

2009 India Trip

For my eighth visit I went to India alone for the first time, in response to a perceived need for sharing the teachings I have gleaned from my life in the Gurukula. These teachings require an inordinately long gestation period, for which not too many have persevered. Thus it is only natural for the “old guard” to do what it can to keep them alive.

Along with this one call to action, a compelling question underlay my sojourn to India, namely, “How did Narayana Guru have such a transformative impact on his native place, when so many others around the globe have tried and failed?”

Neither the action program nor the contemplative investigation could be said to be wholly successful, yet much was learned and much was shared. I’ll record a little of what transpired.

My month in India this last time was one of the longest months in my entire life. A full accounting would fill a book. To be merciful, I’ll just sketch a few highlights.

Everywhere I went I was in the good hands of friends. My overall feeling about India is that you are always cared for there, even by strangers. Despite the incredible chaos, someone will always help you get through it.

I began with a 12 hour layover at the new Bangalore Airport. Happily Vinaya came up to spend a few hours (I did not know yet that he had to come an additional 35 km, or an hour each way, beyond the old airport that has been literally swallowed up by what is now India’s third largest city). As we talked about the difficulties of finding self-motivated students, I mentioned the myth of Sisyphus, the Greek prince who was condemned to roll a huge boulder up a steep hill, only to have it slip from his grasp and roll back to the bottom, for all eternity. When you try to ignite a fire in a soul that’s still too green to burn, the experience gives the same feeling. Basically the myth refers to what life is like when you aren’t in tune with your natural predilections or dharma.

Vinaya remembered a favorite character of Nataraja Guru's, Naranathu Bhranthan, or Madman Naranathu. Like Sisyphus, he would push a rock up a hill, but then he would let it go himself, and would clap and laugh as he watched it roll back to its former equilibrium. Probably he was delighted that whatever effort we put forth is perfectly compensated by Nature or the Absolute. Yet even knowing this we still have to roll our rocks, or else nothing interesting would happen.

The comparison of Naranathu and Sisyphus says a lot about the difference in culture between Europe and Ancient, if not Modern, India. European culture is full of labor and hard work and misery, with results that are sabotaged and never quite arrive. India's spiritual parentage advocated delight and happiness, mirthful at the vagaries of fate. Sadly, its children are busy adopting the Western approach, and have largely forgotten how to laugh. Since the Gurukula once had a sense of humor, I felt the need to pull a few legs and elbow some ribs in its honor. Perhaps my task was another Sisyphean adventure, but the rock I chose to roll was very light. Plus, as most of you know already, I favor the madman over the pedant.

The ancient Egyptians had a myth that when you die your heart is weighed on a balance scale against a feather. If it is lighter you are admitted to heaven.

After awhile Vinaya jumped on a bus, and some hours later I boarded a flight over the Nilgiris to Coimbatore.

Vyasa Prasad met me with his Mahindra jeep. He would be my skillful chauffeur for the first half of my month, which allowed us to explore several out-of-the-way places. We first went up to Fernhill, near Ooty, to conduct a few classes at Nitya's old base. Like most Gurukulas, the place is hanging on mainly due to the memories of past glory. The absence of a Guru is the most tangible impression one has. Still, Mieko and Tanmaya, and occasionally Vyasa Prasad, act as hosts to prevent it from becoming an utter ghost town.

On the way up we stopped to see Manu and Showkath near Metapallayam. Manu is the boy that Nitya adopted in 1993 or '95 and then bequeathed to Deb and me for his financial support. He is now approaching college graduation, and is a sweet and gentle lad, back to living with his family. Showkath, readers of L&B will remember, was one of Nitya's main students and caretakers toward the end of his life. His Malayalam language travelogue about visiting the Himalayas with Nitya is entering its fifth printing. He is bright, centered, and independent, but sadly has been ostracized by the Gurukula due to his Muslim roots. I apologized to him that the current Gurukula was unable to value much beyond the ordinary and was degenerating into caste pride, which Narayana Guru unequivocally railed against. Despite my entreaty, Showkath refused to come up to Ooty to join the classes. Like many intelligent souls he has left the Gurukula in search of greener pastures.

