able to live within the fellowship, I had to provide evidence that the resources were

available as required by the State Department. So the biggest hurdle was to find resources to supplement the fellowship. I tried many avenues, including the possibility of someone in the States providing sponsorship for the additional resources. My main contact was Charlie Ryerson. Being a doctoral fellow himself, he did not have the kind of resources needed to satisfy the requirement. When I was searching for ways to meet the State Department requirement for I-20, he argued that I needed real money, not just the paper work to satisfy the I-20 requirement as his worst fear was that I would not be able to live with a stipend of \$3,000 a year. With the dollar vs rupee exchange rate at that time, the real money needed was well in excess of Rs. 27,000, an unthinkable amount in those days. With all efforts ending up in vain, confident that I would manage to live within the means, Charlie talked to Mr. Telfer Mook, Secretary, United Church Board for World Ministries, in New York. With the recommendation from senior leadership at the college, Dr. M.A. Thangaraj, principal, formally wrote to Mr. Mook and got a letter from him that the Board would meet some of my expenses with the understanding that I would not need or seek the Board's assistance. I got my I-20.

Hannah, after finishing her Ph.D. work in Madurai University, joined Madras Christian College (MCC) as a lecturer. As obtaining visa and travelling to USA seemed imminent, I started thinking about renting a place, in a totally supportive environment, where Oli would live with our children. This would be the first time she would lead an independent life, as she had always been under Hannah's shadow. We were very fortunate. Ms. Alice James, a retired OCPM High School mathematics teacher, was renting out a

portion of her house while she was living in an adjacent portion. The house was at New Colony, just south of OCPM, at a walking distance from Lady Doak College and Seventh Day Adventist school, the one Divya and Satyan attended. Oli knew Ms. James. It was a perfect, ideal arrangement for Oli and children. Hannah started hinting that she would like to leave MCC and move to Madurai so that she could be helpful to Oli and children. I opposed her instincts very strongly and advised her not to entertain such an idea. Despite my strong opposition and to my chagrin, one day Hannah showed up with her belongings, saying that she had resigned her position at MCC and would stay with Oli and children. She did not have a job in Madurai. Left with no other choices, knowing that there was an opening in the Zoology department, I met with my dear colleague, professor JCBA, who was the chair of the department of Zoology and apprised of him of the situation. We both then talked to principal Thangaraj. The vacant position was offered to Hannah.



**Figure 35 Don with Cecilia**

Obtaining a passport took months. Compared to that experience, the visa process seemed straight forward. I was advised to go to American Consulate with all the paper work ready in hand and to wait in line. You would be called based on a first-come, first-served basis.

If you did not make it that day, then you had to come the next day. What was awkward

about the whole experience was standing outside the building on the walkway waiting for your turn, without knowing whether you would make it that day or not. It was a spectacle for people passing by. I did not know why the Consulate did not show some respect for the applicants by making some arrangements for them to be at least seated or lined up inside the building under some shade. I made it the same day and got my visa. I fervently hoped that I would have a housing arrangement on GWU campus but to my utter disappointment, the director of the graduate housing unit wrote to me and informed me that all of the graduate apartments were full, and none were available for me. When asked about off-campus apartment, she replied that her office could not assist me in looking for an off-campus apartment. Basically, what she told was I was on my own and they couldn't do anything to help me.

My challenge was to find a temporary place to live in D.C. – it could be a dirt-cheap hotel—at least for a couple of weeks. While this problem was vexing me, a good colleague of mine, K. Paramasivam, a Tamil professor, introduced me to Mr. Don Larkin, an American. Don had spent a couple of years in Madurai on a project and learnt Tamil from Prof. K. Paramasivam. Don lived in Arlington, Virginia, on the border of D.C. with his wife, Cecilia (Cissy). They had two sons: Narasimhan (9) and Tom (11). I wrote him. He was very kind and wrote me back immediately. He wrote he would do his best to find a place for me to stay, but expressed his doubts whether it would be possible at all for me to live in the States with my meagre \$250 a month fellowship, let alone find an apartment. After almost a month, he wrote me again saying that he could not find a place for me, adding that his family

would be gone on a vacation for two weeks and the best thing for me would be to stay in their house during those two weeks and look for a permanent place to stay. He added that Cecilia's parents would be there at the National Airport to receive me and take me to his house. That was a very generous offer and a huge relief for me.

