



# FULL CIRCLE

*Rajendra S. Sisodia*

In the summer of 1960, I turned two, my father turned twenty-four and my mother became pregnant with my sister. At the end of that summer, my father, a brilliant and iconoclastic student who had overcome every obstacle to attaining a higher education, managed to scrape together the enormous sum of five thousand rupees (about seven hundred dollars then) for a one-way passage to Canada.

## ***From Kesur to Canada***

Narayan had defied all odds in coming this far. The mediocrity of his early education at the village middle school in Kesur did not prevent him from moving to the district town to finish his high school diploma. His father was Thakur Girwar Singh, a self-made man with what he regarded as a more than adequate education to get on in life, and was disinclined to support his educational ambitions beyond that point. In his view, too much education simply created impractical “*lakir ke fakir*”—a popular expression among the wise old nodding heads of the village, which loosely translates as “worshippers of words.” Education beyond the basics of reading, writing and simple addition and subtraction was for those unfortunates who were forced to look for salaried jobs – not for one with the abundance of property and prestige that he had worked maniacally all his life to accumulate for his four sons.

[Many years later, as I set off for college, my grandfather had mellowed considerably but still reminded me that in his view, there were only two salaried jobs in the world really worth having—one, a *Thanedar*, the police officer in charge of a local police station, and the other, a *Collector*, a position created by the British as a part of the Indian Civil Service; the Collector was the administrative head of the government bureaucracy at the district level. As such, he enjoyed an official bungalow, chauffeured jeep and a great deal of power to go with his rather meager

salary. Thanedars wielded power more nakedly, adopted a certain swagger and struck fear in all under their jurisdiction. Somehow, I couldn't see myself in either role.]

As a child, Narayan was often sternly reminded that his first responsibility was to attend to his assigned duties in support of managing the farm — school was not to interfere with the business of earning a living. Especially at peak times in the agricultural season, such as planting and harvesting, when a great deal had to be done in a short span of time, all of the children were deployed to various tasks. The older sons drove the tractors and supervised the workers. The younger ones were dispatched to the fields with their sling shots, to holler and shout and keep the swarming parrots off the crop. A messenger was sent to the school informing the teacher that the Rowla children would not be coming in until the crop was in storage or the seed was in the ground (*Rowla* is the name given to the large house occupied by the *Thakur* in most villages in the region).

My father was blessed with a brilliant mind, vast energy and a determination not to let the circumstances of his birth determine the course of his life, as was the case with virtually everyone around him. Rather than rebel, his response was to work harder to please his father as well as himself. He managed to do his school work late at night under the light of a sooty kerosene lamp (this was long before they had electricity in the village), and completed many of his chores before daylight.

One of his chores was to set several cages with mouse traps around the house each night. In the morning, he would rise before dawn, collect the cages, and walk in the dark down the steep incline to the river bank to drown the unfortunate mice. On one such morning, he picked up a cage and noticed that it was much heavier than usual – obviously, it had been a good catch. He hurried down towards the river, and as the sun rose over the horizon, he could suddenly see what he had been carrying. Coiled around several times inside the cage was a large, shiny black King Cobra. As he had been carrying it, the snake had managed to extricate its head from the cage, and was now poised with its hood wide open, head reared back in the classic cobra attack position, ready to bite in the next instant. Narayan flung the cage down the rocky bank of the river, and soon a crowd of boys gathered with sticks and stones to kill the highly poisonous snake. From that day on, my father always lit a kerosene lamp before retrieving his cages.

Upon graduating from high school, Narayan dreamed about becoming a doctor, and secretly went to Indore to appear for the highly competitive Pre Medical Test. When he found out, my grandfather wouldn't hear of it. After a great deal of convincing, he agreed that Narayan could get a degree in agriculture science, which he figured would at least have some practical value back on the farm. At the age of 17, Narayan set off in 1953 to Gwalior, a town about 300 miles away. There, he enjoyed a stellar academic career, being elected President of the student body

and earning a gold medal upon graduation. He came home to Kesur for every break (while his friends went on professional field trips), however brief, and once there, would fling himself into farm work, spending twenty hours a day in the fields. When he graduated in 1956, it was déjà vu all over again; the scene with his father from three years earlier was repeated, since Narayan had been offered (at the behest of his awed professors) a full scholarship at the prestigious Indian Agriculture Research Institute in New Delhi, and was determined to go. As before, my grandfather eventually relented, realizing perhaps that Narayan was going to go regardless.

Meanwhile, plans were underway to find Narayan a suitable bride. His desire for a college educated wife proved almost impossible to fulfill. Rajput girls were typically not highly educated in those days; most had not even completed high school. At length, they came upon a suitable family. The oldest daughter of Thakur Jaswant Singh Pawar of Berchha, an educated man of refined, Westernized tastes and leisurely ways, had completed a high school diploma, and from all accounts had the makings of a very suitable bride.

The families of the bride and bridegroom were different in many ways, and there was no real basis for anybody to judge the compatibility between Narayan and Usha. However, their astrological charts suggested an excellent match. After the marriage was already agreed to between the parents, Narayan managed to sneak a peek at a tiny black and white photograph of a beautiful, demure and delicate Usha. Usha was not even shown a picture; she was told that she was to get a highly educated man for her husband, and to trust in fate for the rest. Without much further ado, the marriage was arranged. In May 1957, when Usha had just turned twenty and Narayan was a few weeks shy of twenty-one, the wedding party (consisting only of men and one servant woman who would attend the new bride on the return journey) left Kesur for the six hour bus ride to Berchha, a tiny hamlet of a few hundred people. Five days later, the buses returned, bearing the wedding party and a flower-bedecked Narayan and Usha, cordoned off by an improvised curtain near the front of the bus. She was resplendent in a gold and red silk Rajasthani saree and glittering gold jewelry. The bus was weighed down with her *dahej* – the furniture, trunks full of clothes, a sewing machine, shiny new pots and pans, and stainless steel dishes (each engraved “Thikana Kesur” in a dotted cursive hand) that her family had given her to help her start her household.

A month later, Usha was back in Berchha for a bride’s traditional return to her parents, and Narayan headed back to New Delhi, with one year remaining before he got his Masters degree. Three months later, he was in Kesur for the Dassehra festival, and soon after, Usha left once again for Berchha, this time to be looked after by her mother through her newly discovered pregnancy.

