



Spirits



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About the Author



Sanjai is an acclaimed marketing strategist and consultant for leading global brands. Having worked and lived in multiple countries, he is now settled in Bangalore. An alumnus of University of Leicester (CLMS), University of Delhi and Indian Society of Training and Development (ISTD), his true passions are History & Psychology. He perceives them as intertwined and believes that 'If you do not have a history, you do not have a future!'

In short, an intellectual nomad, a secular radical and iconoclast!

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PREFACE

heyyam is the magico-religious ritual native to the Malabar region of Kerala.

Pre-modern Kerala was one of the most asymmetrical and hierarchical societies of the country with the despicable caste system practised with utmost severity. The members of the 'lower' castes and 'untouchables' lived in desperate conditions.

Over a period of time, the collective imagination of the oppressed lot gave birth to one of the most complex worlds of religious and cultural practices - Theyyam! People of those times found dignity in it. Their rebellion found a voice in these complex, spiritual performances.

Theyyam is a grand ritual, both terrifying and compelling. Combining the extreme emotions of religious fervour and fear, Theyyam offers its devotees what they craved for the most – hope. The power of Theyyam lies in its psychological and social context. It is not just another mask-dance but is actually the 'theatre of the oppressed'.

In reality, pre-modern Kerala, despite being a predominantly matriarchal society, was not kind to its women. Their struggles and sufferings were similar to that of the people of the lower castes. This is also their story.

Asatomā sadgamaya Tamasomā jyotir gamaya Mrityormā amritam gamaya Om śhāntih śhāntiḥ

From ignorance, lead me to truth;
From darkness, lead me to light;
From death, lead me to immortality.
Om peace, peace, peace.
(Brihadaranyaka Upanishad — I.iii.28)



hiruvananthapuram was under the magical spell of the rain god that night. Heavy rains hammered relentlessly down the old roof tiles of the renovated house. The periodic sounds of the thunder were deafening; strikes of lightning flashed through the rain-blurred windows, methodically and menacingly. The air was damp and cold. Though it was quite late, sleep evaded me. The bedroom, with its closed windows, felt claustrophobic. Today, I was extrasensitive to nature's stimuli. The din outside made me anxious. I got a sudden and strong urge to open the door and let in some fresh air.

Though the impulse to get out of bed was compelling, I resisted it. Lakshmi was deep in sleep, curled up in a foetal position. I could feel the comforting warmth of her body and her gentle breathing over my back. The slightest movement could disturb her. Normally a deep sleeper, these days she was hyper-sensitive to the slightest disturbance. It seemed she was subconsciously always on guard.

I do not remember when sleep finally overpowered me. The next thing I remember is Lakshmi shaking me gently to wake me up from deep slumber. I heard her say, "It's already 4.30 a.m. Don't we have to go to the temple?" I opened my eyes. The light in the room felt intense and blinding. My eyelids felt heavy. All I wanted

to do was to return to sleep. I felt very tired, which was more psychological than physical.

Firmly persuaded by Lakshmi, I slowly got up and sat on the edge of the bed. She handed me a mug of tea with wisps of steam emanating from it. The aroma of the brew was strong. She sat next to me to ensure that I didn't go back to sleep. Her smile was comforting.

Lakshmi seems to have adapted fast. She is now a mellow, empathetic person. At least that is what she projects. That is a welcome change for me. I can relate to her better.

I was never an early-riser and vigorously resisted the idea of getting up before dawn. But then, today was not an ordinary day.

My eyes were transfixed on the windows. The heavy precipitation had tapered to a light drizzle, as though even God had finally exhausted his abundant supply of water.

For a land known for bountiful rains, climate change is beginning to play havoc. The destruction of forests and mutilation of nature in general has brought unalterable changes. Maybe, even God can't make much of a difference. Kerala is called 'God's own country'. Ha! A smile spread over my lips.

She reminded me, "We have to reach the temple on time, Krish." There was an urgency in her voice. Though her voice was gentle, there was a steely resolve in her words. I looked at her deep eyes. They seemed for a second to accuse me; "If it wasn't for your idiocies." I felt a sudden rush. The hot tea scalded my mouth as I quickly gulped it down.

As we stepped out of the house, around 5 a.m., I saw that my in-laws were already in the car, waiting for us impatiently. They were always together, like a deity and his consort. As soon as we sat inside, Lakshmi's father started the car. He was muttering to himself. For me, these were sounds of suppressed anger. If I weren't his son-in-law, he might have hurled the choicest of abuses at me. Old age seemed to be getting at him. Secretly, I liked that.