It was August 22, 1978, when I boarded the Pandian Express train to Madras, en route to Washington, D.C. There were hundreds of students and faculty giving me a boisterous send-off. As the train steamed off from the station, I waved goodbye to Oli, our children, Hannah, and Ayya, standing away from the crowd. I noticed Ayya with Valathammal. Divya was sleeping on Oli's shoulders. I knew that my siblings, along with Oli's Jeya Mama, Athai, cousin Dulcie, and Aruppukottai Singara Mama, were there to give send off to me. Numb with the emotions of the occasion, I did not feel the anxiety of leaving Oli and children. It did not sink in that I wouldn't be seeing them for a long time. It was like I was just going to Madras.

It was an Air India flight from Madras to New Delhi and it was my first experience in flying. Apparently, I did not feel the excitement as I slept during the short flight. Another Air India flight took me from New Delhi to London and then to New York. The flight arrived late at J.F.K airport so I missed my last connecting flight to Washington, D.C. Charlie Ryerson had written me earlier that he would be in India that summer when I would be traveling to the States so we would be crossing each other's paths. But he showed up at the J.F.K. airport. He told me that his plans had changed so he did not travel to India as he originally planned. He said he came to

receive me and see me off to Washington, D.C. Since I had to miss the connecting flight—it was late in the evening— he took me to his apartment in New York where I stayed overnight. The next day morning, he put me in a taxi to the airport and I took a morning flight to Washington, D.C.

As I landed in New York, I instantly began to carefully observe the people of this new world. The first thing that struck me was that blacks—they were then called negroes in our history books--were all over the airport doing low-paid menial jobs. That was not what Charlie Ryerson had told me about blacks in the U.S.A. He had given me a totally a different impression of them when he was in Madurai studying the caste system in Tamilnadu. The taxi driver who drove us to Charlie's place was a black woman who had a fascinating conversation with Charlie. In this narrative, I am not going to focus upon that aspect of my life in the USA: my reading of its people, their culture, politics, government and the socio-economic conditions. That is for another essay.

As arranged by Don, Cecilia's parents were at the National Airport to receive me. They drove me to Don's house, showed me around the house, gave me the key for the house and left, wishing me the best. Don had left me very thorough and thoughtful instructions, 7 pages long, with an incredible level of detail. The typed instructions were so clear that I felt I could go anywhere, anytime, anyplace—using a bus or subway train--without any difficulty whatsoever. That feeling was very comforting. Night came and I was all alone in the house. For the first time, the numbness was gone and I began to feel the pain. The very thought that Oli and the children were almost 10,000 miles away, that I couldn't talk to them



now, and that I couldn't see them for years started haunting me. For the first time, I was deeply saddened and I struggled to cope with the reality of loneliness. The very next day, I went to GWU by taking a bus and a subway train. Washington, D.C. was a high-energy city; seeing people around and meeting and chatting with Ms. Mary Brown, the mathematics department secretary, who had been communicating with me all these months provided some respite.

I hoped to find an off-campus apartment before Don's family returned from vacation but it did not materialize. Don also tried to help but despite his effort we could not find an apartment within the range of how much I could afford, so I ended up staying with Don's family for two months. Having reached a saturation point, I wrote a letter to the graduate housing director, detailing the efforts I had taken in finding an off-campus apartment, explaining the awkward situation I was in as an uninvited guest in a stranger's place and telling her how it had badly affected my Ph.D. studies. I met with her and narrated my story in person. She was very receptive and, on the spot, assigned me a graduate apartment on campus, which was just a few yards away from my mathematics department.



**Figure 36** Papa and Selvaraj

It was the summer of 1980 and two years had passed by since I left Madurai in 1978. I had finished all my course work required for my Ph.D. study. The course work was intense. I worked hard in mastering the subjects in preparation for my

Ph.D. thesis work with immaculate discipline. I had a wonderful roommate, Amir Maleki from Iran, also a Ph.D. student in mathematics at GWU, and a fellow deeply committed to excellence. Teaching a lot of extra courses, tutoring numerous students, and saving scrupulously, I managed to save enough money for me to visit Oli and the children and, of course, Ayya. I took a month off from GWU and went to Madurai. It was pure joy to be back in Madurai with my family. Ayya came to see me in Madurai and we had a very good time. I visited with Papa and Selvaraj who were married in 1979, a few months after I first left India.