Along with the baby in June 1958 (named Rajendra, which literally translates as “king of the

gods”— my parents certainly had high hopes) came another gold medal for Narayan, and a period of considerable discontent. He had just turned twenty-two, and his education had gone as far as it could in India. Many of his professors in Delhi had been educated in the United States and in Canada, and had conveyed to him the palpable sense of excitement in working at the frontiers of science. The Indian “Green Revolution” in agriculture was just beginning to be talked about, and there was real hope that India would be able to greatly increase its agricultural output and become self-sufficient in food. Suffused with idealism, Narayan wanted more than anything to contribute to the knowledge which would enable scientific agriculture to rapidly permeate his deeply traditional society. However, those research opportunities were few, and closed to anyone without a doctorate.

On the other hand, here he was, back in tiny, remote, still unelectrified Kesur with his gold medals and diplomas, with a young wife and infant son, with little intellectual stimulation or companionship, and with very little scope to use his training. Everyone had expected him to come home and miraculously transform the farm. It was hard for him to explain to villagers that his interest in agriculture was at another plane—one concerned with creating new species of crops using the genetics of plant breeding. He was after revolutionary changes, and certainly did not possess any magic lists for turning the farm around. Besides, the farm was doing very well to begin with; his father was well experienced at crop rotation, irrigation, fertilizing, disease prevention. Thakur Girwar Singh had made himself into a regional legend by being the first to buy tractors from England and Russia, as well as a variety of other new fangled equipment. Soon, the inevitable cynicism set in; what Narayan had done all those years was waste everybody’s time. After all, what could one expect of a *lakir ka fakir*?

His professors in New Delhi thought so highly of him that they almost begged him not to leave the field. Narayan now turned to them, and they enthusiastically recommended him to several Ph.D. programs in the United States and Canada. Of these, the University of Manitoba in the frozen tundra of Winnipeg boasted an outstanding Faculty of Agriculture, and promised him financial support—enough for him to get by, but certainly not enough for a family.

So it came to be that, in the summer of 1960, Narayan turned in despair to his father-in-law to help raise the five thousand rupees for his ticket. His father had absolutely refused to have anything to do with this latest in a seemingly ending series of foolhardy notions, and indeed, had stopped speaking with him entirely. The money was somehow accumulated, and in December 1960, my father left New Delhi bound for Winnipeg, and a doctorate in something called “cytogenetics” and plant breeding. He left behind a newly pregnant wife and an uncomprehending son; he carried with him a burden of enormous expectations and hopes.

As I arrived at adulthood, I often harked back to this period in my parents’ lives. What emotions

went through my mother as she watched the airplane lift off, uncertain when she would see him again, left to look after her toddler son by herself and to contend with another pregnancy and the next child without her husband?

What were my father's emotions as his airplane rose above pea soup fog of New Delhi? This was of course his first airplane flight. There must have been the undeniable excitement of travel to a distant and almost mythical destination; perhaps he felt some relief at being liberated from the confining bonds of village, wife and children. He was, after all, only twenty-four; was he relishing his sudden new freedom, the extended bachelorhood he had never experienced?

### ***Life Without Papa***

Narayan was gone for four long years. My mother had, in the Indian tradition, retreated to her parent's house for the birth of her daughter, my sister Manjula. However, eventually she had to go back and live in my father's village, in a deeply conservative joint family, surrounded by her husband's parents, his brothers and sisters, her sisters-in-law and their young children. She doesn't like to talk about this period, my mother. But from what I have heard, the other women did little to comfort her or to reassure her. Indeed, there was much malicious talk of how many men failed to ever return after leaving for America (which was indistinguishable from Canada in the minds of people in India). There were cruel jokes about the white Memsahib my father was likely living with. Every photograph sent by my father, every line in every letter was carefully scrutinized for evidence to support these theories.

As I grew older, I gradually forgot everything about my father, since I had been only two when he left, and had seen him little even then. I gradually came to know my father only from photographs, as a distant, almost mythical figure dressed in dark suits, knit T-shirts, turtle-necks, dashing Aviator sunglasses, and occasionally sporting a beard. Reports of his continued academic prowess were met with an air of inevitability; to me and many others, after all, he was defined almost solely in terms of his relentless pursuit of education. The multiple gold medals had spoiled everyone; once, someone suggested that, rather than the best, Narayan was now only the *second* best in his program in Canada. I don't know what the source of that allegation was; however, the dastardly suggestion was met by all with utter disbelief, and the person who made it was soon labeled a jealous malcontent.

At the age of five, I was sent to the nearby town of Ratlam (where I had been born in the Mission Hospital) to begin acquiring a proper education in an English-medium school. This was a move that occasioned considerable snide commentary among my aunts in Kesur, who had been perfectly content to send *their* children to the Hindi-language village school. Of course, that wasn't good enough for *her*. My mother had four younger brothers and a sister who were all in elementary and middle school. A large house had been rented for the brood in the Railway

Colony. Ratlam was a small town (but a major rail junction) roughly midway between Kesur and my mother's village. There, I lived for two years with my eight-year-old aunt and four young uncles, along with a live-in housekeeper to feed and hover over us.

As far as I can recall, I enjoyed this period. We all studied at a convent school called St. Joseph's. Lacking local parental supervision, we were pretty much at liberty in the evenings, and in each other, we had plenty of company. The house was curiously designed, long and narrow like a railway carriage. There were about eight rooms, laid lengthwise. Like most houses in India, it had a flat roof with a short wall running at its edge. On warm nights, we would all lug our beddings upstairs and sleep under the stars. My uncles and I would often play near the railway tracks, picking up mysterious globs of grease which had fallen from the coal engines. A favorite game was to lay a square five-paisa coin on the tracks and wait for the train to flatten it into a thin sheet. My private fantasy was to be able to topple over an entire train one day, and to that end, I placed lines of stones on the tracks and waited hopefully. I was quite worried that I might some day succeed in this effort.

Sporting an insatiable sweet tooth, I fell into the habit of stealing handfuls of sugar from the tin in the kitchen, and then running (I thought nonchalantly) through the length of the house swinging my arm in a wide vertical circle. Everybody knew precisely what I was up to the minute they saw that arm, though I thought I was being rather subtle and devious. For some strange reason, I would sleep *under* my bed on many nights rather than on it, and was once bitten all over by a family of bees who had taken up residence there. I swelled up to the point where I looked like a puffy, sun burnt Chinese kid.