My overall impression of the Gurukulas I visited was of wasted or untapped potential. Probably because of the excellence of the three larger-than-life Gurus who shaped it, those remaining seem to be waiting for the next savant to come along. They don't realize that we are it, for better or for worse. I don't know what it will take for the robe-wearing disciples to catch on to what wearing the robes means. How do we convert from absorbers to radiators of our wisdom heritage? It's all the more problematic because we stand in the shadow of giants.

That said—and I don't want to minimize the shortcomings I encountered—when you assess India against the US there is no comparison. The average Indian I have encountered is mentally alert, bright, and eager to learn. They thrive on exchanges of ideas, and are without exception generous and considerate. Americans, on the other hand, largely reflect what can only be described as vapid mediocrity. There is little or no wisdom tradition here, only an unexamined muddle of vague thoughts. I don't know whether it's due to the overdose of dazzlingly shallow entertainment, ubiquitous propaganda, or social angst due to oppressive laws and

mindsets, but Americans have a hard time transcending their negative self-images. Nitya once expressed the contrast between Indians and Americans as India being a very rich country, while America is very poor. It's still true.

In both India and America, spirituality is often equated with repetition of mind-numbing rituals and "techniques". It's easier to slog through a regimen than to make the effort to think for yourself, which could be said to be what spirituality boils down to. Effort per se certainly has some value, but the proof is in the pudding. Is the end result dullness or clarity? Are we gaining freedom, or merely hitching ourselves to somebody else's wagon? I guess the choice is primarily a matter of personal preference. Humans are made up of both leaders and followers. I only chafe when the leaders insist on following, which is happening in the Gurukula.

Vyasa, Mieko and I paid a visit to the Nataraja Gurukula, the last vestige of the hippie splinter group, poised on top of the north face of the Nilgiris. They have a spectacular view and a quiet spot near the end of a long dead end spur. Old hatchets have mostly been buried, and I was touched that Brigit, last of the old gang, had read *Love and Blessings*, Nitya's autobiography. She mentioned how moving the recounting of Nitya's discipleship with Nataraja Guru was in it.

Descending the hill to Coimbatore once again, I was invited to CMS College to give a talk to over 100 mainly grad students. This was a new experience for me, and one that until recently would have caused me major anxiety. But a deeply felt confidence has conquered those emotions, and it became an enjoyable informative session, with the kids staying interested for over an hour, and then asking some very good questions. My opening line was "Americans speak perfect English. Indians speak perfect English. But neither understands the other at all." It got a laugh there. Later, in Mumbai, the same line was greeted with stony silence, probably because the statement is true: they didn't understand me.

The main hook of my talk was suggested by a pretty parrot in a cage at the home where we had spent the night. I told them, “We are all beautiful birds in cages. Birds may resent captivity at first, but they quickly learn not to bump into the bars of their prisons. They walk around in circles, and don’t even notice their confinement after a while. People do the same thing. The only difference is that for us the bars are invisible, so it’s harder to even know we are trapped. We are meant to soar, and instead we simply bide our time until we die in the place we are kept, unresisting prisoners.

“Spirituality consists of first coming to realize that we are held prisoner when those around us don’t even seem to notice. Then we have to feel our way, searching for the invisible door in our invisible cage. When we discover it we have to explore some more until we find the latch, and then painstakingly pry it loose with our beak, and push the door open. Many people stop with that, but the intrepid ones venture out and eventually learn to fly. They may fall and crash a few times, but that’s just part of the learning process. Like birds, we are all meant to glide through our beautiful world, exploring its wonders, pecking its fruit, chattering with our fellows.”

The first question was from a professor of philosophy, about some religious practice. I shocked the elders in the crowd by admitting I didn’t know anything about religion, that spirituality and religion are two different things. I spoke a lot about the distinction. In retrospect I might have said that in my analogy religion would be the decorating of the cage to make it more attractive, coupled with certain rituals to “magic” the cage to disappear, preferably after death. But even without the magic, when the bird dies it gets taken out and disposed of. Vedanta, on the other hand, is about intelligently releasing yourself from confinement. Religion strives to convince the master to release you. To me, the assumption that you aren’t capable of doing it yourself is emasculating.