The roads seemed to have turned into shallow rivers due to the incessant rains and overflowing drains. The muddy water resembled strong milky tea.

I hated the monsoons. The persistent wetness and the overcast skies always managed to dampen my spirits. The inky sky was unusually dark. The night was engaged in a losing battle with the sun.

Time! Time is everything, I told myself. Victory and defeat are dictated by it. In an hour, the sun would win the battle. The victor and the vanguished will alternate their roles. The battle for survival is eternal!

As the car moved forward, Lakshmi glanced at me. She had an anxious look on her face. Last year had been very difficult for the both of us. It had revealed a new side of Lakshmi to me. I realised that she could not only withstand enormous adversities but could also be forgiving. I had possibly misread her all this time.

A reluctant smile spread across her lips, making her look more enigmatic. She was wearing a simple Kerala sari. Her damp hair was casually swept back in a typical kulipinnal. A couple of leaves of the sacred thulasi were tucked carelessly in her hair. As an ardent believer in the power of the Gods, she was the perfect antithesis to my atheism. Silence prevailed, conspicuous by its gloominess. I shifted my gaze and slowly rolled down the window in a metaphorical attempt to let despair out.

The early risers were going about their chores as usual. Newspaper and milk delivery boys, wearing ill-fitting, cheap plastic raincoats, were busy picking up their merchandise. They rode around in bicycles or motorcycles, oblivious of the messy roads that were the result of the previous night's pandemonium.

As we hit the main road, the old man started accelerating the car. He seemed to be in a hurry. The cold wind hit us hard. We passed new office buildings and tall apartment towers shrouded in concrete and glass. They dominated the skyline like muscular monstrosities. The traditional and older buildings seemed to be cowered in submission. The booming IT outsourcing industry had managed to change both the mental and physical landscape of Kerala, the land of bold and adaptable immigrants.

The Malayali diaspora is spread all over the world. Unlike the compulsions of their forefathers, today's ambitious and hardworking denizens have enough opportunities to prosper in their own homeland. The young want the best of both the worlds. The IT professionals travel the globe, earn handsome salaries in foreign currencies, acquire an accent, and return home to prosperous lives. Yes, Kerala is undergoing a rapid socio-cultural transformation.

Monumental architecture has always Thiruvananthapuram, one of the earliest inhabited places in the country. The land of the mighty Venad kings still has its fair share of old palaces, gateways and forts that remind one of the royal past. Their battle for survival against real estate sharks is not an easy one. Like hungry vultures anticipating the death of their prospective victims, many greedy people eagerly await their demise. In today's Kerala, not many seem to appreciate heritage buildings, nor understand their context.

I wonder if the grandeur of monuments such as the Padmanabhaswamy temple, which was the axis mundi of the political geometry of medieval times, can ever be matched by the modern structures. The recent discovery of a treasure worth billions of dollars in the secret vaults of the temple has only added to its aura. Architecture has always demonstrated its power to dominate the mind of the masses.

I have always harboured a strange fascination for the mysteries that history has to offer in plenty. Stories of archaeological finds still grab my full attention. I am in awe of the exploits of kings and conquerors. I like to spend time around old forts and monuments imagining myself as an investigator digging into the past, unravelling it's deep held secrets. I have always lived between the past and the present, spending a substantial amount of time analysing the bygone era. My secret desire is to be an archaeologist or a historian. No wonder, I have a strange fascination for detective novels. I do believe in the saying, 'If you don't have a history, you don't have a future!'

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't realise that we had reached Thiruvallam, where the temple was located, till Lakshmi nudged me. It felt as if we had taken ages to reach the destination, although the temple was only about seven kilometres from her home. The head priest himself was waiting for us; or more specifically, for my fatherin-law who was a former Non-resident Indian and now a prominent, local businessman. Everybody knew the wealthy and politically prominent individuals in Kerala.

The priest, draped in white, was a tall man, about 80 years old. His slightly protruding belly betrayed the sedentary yet lucrative nature of his profession. The spreading tentacles of cataract gave his eyes a smoky look. The frame of the old- fashioned spectacles he wore on his pockmarked face had green patina. Like an obsessive-compulsive person, he continuously ran his left hand over his white chest hair. As the master of the temple and the custodian of its traditional rituals, he displayed the confidence of a messiah who had the power to invoke immense divine interventions. He looked as old as the temple itself.