Oli, on a leave of absence from Lady Doak College, had just finished one year of doctoral work at Madurai Kamaraj University. She was wondering whether she should pursue Ph.D. work in the States along with me. I told her that joining a Ph.D. programme in any place other than Washington, D.C. made no sense and that the probability of her getting admission and a fellowship in one of the three universities in Washington, D.C. – Georgetown University, George Washington University, and Catholic University – was close to zero. I said that if by God's grace she got admission to and a fellowship from one of the universities, then, of course, she should gladly accept it and come to the States. She sent in applications to all three universities.

I was back in GWU. To my astonishment, Oli was admitted to Georgetown University – a prestigious university in the country – in a Ph.D. programme. They did not have funding for her in the first year but suggested that her thesis advisor might have some grant money to support her. She was also admitted to Catholic University's master's programme with no fellowship in the first year. GWU said it had no opening

that year in her area of interest. With the savings I had, I was confident that I could take care of her tuition for one year at Georgetown. I did the necessary paper work through the GWU international program director-- a tough lady who had no empathy for international students—showing that I had enough resources, as defined by the State Department, to bring Oli as my dependent under an F-2 visa.

Oli got her visa and arrived in New York sometime in September. We took a bus from New York to Washington, D.C. I remember that the very next day, I took her to Georgetown University to begin her academic work. She took very little time to acclimatize to the new environment but unfortunately, as F-2 visa holders cannot work, she could not start working under her thesis advisor. In contrast to GWU, the international program director at Georgetown University was very understanding of foreign students. He provided all the paper work needed to change



**Figure 37 Mohan and Malar**

Oli's status from a dependent F-2 to an independent student visa F-1. It was a painful ordeal to go through the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS); they had nothing but contempt for foreigners (aliens) and treated them with little respect. From the second semester, Oli with her F-1 visa in hand, began her work under her thesis advisor with a meagre but a very helpful stipend of \$250 a month.



**Figure 38 George with Letha**

Meanwhile, Mohan got married to Malar in 1981 – Ayya was then 80 years old – and I could not help but recall my conversation with Ayya almost 20 years ago when he said how much he hoped to live to see Mohan passing his S.S.L.C. examination. Ayya had lived to see Mohan

with a bachelor of science and a law degree, employed in a bank, and getting married to start his own life. I told myself that Ayya had done everything for his children and seen the fruits of his efforts; he had lived a full and complete life and it was time that he began his well-deserved retired life.

Surprising news came from Hannah that she had received a postdoctoral appointment under Dr. Lehninger at Johns Hopkins University (JHU) in Baltimore – an hour-long drive from Washington, D.C. – effective from the beginning of the 1981 academic year which, of course, meant the children would join us. Immediately, working through the GWU International Programs office, I mailed all of the documents to Hannah that showed that we had the resources to take care of our children. I assumed visas for



**Figure 39 Hannah with Children**

Hannah and the children would be a routine affair but I got the news that Hannah ran into severe hurdles at the Consulate office in Madras. First, a local official at the Consulate said they needed proof of a visa change for Oli from F-2 to F-1. I did the necessary paper work and Hannah submitted it to the Consulate office.

Then they added a new demand that Oli's visa must be valid for at least one year. I knew the request was absolute nonsense as the local official had no clue how the INS in Washington, D.C. operated in regard to student visas. Hannah asked for an appointment with the Consulate Officer to explain her situation but she was denied on the ground that she did not have the authority to speak on behalf of the children. Now Hannah and the children were in limbo. I could sense that the situation was becoming rather dire, and for the first time I began to get concerned and worried. I talked to a good friend of mine, George Walser, at the Church that Oli and I attended, a remarkable human being, who was a radically kind and an extremely helpful person. He introduced me to Dr. John Cooper, another member of the Church whom I knew but did not know that he was a retired United States ambassador. He took me to the State Department where I explained the situation to an officer-in-charge of immigration issues. The officer said that they would send a telegram to the Madras Consulate. The very next day, I received word that Hannah and the children got their visas.

We lived in an apartment in Arlington, Virginia. Satyan and Divya went to a nearby school called Francis Scott Key School. I wanted to place them in 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grades – they had already finished the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> in Madurai – but the school



**Figure 40 Our first Car**

refused, saying that they could only be placed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades, based on their age. I was very disappointed, but within a month the school called me to say that the children were moved one class up as they were very bright. There was a cafeteria in the school and Satyan and Divya were given hot lunch every day, free of charge. Surprised, I enquired about this practice and found that the government provided free lunch for those students who were living below the poverty line. I thought it was not a good use of government resources. Apparently, from my perspective, the government had drawn the poverty line too high.