Speeches in India are made much of, with at least two formal welcome/introductions, presentation of flowers, concluding formal thank you, and in this case a presentation of some dakshina—a speaker’s fee. Afterwards we had a tour followed by a fine feast in the college’s mock hotel bar/restaurant, part of their culinary institute. Coimbatore is a small city of 4 or 5 million people, and it boasts over 30 colleges. There are a very large number of kids undergoing education there. Vast crowds of them wait by the roadside in hopes of snagging standing room on a bus, on which they are the lowest priority passengers. Sometimes they have to hang onto the outside. It never fails to blow my mind how many there are, and how many would be run over and killed if they were Americans.

Vyasa and I worked our way down to Varkala, stopping in Palakkad to see saintly Indira, and then on to endless road wars. In the 30 years since my first visit, the towns have grown together and the rice fields have been abandoned, so that once pristine stretch of Kerala is now a nearly unbroken canyon of dingy storefronts. Former towns are now teeming cities, and a pall of smoke hangs over the entire subcontinent. Driving is a mystical, death-defying act of barely-controlled chaos. As T. K. Gopi told me later, “If you follow the rules, you will die.” This is of course wonderful spiritual as well as automotive advice, but I quickly abandoned my fantasy of taking a spin at the wheel. Detachment can also be a spiritual practice, and acting as a spotter of traffic hazards kept me plenty busy.

The pollution in the air is stunning. This is the “smoky season,” the time when no rains come to wash the crud into the ground. Even in very remote areas it is a dense canopy. I don’t know whether the new civic sense of sanitation is a blessing or a curse. The mountains of garbage are carefully swept into piles daily. First the cows, dogs and goats get to scour through for anything remotely edible, and then what remains is burned. Much of it is plastic, a.k.a. forms of petroleum laced with toxic

chemicals. Narayana Guru would not be amused: he thought the world was too polluted in his day.

A sumptuous traditional breakfast was served us by a wealthy devotee a couple of hours west of Palakkad. At one point he proudly mentioned that he had all the Gurukula books and a subscription to the magazine. He showed me his bookshelf, which sure enough was filled with those familiar faces. Prominently displayed in front of them was *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler's magnum opus. He quickly pulled it out and hid it away.

This was only the first of many indications that mainstream Hindus are turning into extreme reactionaries in an attempt to safeguard their privileged status. Narayana Guru, whose philosophy is radically liberal and egalitarian, is rapidly becoming just another worshipful symbol of unquestioning belief. Alert members of that non-organization called the Narayana Gurukula can witness firsthand the conversion of a transcendent vision into one more tawdry religious faction. All that's required is for good men to do nothing.

Thus the question of how Narayana Guru occasioned such renewal in South India must be tempered with the realization that most of the progress is strictly temporary. The human tendency toward tamasic stasis must be actively warded off again and again. This is true of individual inflexibility just as much as societal ossification. Once we stop our "rage against the dying of the light" we quickly succumb to habitual behaviors, morphing into caricatures of our former promise, bleating sheep led by deranged shepherds.

To this end the Gurukula should be a beacon against smug satisfaction, but it can hardly be viewed that way anymore. Unlike Christianity, where the symbolism and secret language is so arcane its meaning was forgotten within a generation or two, Narayana Guru and his successors spoke in eminently clear, modern phraseology. You have to actively bury your head in the sand to miss the purport.

There is a paradox at work here. When you uphold uncomfortable truths, those who revere comfort will walk away from you. Absolutism is by its very nature unpopular. To build a movement one must water it down, and water it down again. But as soon as you do, it is no longer absolutism but relativism, no longer liberating but binding.

Most of the inmates at the Gurukulas seem to be preoccupied with other matters. Self-absorption carries the day. I suppose it has its positive side, but it strikes the visitor as a lack of concern. There is little feeling of welcome, unless you are already part of the clan. This is only partly a matter of language.

The main problem as I see it is there is no guru-disciple style teaching going on. There are speeches and seminars and readings, but they float in a sterile atmosphere that gives them no context, other than a big picture of Narayana Guru on the wall. The swamis are glum because there is nothing happening. They aren't participating in any transformative education, either as students or teachers.

People are taught to believe that by restraining themselves they are being spiritual. Yet only by creatively expressing their dharma can they be truly spiritual. We admire and even worship those who are quiet, calm, well-behaved, withdrawn, etc., but they have all too often killed the spark inside to be that way. Spiritual instruction is intended to allow us to become what we truly are, which in all cases is a vast and unique being. The universe wasn't created to limit uniqueness, but to allow it to blossom into myriad possibilities.