The priest gave me a benevolent look and requested me to take a dip in the banks of the mighty Karamana river flowing adjacent to the ancient temple. We could hear the raging holler of the overflowing river. It seemed to be in a hurry to reach Kovalam where it would converge with the Arabian Sea. Originating from the Western Ghats at Agastyarkoodam, it hurtled through thick rain forests. The broken branches of trees and plants floating on it were perhaps the remains of its victims as the river rushed forward with gargantuan energy, destroying everything along its way.

As I stood near the river, I thought that water has always been the nucleus around which Kerala's political, religious and social life revolved. Trade, predominantly of spices, was the lifeline of the state. The seductive fragrance of its spices had spread across the globe, attracting not just traders from far way lands but also conquerors and evangelists. Water thus proved to be both a blessing and a curse.

The large amount of water in the river was due to the pre-monsoon rains, also called the 'mango showers' because they helped in ripening the fruit on the trees. The mango trees around the temple were in full bloom. Their crowns were coloured with yellowish-white flowers that grew on brand new red stalks.

The evergreen tree, which bore the king of all fruits, is hardy by nature. A true survivor of adversities. I still remember the grand old tree in my father's ancestral home in Palakkad. We children called it the 'grandfather tree' as it seemed to be as old as our strict, un-empathetic grandfather. He wouldn't let us throw stones at the tree to bring down the ripe mangoes that constantly tempted us with their succulence. Every morning, we had to scour for the fruits that had fallen from the tree. Many would have been nibbled on by the squirrels or pecked on by the birds.

What we feared the most were the weaver ants that stitched leaves together into small nests. If disturbed, these ants could bite with such vengeance! We would observe the ants walking in a line like disciplined soldiers on the branches with their translucent orange bodies glistening in the sun. All this from a distance, of course. Despite restrictions, we threw twigs and stones at the tree whenever grandfather went out for his routine walks. We always managed to gather enough mangoes to fulfil our gastronomic desires. Needless to say, my cousins and I invariably ended up with bloated stomachs and resultant diarrhoea. The mango tree has remained an important symbol of endurance and nourishment to me.

My flow of thoughts was interrupted by Lakshmi's call to stop procrastinating and come out after a quick cleansing. I slowly dipped my legs into the water. It was ice-cold and sent a shiver through my body. A little worried about the gushing waters, I sat on the granite slab and took the customary bath in the holy river.

The wind was blowing hard. While walking back to the temple's courtyard, the shivering became uncontrollable. I was sure I would end up with pneumonia. Lakshmi was waiting for me impatiently at the granite shrine dedicated to the deity Parashurama. She was behaving like her old parents. She wanted to complete the rituals before the auspicious hour passed. I stood beside her in

front of the deity and prayed. I wanted forgiveness for my indiscretions and eternal peace for the departed soul of a woman I had known only for a few days.

Constant chants emanated from the old granite edifice. Though tradition dates the temple back to ancient times, archaeology establishes it around the middle of the 12th century. This is supposed to be the only temple dedicated to Lord Parashurama, who is considered as the sixth among the ten avatars of Vishnu. Ironically, for a God, he exhibited extreme anger and aggression as he annihilated entire enemy warrior clans. It would be termed genocide in modern times. He is closely associated with the myths about Kerala's origin, thus giving it the tag 'God's own country'.

There were a few other people praying with their heads bowed down. Akin to greasing the lord's hands for fulfilment of their prayers, they put soiled notes or coins in the *hundi*. The priest was conducting a special prayer. He constantly rang a small bell as if to get the attention of God. He held a brass plate with offerings including a bunch of flowers and brightly burning camphor. The old man seemed to be enjoying the ecstasy of celestial communion. He came out and extended the platter with the sacred flame pointing towards us. We put forth our palms around the flame, and then dabbed our faces with them. With a small spoon, the priest then poured out holy water into our cupped palms; we drank some and smeared the rest on our hair. Lakshmi took a pinch of holy ash from the platter and applied it on my forehead. I placed a few 100 rupee notes on the plate as an offering to the priest. I didn't want to disappoint him and wanted him to wholeheartedly participate in the subsequent rituals. His eyes seemed to twinkle at the sight of so much money.

The priest led us to the place where the *bali* was to be conducted. His face had turned sombre. This ritual was conducted for the peace of departed souls. His assistant had the accompaniments for performing the bali tharpanam ready. They included the darbha grass, cooked rice, paddy stalks, sandal paste, black sesame seeds and fresh flowers.