One day, my oldest uncle, about thirteen, brought home a tape recorder, with what he said was my father's voice recorded on it. He convinced me that this little box actually contained a little replica of my father. I spent many hours transfixed by the machine, trying to open it and extract this magical little creature.

Periodically, my mother would come to visit, and complain to the housekeeper that I had gotten thinner and darker, and the housekeeper in turn would complain about my sugar raids and all the nose bleeds they caused me. Fortunately, my report cards reassured my mother that I must have been reasonably happy and was doing alright. She brought with her the little doll who was my sister. Manju was an absolute delight to everybody, including myself: a perky, chubby, cuddly little thing, her hair cut short with bangs on her forehead, and dressed in short frocks. If you dressed her up and put trinkets on her ankles, and turned on the radio, she would do the cutest dance.

Summers and other vacations were spent back in the village. My recollections here are dim, though I do recall that my cousin Gajendra and I used to gather up all the *beedi*-butts we could

find and attempt to smoke them. If that didn't work, we tried to smoke reeds of straw. We were constant passengers on any trips taken by the tractors, and usually returned muddy and disheveled, to our mothers' dismay and anger.

### ***Papa Returns***

Confounding the doomsday-predictors, my father returned triumphantly to India in 1964 to a tumultuous, almost euphoric welcome. Looking back from today's perspective, the celebrations seem outlandish, even surreal. There was almost universal rejoicing in the region. Though he was not exactly a prodigal son, he *was* someone who had gone to the far reaches of the world, and still returned to the village, back to his family, his people and his roots. It was seen, perhaps, as a reaffirmation of the centrality of the place of our origin to our lives, and a triumph for our traditions over Western worldliness. (On the other hand, maybe they were all just happy to see him.) My grandfather, so reluctant to allow him to go abroad in the first place, had relented enough to write him an occasional letter, and once waited for three days to complete a phone call to him, without success. Now, he had orchestrated a series of welcoming parties in every single village that lay in the 80 kilometers between Kesur and Ratlam, with numerous garlands of flowers, plenty of food and liquor, bands blaring and photographers clicking.

My first glimpse of my father was an imposing one—he cut a resplendent figure in his dashing Western-cut clothes, his gold rimmed sunglasses, his big shiny watch, his neck covered with garlands. When he arrived in Ratlam, before proceeding to Kesur, there were numerous relatives, acquaintances and hangers-on waiting to greet him, in addition to those who had met him in New Delhi and had made the train journey back together.

The next day, a lengthy motorcade wound its way towards Kesur, fifty miles to the north. At several small towns along the way, large welcoming arches had been set up near the main squares: “Welcome Back, Dr. Sisodia” (in Hindi, of course). At each stop, the motorcade discharged its passengers, the town elders came forward to greet and embrace my father, and the inevitable band jauntily struck up a suitable melody. Large brass trays filled with silver and gold-sheeted “mithai” (sweets) were brought out. A piece would be broken into two, and my father and the local “Thakur” (landlord) would offer some to each other in the traditional way of the *manwar*, offering with their right hands while cradling their elbows with their left hands. Soon came the womenfolk, dressed in their ceremonial clothes. With their faces mostly obscured by the *pallus* of their sarees, they would take some *sindoor* (a scarlet-colored powder) on a wet finger and press it against his forehead, as he stood in front of them with his palms folded in front of him and his eyes mostly closed. They then took a few grains of rice and pressed them into the *tilak* on his forehead. Finally, they took a length of multi-colored sacred thread and, wrapping it around twice, tied it on to his right hand. Following this, the women would

disappear, and the Thakur would return, this time with generous shots of bright red liquor in two small glasses. Both men would then again extend their right arms and offer the Gulab (rose-flavored *desi* liquor) to each other. Other, lesser Thakurs then followed suit.

I was a somewhat bedraggled figure on the margins of all this pomp and circumstance, virtually forgotten in the excitement. While the village ceremonies were not lacking for drama, I wished they would get on with it, so that we could get to Kesur. However, the entire scene was repeated several more times before we reached Kesur. Here, all pandemonium had broken loose. There were at least two bands in attendance, and it appeared that close to a thousand people had gathered. Word of our progress had been brought by various Ratlam-Indore bus drivers through the course of the day (there were no telephones, of course). It was now getting dark, since our fifty mile journey had taken about seven hours. As the returning cows raised clouds of dust in the distance, fireworks started lighting up the evening sky and startled the crowd with their huge booms.

Here you could clearly see evidence of my father's elemental connections to this place and to these people. He had, after all, been born here, and had attended the humble village school until grade nine. Almost all his schoolmates were here, still living in Kesur, dutifully engaged in the family occupation. His "Masterjis" (teachers) were all there as well, dressed in their whitest *kurtas* and *dhotis*. Narayan, in the traditional gesture of a student toward his teachers, bent down to touch their feet, at which show of humility and grace the teachers sprang back, barely able to contain their pleasure and awe. The village's contingent of *seths* (traders and shopkeepers) had all put on their Nehru jackets and sweat-stained Congress caps and come to greet him. Everyone had disembarked from the cars, and the procession started to move slowly towards the Rowla, our house, which was located on a hill halfway across the village, separating the Hindu and Muslim sections.

My grandfather, who had orchestrated all this, had not until now met my father, choosing to stay behind in the Rowla. When the procession, lit now by dozens of incandescent lamps, and led by the two bands, finally made its way up the steep hill leading up to the Rowla, my father went up to my waiting grandfather and touched both his feet. My grandfather was dressed in his long grey coat and a red *saffa* (turban). They then embraced and walked through the main gates.

The photographs that we have from then suggest that there were several hundred people at the Rowla that night. The celebration went on until the morning broke. My favorite picture of the day is one in which my mother is sitting next to my father, gazing at him as he animatedly talks to someone else. After four long years of being brave and strong and ever so alone, she was finally a married woman again. All the uncertainties, all the slights and the cutting remarks, all her suffering had disappeared into the past. She looked carefree, and seemed suddenly even



younger than her twenty-seven years.

Meanwhile, my sister (then three) was entirely unimpressed. As far as she was concerned, there was no conclusive proof that this was the Papa she had heard so much about. It took several days before she would allow him to even hold her, and much longer before she would deign to call him Papa. Come what might, she would not dance in front of him. So he hid in a closet with a camera, while my aunt dressed her up, played some music and got her to dance.