It may well be that we reincarnate because we come to the end of our life and realize that we haven't truly lived. We haven't fulfilled our potential. Instead, we put ourselves on hold for some hypothetical reason that boils down to being a trap. Or a bird cage. The awareness that we aren't yet truly alive, if it is acute enough, reignites the will to live, and so constitutes a real rebirth. If we can live again in the present life, well and good. If we are at death's

door already, mentally or physically, we can only hope there will be another chance somewhere in another life. In this there are no guarantees, only promises from those who know not.

“Be restrained” in Narayana Guru and others means to restrain our chaotic peripheral interests, to allow for concentration and focus. It doesn’t mean that *everything* is to be restrained!

Most people are looking for love in all the wrong places. What they crave is an intimate relationship, but the urge gets diverted into any number of side issues. Of course this sublimated or repressed eroticism beautifies the world in lots of ways if it breaks out as artistic or civic activity. But one way or the other, in personal love or artistic expression or both, the ananda factor needs to be present in life for it to be meaningful.

A swami’s love relationship could be with a guru, or the universe. Most of us find it in interpersonal relationships like marriage. Beneath the surface of most seekers is a craving for a loving companion, and often when that’s found the seeking ceases.

I say all this because it is apparent that a significant portion of Gurukula inmates are spiritually constipated. They have run away from the programmed bondage of marriage, but have not replaced their love urges with any viable substitute. Prayer and suspension of thought processes work for some people, but they are alien to most of us. We crave action, involvement, interest.

Becoming an adult in the modern sense is to become inured to the pervasive state of lovelessness, resigned to a pauper’s life in matters of the heart. This holds for both sannyasins and householders.

The running away part is a good sign, though, and it should be met with exciting alternatives. Marriage and other types of social structures carry a million rules and obligations. The longer a society lasts without throwing them away, the more onerous they become. No one can blame a young soul for rejecting the gilded prison with the beckoning finger on its gate. It’s a sign of vitality, of spirit. Too bad most ashrams substitute a slightly modified

version of the social prison in which to snare the trusting souls who come to them.

At the Narayana Guru temple in Mumbai I met a 30-year-old swami, who has his own ashram in Kerala. He's from the SNDP, not the Gurukula. He was there to give a well-attended talk on family relations. He looked for all the world like a trapped wild animal inside a pious veneer. He seemed nervous and even miserable. I thought, What does he know about family relations? He has thrown them all away. He's here to mouth platitudes for people to nod knowingly over, to maintain the status quo. I can't imagine a worse subject for an Indian swami to pontificate over. He knows nothing about the subject. No one who has not lived in an intimate relationship should ever open their mouth about any kind of family matters.

By the way, this is one subject where Nataraja Guru is almost as ignorant as the unhappy swami. He never had a relationship with a woman. His Man-Woman Dialectics is purely hypothetical and abstract. He should have had a grandmother around to straighten him out! I know that some of his disciples gamely tried to salvage their dissolving marriages by reading that book, actually a survey of Greek tragedy more than anything else. What a tragic way to deal with a life partner—no wonder those marriages failed or were severely strained! In other areas, Nataraja Guru's wisdom was vast and helpful, but abstraction itself is a recipe for disaster in personal interactions.

Interestingly, I just ran across this in my own Gita commentary, Ch. XI, verse 23:

As already noted, many people enter spiritual life not in a dispassionate search for truth or scientific understanding, but to make their fragile or defensive egos unassailable. By joining an established religious setup they become angelic by association, and any criticism can be taken as hostility toward God or the founding saint and dismissed out of hand. The implication is, "I'm in a divine gathering, which makes me

divine too. Therefore if you disagree with me, you should be exiled or destroyed.” We see this bald-faced egoism plainly in the two-year-old, but by adulthood the urge has been cloaked in more subtle guises.

Obviously such people don’t go to a guru who will criticize them, either. They seek the benignly smiling ones who treat them as their own dear child. Shelter from the storm is adequate, and satisfies the animal instinct to hide from danger. But brave seekers of truth like Arjuna must be prepared to undergo a baptism by fire, where the guru brings their faults out into the open so that they can be acknowledged and relinquished. Coming out of hiding, they eventually discover that there is nothing to fear, and make strides toward genuine fearlessness.