We sat on the white sand that spread like an endless

carpet. As the ritual began, my mood began to darken. The priest requested me to remember the departed. I wanted to recollect the memories of a smiling Maria, but the visual that rushed in was that of her bloodied face and cold gaze.

During the puja, I mechanically followed the instructions of the priest hoping that her soul would finally find peace.

This was an attempt to bid a final goodbye. Inadvertently, my eyes welled up. As I wiped the tears off, I noticed that the intensity of my emotions had agitated Lakshmi.

Memories of Maria were an elephant in the room. She remained the invisible partner in a twisted ménage à trois. Our marriage had survived only because Lakshmi felt partly responsible for triggering the tragic events that unfolded last year. She was the one who had spurred me to make that hasty trip to Kochi.

This bali tharpanam had a larger meaning for us. Lakshmi wanted a formal closure and I wanted redemption for my lapses and guilt for not having been there when Maria needed me the most. To forgive myself, I had to ensure that Maria's soul was at peace. This could also mean a fresh start for Lakshmi and me.

The priest asked me to make small balls of rice mixed with black sesame seeds and flowers. They were placed on flat stones called *bali kallu*. The ritual was entering the final phase. As instructed, I clapped my hands to invite the crows to accept the food. It is believed that the departed soul arrives in the form of a crow and partakes the offering. The bali tharpanam is considered successful if the crows eat the rice. It is assumed that only if the souls are satisfied with the purity of intention of the person, do they accept the offering, enabling the soul to attain *moksha* or salvation from the eternal cycle of rebirths.

The sky was being painted by the bright orange rays of the sun. I clapped loudly inviting the crows.

There were many birds circling above but none came down. I was worried and looked at Lakshmi. She whispered in her father's ears and he signalled for us to be patient. We waited for what felt like an eternity. The birds who served as proxies for the souls seemed to avoid the offering. I wondered if Maria hadn't forgiven me. Perhaps, I deserved her ire.

Frustration set in and I wanted to turn back but Lakshmi dissuaded me. She wanted to bury Maria's memories in the very sands of the temple. As we waited anxiously, a crow with unusually thick black feathers descended condescendingly and started walking slowly towards us. It looked at me intently as if its small dark eyes were gauging my candour.

It took a few steps slowly towards the rice balls. As I waited with anticipation, it stopped for a few seconds as though it was pondering. Was my mind playing tricks with me? Maybe it wasn't hungry or it didn't like the appearance of the food. Finally, much to our relief, the crow decided to devour the feast laid out. As it started pecking, a few more crows came flying down and the offering vanished quickly into their bellies.

I felt lighter. It was as though a great burden was taken off my heart. This was like a symbolic exorcism of tormenting memories.

The priest too seemed relieved and a smile spread on his erstwhile constipated expression. Lakshmi's father offered some more money to the priest as dhakshina. After thanking him, we quietly walked back towards the car. Lakshmi walked close to me and I threw my arms over her shoulder. This was a rare gesture of affection we displayed in front of her parents. Today, I didn't care. I wanted to feel the assurance of her touch.

As we sat in the car, our moods underwent a paradigm shift. As the parents and their daughter started chatting, I lay back on the seat. The traffic was still thin. The car moved ahead with incredible speed. It seemed like an escape from all ordeals.

My calcified belief system had softened a little in the last few months. From an ardent atheist, I was now open to accepting the nuances of religious beliefs. Was I the same person who used to denounce rituals like these as mere psychological dramas? Or was this new garb of spiritualism a mode of escape?

I still retain an otherwise rational mind but I am afraid to question the existence of spiritual beings. What could have caused this change of heart? Contrary to acceptable logic, my mind sometimes interprets last year's events as the outcome of a grand scheme planned by malevolent spirits.

Did they use Maria, Ajay and me as pawns to execute their grandiose strategy? Is that possible? Though I didn't completely accept this, the sequence of events seemed to strongly point towards such a possibility. I wasn't sure if spirits, allegedly a couple centuries old, could harbour and execute revenge with such clinical precision. But then, one could never tell.

As we reached home, Lakshmi suggested that we have breakfast. I desperately wanted sleep and solitude; so I promptly refused despite her insistence. I went upstairs to the bedroom. Lying on the plush bed, I pulled up the comforter to my face. Like a child, I felt a strange sense of security wrapped in it. Unlike last night, I waded into deep sleep soon.