I myself was thoroughly intimidated by the circumstances, and by my father as well. At six years old, I was not possessed of great quantities of self-assurance. Around this Papa, I felt like a stumbling, mumbling fool. My appearance, while considerably above that of a ragamuffin, was certainly not immune to my rough and ready surroundings. I was missing a couple of front teeth, my hair was modeled along porcupine lines, and my meager wardrobe consisted largely of shiny teralyn shirts with dubious geometric prints. My father, on the other hand, looked and talked differently from anyone I had known before. From our photographs today, he looked like a young, Indian John Kennedy. He must have sensed my discomfort; in turn, I am sure he was uncomfortable with me as well. After all, I was a complete stranger to him, even though I was his son. Probably he was as unimpressed with me as I had been awed by him. Since neither of us was particularly demonstrative of affection in any physical way, little happened to break the invisible wall that separated us. It would take many years before that could happen, before I could achieve with him anything approaching the easy familiarity I saw between many of my friends and their fathers.

Six months after returning, Papa announced to my grandfather that he had been offered a job in the West Indies. He had been interviewed by a firm in London on his way back from Canada, and would be working for a British sugar company in Barbados, doing research on sugarcane. This bombshell led to an immediate conflict with my grandfather, who had taken it for granted that my father was back for good, and would now settle down in Kesur or nearby. Nonetheless, my father made plans for us to leave India in April 1965, traveling to Barbados via Aden and London.

This was the beginning of five years abroad, in Barbados, California and Winnipeg, Canada. Towards the latter part of that period, my parents became increasingly concerned that I had completely forgotten almost everything about India, my relatives, the language. My sister, only four when we left, remembered even less. My grandfather had resumed contact (as he always did, eventually), and was pressing my father to return. So it was that my father accepted a job with the Jawaharlal Nehru Agriculture University in late 1969. We were returning to India, “for good,” as our parents told us. No strangers to new places, we looked forward to this new experience with some anticipation. We left North America on Christmas Eve, 1969, flying from

San Francisco to Seattle, and on to Tokyo, Hong Kong and New Delhi.

### ***Returning “Home”***

India is a multi-tiered assault on the senses for even the well-seasoned traveler. For me, a child of twelve, the contrast between the manicured lawns and geometric streets of Salinas, California and the airport in New Delhi was stunning, almost surreal. All of a sudden, I was surrounded by people who were shorter, browner and more numerous than I had ever seen before. It had been honed into me that these were “my” people—they looked like me, I suppose, yet I had never felt so different, so conspicuous in all my life. A number of the welcoming party in Delhi were my relatives, speaking to me in a language I barely understood, calling me “Pappu” (a name I had always disliked intensely), ruffling my hair, treating me as though I were supposed to know them well. My thirteen year old cousin (Gajendra) eagerly took the toy Apollo 11 rocket we had bought in Hong Kong. My sister and I complained, “Mummy, that boy just grabbed our toy!,” evincing laughter all around. Somehow, just about everything we said struck these strange people as very funny (I found out much later that they found our accents unintelligible and thus quite comic).

The whirlwind of activity and commotion all around soon overwhelmed us into a sort of dazed stupor. A large contingent had made the overnight train journey to New Delhi to receive us in style. The next day, we made our way back to Ratlam. It was difficult not to get caught up in the apparent euphoria of the moment. For some reason, we were clearly celebrities, and I was even beginning to enjoy the constant attention. My father, of course, took it in stride. He was not surprised at all the commotion; after all, he had experienced a much bigger celebration when he first returned from Canada in 1964.

Over the next several months, and in many ways the next several years, I gradually ceased to be a stranger amongst my own people. I had to relearn everything: the language (with its complicated forty-four character alphabet), the customs, the subtleties and nuances of an enormously complicated culture. I had to unlearn what I knew about how to deal with friends, with teachers, with strangers, with “elders.” Some days, it seemed every step I took was in the wrong direction.

### ***Back to School***

Certainly the most difficult transition was to my first school back in India. In my fifth grade class in Salinas, California, I used to call one of my teachers “Mr. Roman” and the other one affectionately as “Wally” or “Walnut.” (His real name was Mr. Walton and he was balding). School was a pleasant, even idyllic affair. There was laughter, humor, even square dancing classes at the end of the day. I was popular, happy and successful.

The school I was first enrolled in back in India was called the Christ Church Boys Higher Secondary School in Jabalpur. This was a medium-security corrective institution that was seemingly modeled on a modern-day military boot camp. The uniform (a new concept to me) was an unforgiving combination of starched khaki shirts and shorts (or trousers), with a blue striped tie and heavy black boots. The classrooms were housed in a series of small, squat, severe-looking buildings, almost barren of furnishings except for the scratchy tables and chairs. They were oppressively stuffy, with a couple of languorous ceiling fans slowly churning the hot air and scattering the drowsy flies.

The school principal, judging my educational preparedness purely by my ability to speak English, decided that I should join the eighth grade (I had completed just three months of *sixth* grade in Canada). Compounding matters, I joined the school in March, more than two months into the academic year.

In my first class on my first day at Christ Church, the teacher asked me who I was. I replied sitting in my chair, giving the good man my name, and urging him to call me “Raj” instead of “Rajendra.” There was shocked silence all around – you could have heard a starched collar crack. “Young man,” the teacher thundered, “In India, we show some respect to our teachers! STAND UP WHEN YOU TALK TO ME!” I stammered my apologies and rose slowly to my feet, smoothing the billowing shorts as I ascended. “So, where have you come from?” “We just moved here from Canada.” “Did they not teach you to say “Sir” in Canada?” “Yes, Sir. I mean, no, Sir.” Glowering, and visibly pleased at his power to so readily subdue me, Sir moved back to the front of the classroom, and proceeded to silently fill the blackboard with (to me) unintelligible math equations. An eternity later, the bell sounded, and I ate my packed lunch under the shade of a tree surrounded by glaring and hostile boys laughing and talking about me in Hindi.

At the end of that first day, I left the school compound blinking back tears, and walked across the street to pick up my nine year old sister from the female penitentiary. I found her standing alone at the bus stop, sobbing pitifully. Naturally, I could not show any weakness in front of her. I consoled her during the forty minute bus ride back home, and then the two of us spent the rest of the evening crying. It happened to be our mother’s birthday, and the two of us sang “Happy Birthday” to her between sobs, convinced that we ourselves would never be happy again. “We hate this horrible country,” we wailed. “Please, please, can we go back to Canada or California?”