Fundamentalist Hindus are vying with Christians to plumb new depths of stupidity and triviality, as I learned later in my trip when I came in contact with newspapers. Gangs were attacking couples and publicly burning pictures of hearts with arrows through them. Venting Holy Fury against Valentine’s Day indeed! It’s a trivial, harmless celebration, conceived as a commercial proposition, and aimed mainly at the amusement of young children. Undoubtedly there are better things, as also worse. At least Christians go around draping towels over the naked breasts of their former symbols of justice. In India, where such “obscene” symbolism has not been used for 2000 years, angry crowds have to go farther afield in search of targets.

Is there nothing more worthy of our activism? On the day when we can look across the land and see only a garden, filled with well fed people living meaningful lives, breathing clean air, walking on ground free of garbage past well-tended animals, in a world without violence, then perhaps we can afford to turn our efforts toward such powder puff issues as PDAs—public displays of affection.

Until then we will win hearts through our intelligently directed energies and through love itself. Ranting and raving over non-issues will not bring converts, except the demented, and even simple people can grasp the contradiction of killing in the name of ahimsa or the ten commandments. I hope so, anyway.

Movements like the SRS or the RSS are the best possible advertisements for Christianity and Islam. In fact, one can only suspect them of being secretly agents for one or both of those religions. Stupidity doesn't have evolutionary merit. Quite the reverse!

Modern mass media is attracted to criminal behavior and shuns complexity. This makes it harder than ever for intelligent leaders to attract a following, and perhaps easier than ever for half-baked schemers to do so. It seems that nowadays a Narayana Guru would be elbowed aside by noisier or more photogenic activists.

Most people are content to be led, and most leaders are those pragmatic enough to take advantage of this fact. For every Jesus or Narayana Guru, there are dozens of Hitler-Cheney-Stalin types lined up to try their hand at "saving the world" and lining their pockets in the bargain. A century ago the inhabitants of South India were very lucky indeed to be guided by a wise rishi instead of a half-baked demagogue.

Shepherd/sheep allusions are familiar hangovers from the Aryan Age, but most idealistic daydreaming depends for its imagined successes on large numbers of sheep miraculously turning into enlightened shepherds. Because of the ingrained prejudice within society in favor of acting like sheep, this is highly unlikely. Most people choose to become shepherds for selfish reasons, and the results are commensurately awful. They should reject the mantle of leadership until they have first mastered their own greed, anger, and lust for power. That's the example of the enlightened masters. But the urge to follow is strong enough that we will happily line up behind whoever presents themselves.

The willingness of groups to align behind virtually any type of martinet is shocking. Psychologists convincingly argue that the need to affiliate with a tribe is primary (hence primate). The continued civility of civilization depends on our transcendence of this conditioning.

Even with those leaders like Narayana Guru who explicitly call for universal uplift through self-reflection and self-realization, people are all too eager to become followers. They ally themselves with the new “team,” and strive to behave according to the rules as they imagine them, which tends to be the old rules with new makeup. Lip service paid to freedom and liberty is more than enough, and so is quickly replaced by the next rigid system, to which adherence is mandatory.

What may happen if societies are destroyed or otherwise break down (as we are currently experiencing) is highly speculative. Arjuna, in Chapter I of the Gita, reeled off some wild fears about possible outcomes. In the ensuing vacuum it may be that of necessity psychological self-reliance is elevated. We shall see. Still, we can get much, much farther with mutual support than we can going it alone. Thus it would be far better to reform society than to run it into the ground, which in case you haven’t been paying attention is the express desire of capitalist culture, and the rightwing thugs it enlists to defend its program.

This is a large subject, and I don’t want to overdo it in this travel summary. Yet my travels were primarily contemplative, and very little about sightseeing, so I’ll be writing about thoughts for the most part.

In Varkala I gave a seminar intended to shake the foundations of caste identity and parochialism of all kinds. My opening line was humor that fell flat: “I have come from far, far away to make your lives very unhappy.” Irony is impossible to pick up on in a second language, no matter how fluent you might be. As elsewhere, I began with the vaguest of plans and let the spirit speak forth. Over the years my confidence in what I’ve

learned from Nitya has grown to the point that this has become easy. There is so much of the philosophy that is so powerful and direct, one doesn't have to search in recondite corners of the memory banks.