Having the children with us, I felt the need for a car. With the help of Amir, my former roommate, I found a used-car dealer and bought a compact Mazda car with shift gear for about \$2,000. Despite having a car, Oli and I commuted to our respective universities by bus and train. Often Oli would cross the Potomac river by walking on the Key Bridge to reach Arlington and then take a bus or train to our apartment, thus saving a dollar or two.

Taking a train, Hannah would come home every weekend from Baltimore. Life was relatively smooth only for a month. One weekend in September, Hannah came home totally

confused with symptoms of a severe mental breakdown. Evidently, being a single woman and new to the States, she did not quite understand the social dynamics in her lab with co-workers and she snapped. She started rambling and it became clear that she needed immediate medical attention. She was taken to the Johns Hopkins University hospital, one of the best in the country, for treatment. She was admitted for five days and treated with medications for serious psychiatric conditions. Unfortunately, this nature of episode relapsed several times for two years while she valiantly continued working at her laboratory. She left the States for good in May 1983 with the hope that she wouldn't have this problem in her native environment.

By June 1983, I obtained my Ph.D. degree but Oli had at least two more years to go to complete her work. As my study leave was ending in the summer of 1983, I decided to extend my leave by two more years for post-doctoral work with Prof. Junghenn, my thesis advisor. Also, it had been three years since I visited Ayya and I wanted to see him badly. With that in mind, I went to India the summer of 1983, leaving Divya, Satyan, and Oli in the States. That same year, with Varadan providing all of the monetary support, Ayya and Valathammal left Mettupatti for good and were living with Malar and Mohan who was working now in Nagamalai Pudukottai. I visited Ayya. He was leading a very comfortable retired life. I met with Hannah in Madurai; she did not have a job yet. It is my vague memory that I met with Shanthi Manuel, the principal of Lady Doak College, in Madurai regarding Hannah's situation. I knew her well while I was at American College. She had visited with me in Washington, D.C. before Oli arrived. Hannah got a job at

Lady Doak College, effective at the beginning of the academic year, 1983. At American College, I did all the paper work necessary to extend my study leave of absence for another two years. With the mathematics department's recommendation and principal P.T. Chellappa's strong support, I got my extension. I returned to the States.

## FAREWELL



**Figure 41 With Mohan, Jeya, and R.C.P. Annatchi family**

Oli finished her Ph.D. in 1985. The government did not approve her request for an extension of leave of absence to complete her degree and so she was terminated from her position at LDC. Due to inexplicable reasons, we decided to stay in the States. I

retired from American College, effective June 1985 and joined North Central College in Naperville, Illinois, as an associate professor of mathematics. In February 1987, we got our green cards and I immediately booked tickets to Madras for a summer visit to see Ayya in Courtallam, who, after a year of stay with Mohan, had moved to Courtallam to live with Indra Bhavani. Papa was living in Courtallam with her family. Mohan, who had transferred to a nearby town, was also living in Courtallam with his family. Jeya also had a house in Courtallam. At Mohan's invitation, we stayed at his home in Courtallam with his family: Malar and their two boys, Aravind and Vicki. The stay was simply wonderful, thanks to Malar and Mohan's exceptional hospitality.



This 1987-visit was also very fulfilling in the sense that we were able to see all our siblings and their families, including RCP Annatchi and his family. I single out RCP Annatchi because tragically that was the last time I saw him. He passed away in



**Figure 42 With Mohan family**

1989. I understood that heavy smoking caused his death. Ayya had told me that he himself was a smoker until RCP Annatchi was born. He feared that his son, when he grew up, would pick up the bad habit so he decided to quit smoking. He did so by keeping a pack of cigarettes in his drawer. When there was an urge to smoke, he would open the drawer, look at the pack and close the drawer. He wanted to test his own will power. What an irony that Annatchi picked up smoking—becoming a chain smoker—which eventually caused his death!

Divya and Satyan enjoyed their time with Ayya as much as he enjoyed his time with them. Oli spent some fine time with Ayya. Needless to say, I relished every minute of my stay with Ayya. He had lived to see the success of all of his children: they were all married and well settled. Ayya also lived to see all 30 of his grandchildren. He lived a full and a complete life. I was happy to see him leading a comfortable retired life, thanks to Varadan. Ayya advised me to buy a plot in Courtallam and to build a house. One day, I was curious so I asked him whether he missed anything in life. In the blink of an eye, he said “Saraswathi.” I did not expect that response at all; it surprised me. But after reading his diaries, it became

very clear to me that he was deeply pained at her loss and lamented her death for years to come. She was everything to him. Ayya missed Amma dearly until his last breath.