In a couple of weeks, my father was due to return to Canada for three months as a visiting professor. I absolutely insisted that he take me back with him, since I could not possibly continue to live in India. I composed a twenty page letter to my father’s friend in Canada, Uncle Shyam, with whom we had shared a house for a few months. I pleaded with him to rescue me, offering to

clean, paint, mow, do whatever it would take to convince him to temporarily adopt me.

My father was sympathetic but obviously failed to appreciate the gravity of my situation. The next day, he came with me to school and had me demoted to the seventh grade, whereupon I was able to decipher about twenty percent of what was going on. This time, I knew exactly how to comport myself, and escaped any significant humiliations. I could not have been faulted for a lack of military bearing or a failure to show due respect. I think I must have said “Sir” to the bus driver.

As the days wore on ever so slowly, I waged a lonely struggle with the Hindi alphabet at home, working with a tutor for two hours every evening. By the end of the term, I had learned fourteen of the forty-four characters in the alphabet – quite an accomplishment, I felt. Soon, it was time for the mid-year exams. When I took the Hindi test, I was of course unable to even read it. So I wrote a little essay to the teacher (in English), explaining anew my predicament, and filled up the remainder of the note book with line after line of those fourteen characters I knew so well. I came home and reported that I had done quite well on my Hindi test. Imagine my surprise when I received a score of exactly zero out of fifty for my labors. Surely, there must have been some mistake. The same sad story was repeated in Sanskrit (our version of Latin).

In my algebra exam, one of the questions was to solve a set of three simultaneous equations in three unknowns. Since I had acquired only a nodding acquaintance with algebra, I had no idea how I was supposed to extract this information. I tried several hunches, and found to my immense pleasure that a solution of  $x=1$ ,  $y=2$  and  $z=3$  fit the three equations perfectly! In my answer book, then, I wrote “Obviously and evidently, the solution is  $x=1$ ,  $y=2$  and  $z=3$ .” Imagine my surprise when I got the exam back, and found that the conspiracy to make my life miserable continued. The teacher had written, in big red characters, “Obviously and evidently, you get a zero for this answer.” (I suspect he graded me harshly on the rest of the exam as well, as punishment for my insolence.) Apparently, I was expected to use commonly accepted algebraic procedures in solving the problem. I was in a high state of indignation for days. Clearly, I had the ability to eyeball algebra problems and generate solutions – why should they care *how* I arrived at the answers? In all likelihood, my methods were superior than their plodding ways.

My saving grace was English—or so I thought. The exam called for us to use several pairs of words in sentences to demonstrate their different meanings. This seemed so obvious to me that I thought they surely must have meant that I was to use each word *twice* in the same sentence, but with a different meaning for each of the two uses. So I constructed ten sentences along the lines of “The Principal of the school promptly paid back the entire loan, including the principle and all the accrued interest.” Once again, I found myself misunderstood and unappreciated.

You might summarize by saying that my first semester at that school was not a smashing

success. I was beginning to feel hunted and cornered. It seemed to me that at this rate, I would be lucky to escape that school in the next twenty years or so.

Fortunately, my luck was about to change. At the end of that summer, it was determined that since nothing could possibly be worse than Christ Church, we should try switching schools. There was, it turned out, a more humane institution across town, which would prove to be as nurturing an environment as the other had been debilitating. At St. Aloysius, there was an understanding Principal who said I did not have to pass Hindi or Sanskrit for a couple of years, and a sweet young English teacher who said “What a lovely accent!” upon first hearing me speak. I could have kissed her.

I have always considered myself fortunate to have gone to Christ Church first, since it made anything that came after seem quite pleasant. At St. Aloysius, all the teachers were reasonable individuals, and I was soon feeling quite at ease. Except, of course, in Sanskrit class. The teacher was Mr. Shastri (the name literally means “scholar”), a quixotic juxtaposition of extremely tight, shiny Western suits, a shaven head, a thin braided pig-tail and an elaborate, broad horizontal *tilak* across his expansive forehead. The diminutive but fierce Mr. Shastri brooked no excuses for not having memorized the prescribed Sanskrit phrases, which were entirely unfathomable to me. Failure to do so meant standing up on the desk and proffering one’s hands to him, to be swiftly swatted by his thin, ever present cane. While not especially painful, the experience was one which threatened to make me erupt into helpless laughter, as the five foot tall Mr. Shastri would leap up slightly on each swing, to get a better angle on some of the taller boys.

Within the year, we moved again, this time to the city of Indore, only thirty miles from Kesur, our village. My school here, St. Paul, proved to be only a small adjustment from St. Aloysius. By this time, I was reading and writing Hindi at about a third grade level (though I was in the eighth grade), and was quite proud of that accomplishment. Then came ninth grade, and “Higher Hindi,” a phrase which still evokes fear and awe in me (like “thermodynamics” and “heteroscadasticity”). Though the State Education Board allowed students a choice between Higher Hindi and Higher English, our school had decided that we needed both. I nearly wept when I saw what this entailed. We had seven books for Higher Hindi, including a dense volume consisting of a single 300 stanza poem. Written Hindi is almost an entirely different language from spoken Hindi, and I was once again hopelessly at sea. The teacher, in this case, took my ineptitude with good humor. After I had received failing grades in several monthly Hindi tests, he declared that if I ever did get a passing grade (which would be four out of ten), every student’s score would be boosted by ten percent. This immediately united the entire class behind my Hindi-learning efforts; it was touching to see all the genuine concern being expressed all around me. I think I finally rewarded them halfway through tenth grade.

## ***Rediscovering Kesur***

Looking back, my happiest times in those years were spent away from the city, back at our family farm in Kesur, where my grandfather, my father's brothers and their families lived. I spent the summers driving a tractor and using my American air-gun to shoot birds and other innocent creatures indiscriminately. I soon acquired a reputation as the terror of the village—a strangely incoherent child (my Hindi was still very broken), cursed by many old women. Once, with no real provocation, I shot a pigeon, which then staged an elaborate death scene inside one of the few drinking wells in the village.