Current Guru Prasad seemed happy to provide a Malayalam translation for me, which was a great help. Overall it was a cordial visit with him, and I felt genuinely welcomed for the first time there. Several ideas I suggested met with a positive response. The Gurukula is actually functioning here, with weekend programs for kids and adults, and a core group of regular members. Being on a weekend, the seminar had a fairly substantial attendance. It is all basically one caste, though, sad to say. There is not enough reaching out to different groups, so its monochromatic makeup is self-reinforcing.

There is a very good vibe here, and teaching in the original Gurukula felt wonderful, like opening my soul to something special. After the first class Friday evening, I walked over to the back gate. Just then an elephant strolled by with her handlers, a red reflector swinging from her tail the only warning to careening motorists. I was smitten, and followed them up the road until they vanished in the distance. It felt like a blessing from a vestige of the ancient world.

One of the main themes of the class I gave was How do we relate to a seeming enemy from a spiritual standpoint? This is a question that should be primary, but no one had an answer ready to hand. Eventually we had quite a discussion, but we never got to Narayana Guru's core instruction that what appears to be outside us is really inside us. Thus you disarm the enemy by finding accord, by knowing and sharing the ground common to both, etc. You open yourself up instead of closing the borders. In the ultimate analysis there are no enemies, we are all one in every respect. The genome project, proving humanity is in truth one extended family, should help us with our spiritual development, but it has been slow to catch on.

The ball finally got rolling when Divakaran mentioned the fourfold stages of political diplomacy as taught in the Smritis: sama, dana, bheda and danda. First, you try to reason with the opponent (sama). Then you make a concession or a gift (dana). If that fails you threaten (bheda), which you back up the threats by fighting or other punitive measures (danda). This struck everyone as good enough for dealing with enemies. Religiously sanctioned, to boot.

On reflection, I realized this was a codification of the kind of raw justice meted out by kids on the grade school playground. Sometimes the dana part is minimal, but otherwise it perfectly describes the escalating stages of a childhood fistfight. First you argue or cajole, then you threaten. After that there's nothing left but to start punching.

Narayana Guru had something utterly different in mind. In an all-out battle, one side wins and the other loses, and therefore no schism is laid to rest. It's not a solution, only a prolongation of the problem. The losers will always try to become victors in the next round, and the more you beat them down the more they harden their resolve. On the other hand, if you surrender, then you simply promote the losers to winners and the dichotomy remains unresolved. There has to be a third option, the spiritual option. The Guru exemplified it, and in so doing transformed millions of lives. Now he has been turned into a series of statues kept in cages throughout the region. Gandhi also has become a vestigial, mythical being. The generals receive the honors these days. We worship guided missiles in place of Siva linga. How those great souls worked their magic remains a tantalizing unanswered question.

I did do a little sightseeing in the far south. Varkala was the base for healing trips to the beach for sun and body surfing, as well as excursions to Kallar and Meratvamallai via Aruvipuram. The former is a forest stream of pristine water, with small pools and waterfalls, one of which you can sit under. Peter O. was our

seasoned guide, Vyasa Prasad as always our ineffable charioteer. We spent a night there under a clear sky blazing with stars, and drenched in quiet, one of perhaps two quiet nights on the entire trip. A torrential downpour onto the broad leaves was the essence of susurration, sweeping us sweetly into sleep.

Tyagi Swami joined us for the trip to Kanyakumari, at the tip of the subcontinent, and Meratvamallai, the cave where Narayana Guru lived as a young man, meditating with only a tiger and a cobra for companions. I've been wanting to go for many years. It's a very steep climb to an awesome view, more than a thousand feet above the tip of India. There is a penetratingly peaceful vibration there, now overlaid by lots of pilgrims and the irrepressible urge of swamis to chant their chants wherever and whenever they can. Quiet is not much prized in India. Luckily I was the first one up that day, by ten minutes or so, and was able to sink into silence for that brief period. The uplift that pervades the place has stayed with me ever since.

Probably the main accomplishment for the trip was the inauguration of the Gurukula Video Archives Project while in Varkala. With the endorsement of Guru Prasad and Vyasa Prasad's direction, a cameraman was hired at the end of my Varkala stay. We filmed 5 people, including Prasad. Later we added 4 more in Bangalore using Vyasa's camera, Vinaya and Margaret at the Gurukula, and Gopi and Padma up in the city. The last two were present when Nataraja Guru was accepted as the head Guru in 1954 at a large meeting, after his return from America. Gopi's family had been intimate even with Narayana Guru, and he shared some cherished stories of those bygone times. Padma had gone to Fernhill in the late 1930s to meet Nataraja Guru for the first time, slogging through the mud on foot to the remote mountain retreat. She was about 13 at the time.