I thought Ayya had a strange feeling that he might not be alive when I would visit him again. He asked me and Oli to buy him silk *veshti* and a silk towel. He wanted them to be buried with him. Oli and I did some shopping in Madurai and gave them



**Figure 43 With Ayya in Courtallam (1987)**

to Ayya. As Ayya did, I too had a strange feeling that I might not see him anymore. When we were leaving for the States, Ayya walked with me up to the front gate and I, very respectfully, folded my hands and said *Parpome Ayya*. He folded his hands bidding goodbye to me. I distinctly remember where exactly Ayya stood and how we bid farewell to each other. It will always linger in my mind.

One year later, it was June 30, 1988. Oli called me while I was in my office and told me that Ayya had passed away. She got the news from Varadan who called us home and I called him back immediately. He said that Ayya died on June 27<sup>th</sup> at 8:12 P.M. (IST) and that he was buried the next day at about 5:00 P.M. in Mettupatti on our private land. Varadan had tried to reach us but his phone did not work so he sent us a cablegram which we had not received at that time.

W.U.  
308 W RTE 38  
MOORESTOWN NJ 08057 30AM

Western  
Union Mailgram



1-003540A182 06/30/88 ICS IPMRENB RNO CGCA  
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R D PANDIAN  
518 KIOWA AVE APT 102  
NAPERVILLE IL 60565

1-065817G182 06/30/88  
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UDNX BN INBA 000  
BOMBAY 30 1213  
POSRA WNY526 DDA086 MBA935 MS99/28  
UWNX CO INMX 031  
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The news itself was not a big shock to me. A couple of months ago, Varadan told me that Ayya was suffering from stomach and lung cancer and the doctor had told him that the cancer was in the final stage. It was a debilitating blow. Varadan told me that Jeya's son Ramesh, Annatchi's son Ramkumar, and Manoharan—a full-time housekeeper—did some exceptional work, taking care of Ayya who was completely bedridden. The trio did yeoman service, doing everything humanly possible to ease the pain for Ayya. Later Oli and I talked with Ayya over the phone. Ayya's voice was rather feeble and it was clear that he was suffering a lot. I very much wanted to be with him. Hoping that Ayya would be alive for at least a few more months, I booked my tickets for August 5<sup>th</sup>, the day after the end of the summer classes at GWU. Ayya had written a letter to me on May 23, 1998, just a month before he died, which Varadan sent to me. It was not clear when I received the letter.

Ayya's handwriting was very shaky. He wrote that he was not well and he was not getting good sleep. He also wrote that he could not go to Mettupatti for *Pongal* and that Mohan was transferred to Tuticorin. He added that a doctor visited him every day and all were taking good care of him. He finished his letter by saying, "Do not worry. I will be fine until you arrive. Tell Oli and grandchildren to be happy." I wanted Ayya to be alive until I made it to India. On the other hand, I did not want him to suffer for such a long time. I was relieved to hear that Ayya would suffer no more. But it was extremely difficult for me to accept the fact that I could not see Ayya anymore, the man with whom I had spent 45 glorious years. My relationship with Ayya was unique. It was not simply the relationship of a father and a son. We were friends. We were

counselors to each other. He was a genius, a man with a brilliant mind. He was a giant and a great leader.

In 1988, almost 30 years ago, after hearing the news that Ayya had passed away, I sat down to write my thoughts about Ayya in a seven-page long essay, which I shared with my siblings, nephews and nieces at that time. I will finish this narrative verbatim with what I wrote at the end of that essay:

*Ayya is not dead. His soul is still with us. Ill health affected his body. The body became weak and could not bear the soul anymore. So, the soul departed and the body is laid to rest. Ayya is not dead as long as he is remembered by someone. Our generation will remember him. I do not know about the next generation. That largely depends upon how we keep the memory of Ayya alive. What is the best monument that symbolizes the power and progress, a monument that stands for courage, a monument that speaks for the importance of education for every child in our neighbourhood, a monument that transcends caste and religion, and a monument that looks into the future? Ayya! He was Ayya not only for his children but for many others. Truly, in his case, the word 'Ayya' transcends the relationship of a father and his children. Any memorial shall be called 'Ayya Ramaiah Memorial.'*