Fortunately for all concerned, this phase of my development soon passed. Though I had developed into a crack shot, I turned into a qualified pacifist, shooting only animals we would actually eat. Evenings were spent playing cards with my grandfather, cousins and uncles—a simple variant of bridge called “Seven Hands.” Nights were spent in the company of my many cousins, sleeping on the roof under the stars and chatting into the night.

Ours was a large village, for India—about 5000 people. Our house, which looked more like a minor fort, was known as the *Rowla* (“the landlord's house”), and separated the Hindu side of the village from its Muslim side. Actually, Kesur differed from many villages in that it had two *Rowlas*—the *Chhota* (small) *Rowla*, which was ours, and the *Bada* (big) *Rowla*, which was located nearby.

The names were relics of an earlier generation; it was common knowledge that *Chhota* was really *Bada* and vice versa. The *thakurs* of *Bada Rola* had squandered most of their land on drink, while our grandfather had added to our land through hard work; they had a few sorry-looking oxen, we had three tractors, including a brand new British-made “Massey Ferguson,” a gift from my father that was the envy of the entire district. The denizens of *Bada Rowla* were a forlorn bunch; some of the brothers were slowly dying of liver disease from too much alcohol. The sons were unlikely to turn this around; one contested the presidentship of the local high school student body, and bought his votes with numerous bottles of liquor. More and more of their land was put up as collateral and ultimately sold to enable them to meet their rising debts.

Though this was 1970, there was much that was quite feudal about our life in Kesur. My grandfather was the local landlord, and was known as the *Thakur Sahib*. His sons were called *Kunwar Sahibs*. Their sons (my generation) were *Bhanwar Sahibs*, and so on. I was quite taken aback at being granted such a title, and never did get used to the fact that very few of the village people called me by my name. In fact, even brothers and sisters were supposed to call their older siblings by “*Dadabhai*” (older brother) or “*Jeeja*” (older sister). I was uncomfortable with this, and insisted that *Manju* and *Sanjay* call me by just my name.

Why were we so different from all the people I knew in school, I asked. We were *Rajputs*, I was

told, members of the warrior class which had ruled over some 500 small kingdoms before the British created present-day India. In particular, our family's ancestry could be traced back directly to the Chittor kingdom of Rana Pratap, who was celebrated for being the only king not to be conquered by the Mughals, in spite of many ferocious battles. All the other kingdoms had succumbed to Akbar; many had given their daughters in marriage to him (he had thus accumulated three hundred queens). Some had been forcibly converted to Islam. But not Rana Pratap.

After my first summer in Kesur learning all this, I was suffused with Rajput pride and resolve. I returned to school that fall, and early on informed the class bully that he had best not mess with me, since I was (pause) a *Rajput*. The general mirth occasioned by this comment soon disabused me of my notions of Rajput splendor as an effective deterrent to aggression. Eventually, I found that addressing the bully's chin directly achieved much quicker and more gratifying results.

I would realize in a couple of years that the glory days of Rajputs were long gone. The community had fallen on bad times. My cousins had filled my highly impressionable young head with stories about the glorious Rajput history and nobility, but had neglected to mention that the vast majority of Rajputs were still living in the feudal past, often selling their lands to support their drinking habits (such as our Bada Rowla neighbors). The Rajput child is born to a landed family, and his future is thus assured – or as it more often turns out, he is condemned to an existence largely devoid of any real ambition or scope. Land is scarce and thus precious; because you are born to it, you must make use of it. It is unusual in India to find many Rajput professionals, to see them educated beyond the now customary B.A. Education has just been seen as too proletarian a pursuit, something best left to the banias (traders) and the Brahmins.

My grandfather and my father commanded real respect in the village, because of what they had done in the past. On the other hand, the artificial respect shown my uncles because of their titles and the legacy of their past powers was a deeply dangerous thing. Some of them were quite domineering and, to me, callous in their attitudes towards other villagers and their own workers. I could see the resentment in the eyes of some of the laborers, and warned my uncles that they could not continue to treat people in this manner without inciting an eventual backlash. (Sure enough, a number of incidents were to occur some years down the road which bore this out.)

Our family was in many respects an exception to the general decline of the Rajput community, due, of course, to my grandfather. The stories about him are legion. He was one of only two children, and the only son - rare indeed in India in the early part of this century. As a youth, he once took a gun on one of his nightly forays into the jungle, against the wishes of his father. He had an accident in the jungle, and a 22-caliber bullet lodged itself in the inner part of his left arm. Rather than rush home and deal with his father, he extracted the bullet, pressed all the hanging

skin back into the wound, and tied it tight with twine and some leaves. He hid his arm for weeks while it healed. Later, there was an impressive scar as proof. How was anyone to live up to this man's strength and resolve? He paid back all his father's debts, released the family land from its creditors, rebuilt the Rowla into a huge brick and concrete structure, bought the first tractor in the entire region (an early Russian model with about sixteen moving parts), and would drive it for thirty-six hours at a stretch when the need arose. Thakur Girwar Singh of Kesur was now known throughout the region as a man to be reckoned with. Thanedars and Collectors came by to pay courtesy visits whenever they were in the area. Politicians sought his counsel and his endorsement.

### ***Dassehra in Kesur***

Our trips to Kesur were either during school breaks or festivals. Of the latter, none held more importance for us than Dassehra (a festival celebrating the return of the god Ram to his kingdom after twelve years of exile).

The Hindu religion, like most religions, has a number of rituals which over time lose their symbolic meaning and become ends unto themselves. Every Dassehra, my grandfather held a *havan*, in which three family members (from among my uncles and cousins) would sit around an open fire, while a priest occupied the fourth side and read from the scriptures in Sanskrit (which nobody there understood; my own training at the hands of Mr. Shastri was laughably inadequate). Upon receiving periodic promptings from him, we would pour a quantity of *ghee* (clarified butter) into the fire, a ritual whose significance and meaning no-one was ever able to explain to me. In a typical night, we would burn about twenty kilos of ghee, which was scarce and very expensive (the equivalent of several months of wages for one of our farm workers). I joked to my grandfather about dropping some firecrackers down on the holy fire, from the temporary hole in ceiling above. My grandfather (not a particularly religious man the rest of the year) was livid, though my father was amused at the irreverent thought. When my father came down with a bad stomach ache the next day, my grandfather was quick to ascribe it to the blasphemous goings-on of the night before.