As the camera rolled, we realized we had opened up an amazing untapped resource. Everyone was so touched to be given the opportunity to share their intimate memories. Most of them

were moved to tears, sometimes frequently. Factual recounting was overwhelmed by the emotional significance of the role the Gurus had played in these people's lives. Several were in their late 80s, but all were clear and strong in their mental states.

Many dozens more Gurukula affiliates remain to be recorded as time permits. Some day the results may get edited and circulated, but for now the task is to capture the memories before death takes away the chance. Vyasa Prasad is in charge of the project, and I've assured him we would hold a fundraiser for it at some point. For now, be sure to enjoy some of the raw footage whenever fortune carries you that way.

[2020—as with many important projects of the Gurukula, the ball was totally dropped, and nothing has come of it. Somewhere precious footage may still reside.]

From Varkala I took an overnight train up to Thalassery. Going by autorick to the station reinforced my inclination to leave early, no matter how simple the route. When we dropped into town, still a couple of kilometers from the platform, traffic was completely stopped. Autoricks can go anywhere, get through any opening no matter how small, but the driver turned ours off and started talking with his friends. Luckily, after about 15 minutes a cop directed us around the holdup: a parade featuring drum corps, giant statues of animal deities on lorries, hundreds of marchers, and three gigantic elephants. Every fifty yards or so they would stop and set off strings of deafening firecrackers. The saintly elephants didn't even twitch. Maybe they were already deaf. Anyway, I got to the train on time, and as I waited the whole shebang ambled by again before fading into the darkness, if not the silence.

Jyothi met me at the platform in Thalassery, and took me to her lovely home, where I stayed a few days. There is a Narayana Guru-founded temple there that has a semi-miraculous story about its founding. The key fact for me was that in getting it approved Narayana Guru dealt directly with the village headman, who was

initially against it. As Jyothi told me, if you convince the chief, you don't have to convince the whole village one family at a time. This is a partial reason for the Guru's success at community organizing—start at the top. But only a partial reason. We are forced to admit that the whole thing has a mystical flavor. While the Guru had a clear vision of human unity within an Absolute or divine framework, his influence spread like wildfire, faster than any planning could accomplish. Reasonable explanations fall short. Surely, the underdog communities of the South were ready for something new, and happy and energetic in their participation when one came along. Surely his is an inspiring gospel. But it is a stretch of the imagination to claim that there was nothing below the radar, no invisible force at work. The Indian view, so different from Western rationality, is that events rise up from the depths of consciousness and pass through our awareness on the way to becoming actualized. The transformation of the region looks a lot like that: an eruption of vasanas or seeds when the season was right for their sprouting. Narayana Guru, unlike many who are accorded the laurel wreath of historical significance for a coincidental association, was an active and caring gardener, instrumental in propagating an Eden.

About 15 minutes away from Jyothi's is Kanakamala Gurukula on a high hilltop, set in the middle of an abandoned cashew orchard. Nancy Yeilding and Jean Norrby were there, the former giving her annual seminar at the site. We worked on Atmo verses 30 and 31 with a good crowd of very bright students. The first day, before the seminar, a small group of us were whisked up to a budding English medium school dedicated to the wisdom of Nitya and named after him. We all gave presentations to the assembled children, about 200 or so, who understood very little of our English, medium or no. Luckily we were strange enough to be interesting, and Jean captivated everyone with a sing-along of "Make new friends, but keep the old/one is silver and the other gold."

Then it was another overnight train back to Bangalore and Vinaya and Margaret's Gurukula at Somanahalli. We had some lovely visits and classes. Their daughter Manjari, who I'd last seen as a baby, was there with her husband. The two are a delight, and big animal lovers. They report that animal welfare has finally become an issue in India, several of the native dog species have been officially named (such as "Indian hound"), and adoptions are taking place. This was good news to me, because the condition of dogs here is heartbreaking. Humans have made great strides since my first visit, and now some of the prosperity is spreading to other species as well. It is a vast undertaking, and desperately needed.