While asleep, I sensed the temperature dropping despite being ensconced in the expensive comforter. I felt a hand touching my face tenderly. This feeling lingered for a few seconds. Fear ran down my spine and cold sweat broke out. I woke up but couldn't move. I wanted to scream but couldn't. I was not sure if I was asleep or awake when all this happened. Was it Maria? Had she come to bid me a final goodbye? A strong sense of anxiety gripped me.

I tried hard to push away the comforter and got up from the bed. The room smelled unmistakably of Maria's perfume. It was strong and overwhelmed me with nostalgia. My mind turned turbulent. I walked across the room trying to rationalise the experience.

Was this her way of assuring me that she did not hold me guilty? Was this experience the result of a collective integration of my grief, despair and anger? Did my mind conjure this up to offer the redemption that I was seeking? Was I deluding myself that Maria was happy and possibly leaving for her abode in heaven? My scepticism was countered by the strong smell of Maria's perfume still permeating the room. Or was that my mind playing tricks with me?

Can dead people roam the terra firma in the form of spirits? Can they haunt and possess human beings in their malevolent form?

Though never empirically proven to exist, human minds continue to believe in such beings. Many people claim to have had the 'experience' I just had. After the 'exposure', different people react differently. While many go back to their normal lives, many others cannot handle such a 'contact' and become a little unhinged psychologically. The irrational side of an otherwise rational human mind can indeed be perplexing!

I heard Lakshmi's soft footsteps as she came up the stairs. The strong feelings that had coiled around me like a constrictor began to loosen. I finally concluded that my mind had been playing tricks with me. Perhaps everything was the result of a tempestuous mind.

Lakshmi walked into the room and her first reaction was, "What is this smell? Like the fading fragrance of a woman's perfume. Smells like Chanel No 5." Her words seemed to confirm my fears. She looked at me. I gathered enough courage to say, "You and your imagination!"

She insisted that I take a hot shower. The ritual bathing on the banks of the river Karamana didn't account for much. Not wanting to be alone in the room, I insisted that she remain there. She said, "Make it fast. Ambika and her family have come for a visit. They are waiting to meet you."

It was then that I became aware of the noise downstairs. I could hear my daughter's laughter and her loud chatter.

I came out of the shower quickly. I noticed Lakshmi sitting on the bed, seemingly pondering the source of the fragrance. I liberally sprayed eau de cologne in an attempt to mask the fragrance and her suspicions.

I asked myself, "After all, who was Maria to me?" The relationship, though fleeting, had been intense. I had even contemplated a divorce with Lakshmi. Had we really been in love or was it just a deep kind of fascination? Or, as the old astrologer in Kannur had claimed, had Maria and I been mates in the previous birth? Were our lives intertwined in some ways? There would be no firm answers.

Joining Maria in her journey into the colourful, mysterious and fiery world of Theyyam had indeed proven to be a turning point in my life. Somehow, I began to feel free of the guilt that had been plaguing me like the proverbial heavy sack of bricks. I felt euphoric.

Ambika and her family were seated around the dining table talking to Lakshmi's parents. The clock indicated that it was way past lunch time. As I joined everyone, Ambika called out to Lakshmi, who was in the kitchen, "Hey I forgot to tell you. Remember I spoke to you about my cousin Malini who was desperate for a child? That she had even attended the Theyyam seeking divine intervention. Her wish was granted and she delivered a baby girl a couple of months ago."

That seemingly casual statement shocked me. Was it my child or did the Theyyam spirits bless Malini with a child? I would never know and that ambiguity was killing. After all, the serpent gods had not been lenient...





t was the sheer intensity of the bright sunlight that woke me up. It was way past midnight when I had gone to bed. The flight from Dubai had landed at the Kochi International

Airport quite late last night.

As soon as I checked in, out of curiosity, I had opened the heavy curtains that shielded the occupants of the rooms from the outside world.

All I could see were old street lights that unsuccessfully tried to throw light around the buildings across the road. A makeshift cart on the corner was still serving food. Light from a petromax flickered. A couple of SUVs were parked next to it and a small group of young people were having a very late meal. They must have been returning from a party or a movie. Kochi did have a nightlife, though it was restricted to a few affluent pockets. Stray dogs, the nocturnal lords of the roads, were running amok on the empty tar roads. Till the early hours, the roads were their empire. They would fight, mate and play all night but vanish as soon as dawn broke. Tired and sleepy, I turned my gaze away and returned to my secure, cocooned world.