Another Dassehra ritual was to try and teach the young boys how to tie the "saffa," a turban worn by Rajputs on special occasions. This occurred at the local Hanuman Temple (Hanuman was the monkey-god who helped Ram escape from the evil rakshas (demon) Ravana), where yet another *havan* took place each year. The saffa-tying exhibition was much awaited by all those in attendance, as I was invariably the focus of this effort. Try as I might, I could not master the technique, and my efforts usually fell (or were knocked off) my head as soon as I put them up.

Also every year, and usually at the end of the Hanuman Temple *havan*, one of the youngsters was handed a sword and asked to behead a young goat. This was the macho event of the year



(one of my uncles could behead a goat with one hand) and rite-of-passage for every young Rajput. The scene was an eerie one all around: the beating of drums, men carrying flaring torches, a roaring crowd. One man crouches behind the unfortunate goat, holding its hind legs. The goat, its bleating drowned out in all the din, turns the front part of its body from one side to another. Finally the swordsman lets swing with a smooth, angled blow at the neck, (which in my case, was usually a flailing glancing blow). If the swordsman (and the goat) were lucky, the head would come off in a clean swipe, bounding across the dirt still bleating silently, the rest of the body bleeding pulsatingly and profusely. If not, a reservist would be called up to sit on the goat and sever the head, while the crowd turned its attention to (good-naturedly) ridiculing the failed executioner. Later that night, as the featured goat was consumed, much would be made of this, with idle threats to dress the erstwhile swordsman in a skirt and bangles. We filmed this event once, causing poor Mrs. Verma, an innocent city-dwelling acquaintance, to faint in our living room a few months later.

My score on beheading goats remains about 0 for 5, with little prospect for improvement now. My grandfather would tell me I should practice with onions, though I never did see how this would improve my backswing and follow-through.

The most anticipated event at Dassehra was the arrival of the “Randi,” a nautch-girl brought in from the big city, accompanied by several world-weary musicians and tingling expectations. The randi was an exotic woman of proven dubious virtue and exciting possibilities.

My father and I (about fourteen at the time) inevitably objected when the idea of getting a randi was tentatively floated a few weeks before the big day. Our objections were high-minded and virtuous but also half-hearted. While admirably principled, we were certainly not *fanatical* about the issue. On the appointed day, the randi would arrive in the village, preceded by numerous reports about her progress in our direction. The day would be filled with misgivings and recriminations. Come nighttime, however, everyone would relent and join in on the gaiety.

On this day, the Rowla was open to any and all. Towards nightfall, people started streaming in and taking up advantageous positions. Soon, the randi and her supporting cast arrived, and were given a room off the dance area. Liquor flowed quite freely, much of it provided by my grandfather, especially for our regular farm workers. Soon, the music welled up from the harmonium, the *tabla* player drummed up a heartstopping beat, and the randi undulated out from the shadows towards the brightly lit center.

Nothing untoward ever really happened (as far as I know), since the randi danced until daylight, but the whole enterprise was filled with the unmistakable scent of sin and man’s weakness. Meanwhile, the women of the Rowla would crowd around the large main door separating the outer courtyard and public portions from the private area within. They giggled and peered over

and around one another to catch a glimpse of this heroically wanton woman, singing and swaying while hundreds of men (and boys) in various states of drunkenness uproariously egged her on. Every so often, somebody would get up (or designate an eager underling) and take a five or ten rupee note, circle it over the randi's bobbing head, and drop it on the impassive musicians. Without missing a note, one of them would gather it up and stuff it into one of the crevices of their instruments.

### ***Kunwar Sahib***

My father was not the oldest of his siblings. He had an older brother, now known only as Kunwar Sahib. There were many stories about him - he was the most promising of the Kunwar Sahibs - tall, handsome, intelligent, gentle of manner. My grandfather relied on him, my father looked up to him. After his marriage, the story goes, things started changing slowly. His wife was an avid practitioner of native medicines, and brought back all manner of concoctions for him when she returned from one of her frequent trips to her "maica" in Rajasthan. Presumably, these elixirs were supposed to imbue him with all kinds of powers. Instead, it is alleged, they started affecting his mind.

More than likely, these allegations against my aunt were born of resentment and frustration, directed against the outsider who had come into the family and tried to change her husband. How could they burden this poor woman with this kind of guilt?

It started as brief lapses into uncontrollable fury, followed by periods when Kunwar Sahib would once again be gentle and loving. Gradually, the bad periods started dominating, until he had to be restrained and confined to a little corner room. There he would rage and thunder most of the day, lashing himself against the wall repeatedly. He would tear off his clothes and occasionally break into a coherent stream of unbelievable foul curses. All the terrible sounds coming from that room are an indelible part of my childhood memories.

My grandfather tried every possible remedy - Western, Ayurvedic, Homeopathic. When none of the conventional remedies worked, he turned to the unorthodox ones. For many years, our house was a beacon for every miracle worker and faith healer in the region. There was the Guru in Sailana, who became quite a sensation for a couple of years. He cured illnesses by striking people on the shoulders with the blunt side of a sword. After an elaborate and high security expedition to Sailana, Kunwar Sahib received the treatment calmly. All it did, however, was to give my uncle was a very sore shoulder and an even more grumpy disposition than usual.

Another healer came and took up residence in the Rowla for several weeks, the better to prepare for the day of healing. During this period, he required a steady stream of foodstuffs, including precisely one and a half kilos of mutton for each meal. Two weeks later, glowing with good

health, he presented us with a list of item he would need for the cure.

While most of the items were quite strange, one in particular stumped us. He needed two hairs from a tiger's moustache. One of my uncles and I went to a number of eerie stores in little back streets in Indore, stores which I never imagined existed, which carried every imaginable weird thing except what we wanted. Finally, we went to Sanghi Motors, the majestic Ambassador car dealer in town. While I engaged the manager in casual conversation about the 1972 Ambassador (which was exactly like the 1958-71 Ambassadors), my uncle sidled up to the large stuffed tiger which was displayed in the center of the store, and casually extracted two moustache hairs from the beast. Convinced that we now had the cure for my uncle's illness, we made our triumphant way back. Unfortunately, this cure, like the dozens before it, failed entirely.

Kunwar Sahib slowly became a part of the background during my visits to Kesur. He was wasting away, and clearly there was no cure about to materialize. When he finally died some years later, my cousin Gajendra (one of Kunwar Sahib's three sons) and I took a long walk and tried to sort through our emotions. We felt a palpable sense of relief, rather than any real grief. I think for my cousin, especially, his passing served to remove an everyday reminder of his own vulnerability - after all, wasn't this sort of illness usually passed from father to son?