For the final stage of my trip I flew up to Mumbai and was met by my good friend Pradeep and his new wife Rushheda. He had secured a room in the hotel-like guest house at the India Institute of Technology where he teaches chemistry. The college is an oasis at the edge of what is now possibly the world's largest city, and I enjoyed my first comfortable and quiet nights other than the one in Kallar. (Jyothi's house was also comfortable, but the neighborhood racket got going really early.) It was exam week, so my planned talk on Science and Spirituality hadn't materialized, but Vinaya and Dinakaran had arranged for me to give a talk at the Narayana Guru International Study Center in New Mumbai. I had no idea what was in store for me there. In the back of my mind was the schism between the Gurukula and the SNDP that festered during the times of Nataraja Guru and Nitya and is well chronicled in *Love and Blessings*. But I am operating on the venerable American tradition of "innocent until proven guilty," so I try to keep an open mind wherever I go. And it was well I did.

The temple that houses the Study Center was in full swing, with a wedding and the talk by the SNDP Swami I mentioned earlier. They also have a beautiful library with some of the Gurus' books ensconced therein, and I was able to secure a copy of Nitya's *Psychology of Darsanamala* so I could read out the two beautiful verses from Narayana Guru included in the introduction. Despite the usual communication difficulties, the talk seemed to go

well. In the past I would have been terminally nervous in such a situation, but I just followed Nataraja Guru's advice on public speaking to lower the ego and allow the spirit to shine forth. The spirit was a bit shy, but picked up momentum as it went along.

I must admit that my clowning at the outset fell totally flat, and so I had to mentally scramble to find an acceptable tack. I begged people to tell me what Narayana Guru meant to them, but no one would speak up, so instead I told them what he meant to me. I spoke of his global vision, and the progression out of his specific background to speak a universal language. Anything to do with caste or regionalism or religion or any -ism was only incidental, and by the end of his life had vanished. I still wish I knew what other people think of him, beyond the obvious labels of social reformer and "our" liberator.

One thing that went over well in the talk was a minor revelation I had in Varkala. Narayana Guru's most famous saying is "One caste, one religion, one God for man." Suddenly I realized that one caste means no caste. If you have a hierarchy consisting of one item, then there is no hierarchy at all. The universal religion according to Narayana Guru is the search for happiness, and one God is the Absolute called by various names by various groups and individuals. Anyway, I felt I had struck a solid but gentle blow against the casteism creeping up around Narayana Guru, where "one caste" all too often means "our caste" instead of no caste. The gentleman who gave the closing remarks specifically mentioned this idea, so I know it found a mark.

In the question period afterwards there were some very thoughtful discussions. I enjoy answering questions more than lecturing, because it seems easier for something worthwhile to emerge. At one point I was asked, "How does Narayana Guru's philosophy accord with nuclear physics?" This being a special interest of mine, and thinking of my ten pages of notes for a talk on Science and Spirituality, I answered, "I wish we had three days to go into that one." I gave a quick answer and moved on. It was well I did, because when I was introduced to the questioner later, she

turned out to be a professor of nuclear physics. On the other hand, I wish I had had the three days to go into it with her. I would've learned a lot.

One man asked, in keeping with prevailing opinion, "Should we treat Narayana Guru as a God-man?" I answered that according to Advaita Vedanta we are all God. We should treat everything as God, and if we single out one person as God we are implying that the rest of us are not God. Moreover, Nitya told us once that Indians preferred to worship their gurus, so that they wouldn't have to take their teachings to heart, which was much more difficult. It is far easier to nod to a statue than to search your soul. But only the search has value. The Guru did not want to be worshipped. He installed a mirror in a temple to remind people that they themselves are what they come to worship. The Self is all. So our task is to discover and express the unique aspect of divinity within ourselves. If we wish to honor the Guru, this is how we should do it. I think this was the one time I got applause, and I was glad that those challenging ideas were well received. On the whole the audience was much more savvy and less pedantic than I had expected.

After a couple more days' stay with my gracious hosts Pradeep and Rushheda, I headed back to the USA, certain that I had nothing I needed to write about my trip. Funny how this account has grown in the telling, yet this is only the tip of the iceberg. I apologize to any who made it to the end for any time wasted. Life is more full than we realize!