Kochi was my home but I have no place to call my own. As he aged, my father, my *achhan*, became nostalgic about his ancestral home in Palakkad. He decided to settle there, against my protestations. He and my mother, my *amma*, seemed to have decided to

spend the rest of their lives around the relatives who lived close by.

Kochi had better medical facilities and achhan's old friends also lived in and around the area. Thus, in my opinion, Kochi would have been a better city for them to retire to but then they didn't listen to me. I felt hurt that they treated me as a kid with no worldly exposure. I had invested a considerable amount of money in renovating our old house. I wanted my daughter to spend her vacations there. But since they knew that I wouldn't agree, they did not inform me when they sold the house. It hurt me a lot. Since every call with amma ended in arguments regarding the relocation, I stopped the regular calls. It was Lakshmi who kept the communication going. I hadn't visited my parents for guite some time. An invisible iron curtain had descended between the parents and their child. I felt homeless. Kochi held so many memories of growingup. I could never feel the same sense of longing with Palakkad. This was also the reason why I did not inform my parents that I would be in Kerala. Things had changed so much.

As I agonised, I had forgotten to close the curtains.

As soon as I woke up, almost instinctively I called room service for a pot of hot and strong tea. Bed-tea was my bad habit. Lakshmi had tried to wean me away from this, but old habits die hard. Though feeling lazy, I had to reluctantly get out of bed to close the curtains. The soft knock on the door indicated that my fix had arrived. When I opened the door, a well-dressed young waiter greeted me and walked in.

He made tea with no sense of urgency. The strong aroma of the fresh beverage made me impatient. He confidently interacted with me in reasonably flawless English. Before leaving, he said, "Have a great day ahead, sir!" The hospitality industry in Kochi was adapting to international standards quickly. I felt happy. I sank into the plush chair with the cup of tea.

Lakshmi had spent a lot of time choosing the right hotel for me. She could be very fussy when she wanted to. Her firm belief that I was incapable of being independent and was reliant on her for nourishment, advice and almost everything else, gave her a sense of security and importance. While it unburdened me from the nitty-gritties of life, it could also be stifling at times. She would often ask, "What will you do without me around? Can you live by yourself?" I would put on a naughty expression and reply convincingly, "You are my only addiction, darling! You are like a drug that I don't want to be weaned away from." That would make her happy. Very happy, though she would never admit to it.

I was 37 years old and she was just two years younger than me. Yet, she behaved like she had seen more life than me. Over a period of time, I learnt the hard and valuable lesson that as long as she was happy, it was easy to manipulate her. Need for praise was her Achilles heel. However, she seemed to be totally oblivious to this chink in her otherwise impregnable armour.

Ignoring my desire to stay in one of the heritage properties, Lakshmi had chosen a new five-star hotel right in the heart of the city. Though I had protested, as usual it was her wish that had prevailed. I had a penchant for history while Lakshmi loved the contemporary. In many ways, ours was a marriage of amicable contrasts.

I didn't have reasons to complain though. The hotel was managed by an international hospitality brand and was quite popular with the affluent western tourists. The young owners of the property were from an old aristocratic family known for its wealth and political influence. They had spent lavishly in creating tasteful interiors that highlighted the culture of Kerala.

The room was spacious, complimented by a kingsize bed, fluffy pillows, and clean white bed linen. At home, I discouraged using white bed sheets or pillow covers as I was constantly worried about them getting dirty. On the contrary, I was allured by white apparel. I loved women in white as I associated it with sensual elegance.

The walls were painted in light green pastels; a few photographs were mounted on them symmetrically. Right across the wall, there were four large photographs that depicted the iconic Chinese nets, shot at different

times of the day. These simple mechanical contraptions hold large horizontal nets. They use the cantilever technique with large stones tied with ropes as counterweights. The hurricane lamp suspended in the middle serves as a bait for the fish. The net is lowered periodically into the water and then lifted back. The unfortunate victims, oblivious to the trap in their own backyard, end up on the dining tables by the next day. They never even get a chance to regret their folly and none can ever back to warn their friends about the entrapment. So, even centuries after their arrival, the Chinese nets continue to be a successful fishing mechanism in Kochi. Its design seems to have withstood the vagaries of time. Just like the stories of Kerala.

The furniture in the room, including the tables, chairs and lamps, were from the colonial era. They were possibly sourced from one of the big antique warehouses located at the famous Jew Street. Refurbished with modern embellishments such as silk linen covers, these pieces from another era had been granted a new lease of life.