The rest of the family found our walk to be in extremely poor taste. Poor Gajendra was told "Can't you even pretend to be in mourning? He was your father, and all you can think about is going for a walk in the jungle." The mourning process dictated that we were not to leave the house for eleven days after the cremation; on the twelfth day, there would be a formal ceremony, at which time all the sons, nephews and younger brothers would have their heads shaven clean. Only then, wearing a hat if they wanted, could they venture out and resume their lives.

My father had refused to shave his head when his mother had died, and refused now to let my head be shaved either. Gajendra, of course, was shaved on both occasions, and was soon walking around with a floppy hat on his head.

### ***The Daily News***

My grandfather was avidly interested in world affairs, and followed the news closely. Naturally, he was cynical about much of what he heard and read. Mrs. Gandhi's name would unfailingly elicit a grunt and a muttered, "That *raand*" (a raand would be a randi who didn't just dance, if you know what I mean). When his eyesight started failing him in the early 1970s, my grandfather refused to get an operation for his cataract trouble, fearing that he would go blind, just as his sister had many years earlier. He couldn't read the newspaper anymore. So he asked the newspaper man to read it to him. Thus began a new ritual.

Every morning around eight, my grandfather would go out, pull up a chair and sit down in the

sun. Seeing him outside, several older men would silently appear from various directions and would settle down for some conversation; some would sit down under a tree, others would improvise a stool out of virtually anything, still others would merely squat on the ground and doodle with twigs. Then they would start talking about various things, in the worldly-wise way of older men. They would talk about the crops, about the weather (the monsoon was always an important part of life), the prices of things, politics, how things in general were going to seed, the various shocking things their sons had done, and so on. Soon, the newspaper man would trudge up the hill, explaining that the bus from Indore had been delayed, thus making him later than usual. My grandfather would invite him to take the other waiting chair, and say, “So what’s been happening in world?”

Over time, the newspaper man became a very fast but coherent reader. He knew exactly what interested my grandfather, and read those stories in full; otherwise he would just present the headlines in rapid fire succession. My grandfather would prompt him, “What happened with those Americans in Iran?,” “Did the price of sugar go up again?,” “What are they saying about the monsoon?” Each answer would be met with a chorus of knowing and usually disapproving comments. The men were quite careful to find out where my grandfather stood on a particular issue, before pronouncing a position of their own. Nothing was to disturb the harmony and general agreeability of these mornings.

One of my grandfather’s most regular companions was an old Muslim man named Abdul Karim, known to all as Munshiji. He had never been known to ever disagree with my grandfather in thirty or forty years. On most days, he did nothing but hang around my grandfather all day and carry on a stream of agreeable chatter. Munshiji was the original “Yes Man,” but had no ulterior motive in being thus; it was just the way he was, and we were glad for the decades of companionship he gave our grandfather.

### ***Other Images of Kesur***

I looked out of a window in the Rowla once, and was astonished to see a strange looking man perched high atop a tree, speaking loudly to no one in particular. My aunt explained that he was a Harbola from Bundelkhand (all Harbolas are from Bundelkhand). For centuries now, their job has been to travel around the countryside spreading the news, a tradition which started when the Queen of Jhansi was being defeated in battle and needed to rally support from nearby areas. The Harbola finds the tallest tree in a village, clambers atop it and then relates tales in a loud sing-song voice with amazing carrying power—a sort of Paul Harvey without the radio. Presumably, there is a living in this sort of thing

In addition to driving a tractor, I was fascinated with riding in bullock carts. I recall going to my first Ram-Leela (a sort of vaudeville in which the story of the Ramayana is performed) in a

bullock cart to a village several kilometers away. We set out at nightfall, since Ram-Leelas are only performed after dark. Driving a bullock cart calls for more than steering and shifting gears—it calls for a close understanding of animal psychology. You need to make the right sounds and administer an occasional hearty twist of the tail. I discovered, in addition, that opening and shutting an umbrella while driving the bullocks elicited an immediate and sustained spurt of speed. We bumped along in the full moon night. The Ram-Leela was entertaining, with its garish costumes, the young boys dressed up to play the women's roles, the exaggerated acting, the hearty audience involvement. Afterwards, we bought some incredibly sweet (sugar being much cheaper than milk powder) sweets, some incredibly hot "sev" (a fried snack made of gram flour) and cups of sweet, milky tea.

The communication revolution came late to Kesur. As recently as 1981, there was only one telephone in the entire village, located in the post office. Here, if one was persevering and extremely patient, calls could be cajoled through the system by talking first to an operator in Dhar (our district town), who would then connect you to an operator in Indore, who would then route your call further along. Making a long distance call (there was no other kind) involved booking the call, and then waiting for hours until it was put through.

Our incoming phone number was 12. Once, I received a call from New York in the middle of the afternoon. Upon learning of the call's origin, the operator became quite excited, and quickly dispatched two kids to the Rowla to call me, while he asked questions about New York in fractured English. The kids, soon joined by several others, came racing down the hill and back up the other hill towards Rowla, yelling "Arre, phone aayo re, phone aayo re!" ("Oh my God, a phone came, a phone came"). Fortunately, I was at home, and raced back to the post office with my little retinue. There I had a transfixed audience as I talked to the caller from Columbia University. Afterwards, there was an air of triumph, and of satisfaction at having successfully completed this technological tour de force.

### ***Closing the Circle***

I returned to the United States in September 1981, after about ten and a half years in India. In many ways, the intervening period had been a departure, and the US felt a great deal like "home" to me. New York was a long way from Kesur, but it really wasn't all that far from Bombay, where I had spent the previous two years.

What I am grateful for today is that I was able to come to the United States on my own terms. Had my parents continued living here, I would have grown up without any real choices; I would have been an American by default, and would probably have had to make a tortuous journey later in life to try and understand my own roots. That sounds like an awfully hackneyed thing to do, but it is a very real need for people with my experiences.

My middle years in India gave me some sense of my origins; much of what had caused me wonderment in the beginning eventually became commonplace. I felt, though, that I could still see a great deal which my cousins and friends really could not—things which still struck my eyes which really could not be seen by them. This included many positive and wonderful things; it also encompassed some things that appalled me but which others seemed to take in stride.