Just a couple of decades ago, Kochi had only a handful of star-rated hotels. Most of them were in and around the man-made Willingdon Island catering to mostly western businessmen and local elites. Over the last few decades, the muscular forces of financial prosperity and its intimate soulmate, social change, have been reshaping Kochi. Global brands have setup their offices here, signalling her brave new global aspirations.

Slick marketing campaigns and roadshows by the Government of Kerala have made the state one of the most sought-after tourist destinations globally. Its clean beaches, green paddy fields, emerald backwaters, hill stations, forests, exotic wildlife, and rich folklore have been showcased to attract the well-heeled tourists. Ayurveda, the indigenous medical science of wellness and longevity, has become a prime attraction. The well-connected, urbanised Kochi gets her fair share of income from tourist dollars. Even historic buildings are being rapidly converted into heritage hotels and art galleries.

Called the Queen of the Arabian Sea, Kochi is mainly known for her deep ports, the Indian naval base, shipyard, and seafood exports. Coastal Kochi is dotted with factories that employ thousands of women, whose nimble fingers clean prawns for export. These prawns have created many millionaires. These exporters, with their large houses and imported fancy cars, form the business elite who influence the politics of the state. For people from the other parts of Kerala, Kochi is still the veritable land of opportunities.

It is IT outsourcing and software production that largely fuels contemporary Kochi, ensuring a steady stream of well-paid jobs. The money in Kochi is slowly acquiring a refined hue. It is one of the most happening places in India. As the inhabitants of Kochi, we were treated differently when we visited our relatives during vacations.

The low hum of the air-conditioner sounded like a lullaby urging me to return to sleep. I looked at the clock on the side table. It was 10.40 a.m. Gosh, it must be 9.10 a.m. in Dubai, I thought. Lakshmi must be wondering why I had not called her. Inarguably, she was the lord of the household. Despite being far away, I was still afraid of her wrath.

I have asked this question to myself many times. Despite being a go-getter and self-starter, why did I let her dictate my life? I don't think I ever found an answer.

I restricted my involvement to the most critical decisions and did not interfere in routine issues. She ran the household like clockwork.

There were many strong-willed women in my family who had to struggle against many adversities. Sometimes they lost, sometimes they won. But they always put up a strong fight. Having been used to strong females in the family, I didn't find Lakshmi's dominant personality to be odd. Deep inside, like other alpha men, I secretly liked the presence of a strong and independent person as my spouse. I pampered her with my psychological dependence. I didn't want a passive wife and she didn't want a domineering husband. In a Faustian bargain, she enjoyed the feeling of power and

I the resultant intimacy. It was a wish fulfilment akin to the Oedipus complex.

Lakshmi had been an entirely different person when we were courting. She loved listening to my past stories and current adventures. As she egged me for more details, I would sometimes make up stories to satiate her curiosity. I used to call her late in the nights after getting drunk and she would laugh at my naughty jokes. She had told me that she liked my playfulness and childlike demeanour. But, gradually, after our marriage, her matronly behaviour became pronounced and she seldom encouraged my playfulness. Maybe I too played a role in that transformation. In our transactions, she upgraded to the parent-ego state and I got downgraded to the child-ego state. But these quickly reversed when I lost my temper. Her ability to switch ego-states was possibly her greatest strength. She is a control freak who carefully disguises her needs under the garb of caring and affection. She loves to dispense tough love in a seemingly restrained manner.

She wanted to know where I was at regular intervals. Yesterday, I had called her as soon as I reached the airport, after I cleared security check, before boarding the aircraft from Dubai, and after landing at the Kochi airport yesterday.

Today being a Thursday and a weekend in Dubai, she must be sleeping late, hugging Meenakshi, our 12-year-old daughter. We call her Meenu at home. The choice of her name drew loud protests from Lakshmi's parents and other relatives. They felt that it was old fashioned. I liked the way it sounded and, therefore, remained adamant about it.

Meenakshi means 'the one with the eyes of the fish'. Lakshmi astutely kept away from the battle as we had a deal that I would choose the name if it was a girl and she if it was a boy. To sweeten the deal, I had also promised her a solitaire ring if blessed with a girl.

As she was being taken to the ward after giving birth, despite being very tired, Lakshmi indicated to me by touching her fingers that she hadn't forgotten my promise. Well, she had literally delivered hers. So, I had no reason to argue and got her a solitaire ring from the Tiffany & Co. outlet at the Deira City Center. I didn't hesitate to bargain despite the sales manager giving me a penetrating dirty look. I am sure sales managers were trained to sport that look but I pretended not to notice. Grudgingly, he agreed to a small discount.

I am a non-conformist among men in my love for shopping for jewellery, especially the exotic variety. Though I personally dislike wearing any, including my engagement ring, I liked to see it on Lakshmi. I make it a point to pick up jewellery for her from the countries that I travel to. Perhaps, this is my way of imposing my choices on her.

I have a fetish for nose rings. I had tried for almost two years to convince her to get her nose pierced. She had steadfastly refused, till one lazy weekend. Out of the blue she said that she wanted to get her nose pierced. I was surprised and asked her a couple of times, "Are you sure about this, Lakshmi?" She answered in the affirmative. She seemed to have made up her mind, possibly realising that this would give her another lever of control over me.

We drove to the iconic Gold Souk. She took her time choosing the nose ring at a reputed jewellery store. The manager of the outlet took us to the backrooms. The goldsmith suggested that we use a piercing gun that would be less painful but, she wanted the piercing to be done the traditional way using a gold needle. I looked at Lakshmi as he again warned us that it would be quite painful. She sat there with a determined look on her face. I couldn't bear to see her undergo pain. So I left the room. I personally have a low-threshold for physical pain.

She didn't scream or cry. As Lakshmi came out, my first reaction was to hold her hands and look at her nose. It was red. She simply raised her hand indicating to me to not ask anything. The look on her face was quizzical as if to say, "What all should I do for you?"

Her body language suggested that she definitely wanted me to know how miserable she felt and how much pain she had undergone to fulfil my fetish. She put on her classic 'I am the martyr' look. As we walked outside of the large bazaar, she held my hands and walked very close to me. She doesn't do this often. I suggested dinner and a late night movie. Unlike her usual self, she wanted to have a quick dinner and return home. She was unusually quiet.

After reaching home, Lakshmi freshened herself, changed into lingerie, and walked into the bedroom. I stood in the drawing room for a few moments not knowing what to do. Following my instinct, I went to the room. She had switched off the light and was lying on her back. As she saw me coming in, she slowly and deliberately opened the window curtains to let the pale moonlight in. The nose ring made her look like a temptress as the little diamonds caught the light and sparkled naughtily. She offered me her hand inviting me to join her and huskily said, "No condom tonight." I could feel the tremble in my body. The faint smell of her sweat mingled with her perfume was always the libido trigger for me. She pulled me towards her. As my hands caressed her body and moved towards her waist, she kissed me. She seemed to be in the heat.

We skipped the customary long foreplay. Her active participation drove me into ecstasy. She was unrestrained and surprisingly rough. She responded positively to my gentle bites around her nipples. In between, she wickedly whispered, "Are you on steroids tonight?" I replied, "Yeah, you." I think those words excited her more. For me, the feel of natural lubrication without the hindrance of latex was indeed a new experience. She seemed intoxicated and insatiable. We had sex three times that night.

The next morning, we woke up late and went out to a nearby restaurant for a leisurely brunch. She was unlike her usual self. She wanted to finish eating and return home. She walked with her hand around my waist. I could feel her hard nipples brushing the back of my arm. Maybe she did this deliberately. She continued to be in a state of arousal. We made love twice that afternoon. Though gentler than the previous night, it was equally exciting. We went to bed early that night, clearly exhausted from the carnal overload. We continued to have a healthy sex life but nothing matched the hunger and vigour of that weekend.

Both of us were under constant pressure from our parents to have a child. But we wanted to wait till Lakshmi's career as a clinical psychologist was established. As months went by, her parents became more impatient. They would often emotionally blackmail her saying, "So you want us old people to die without seeing our grandchild?" It was when she announced her pregnancy that I realised she was already planning a baby. So, had she faked her desire that weekend? I don't know. Perhaps it was the urgent and innate need to be pregnant that had played havoc with her hormones and behaviour.

Despite her confidence, Lakshmi had her insecurities about the fact that I worked closely with many beautiful and ambitious women. She didn't feel as beautiful or smart as them. As I travelled frequently on work, she secretly worried that my sex drive would weaken my resolve to be loyal. She aspired to be my only source of excitement and obsession. She loved the feeling of being my sole fixation, the erotic goddess who demanded constant propitiation in return for ecstatic pleasure. She was possessive as far as I was concerned. I thought she was like the woman in Billy Joel's number 'She's always a woman to me'.

The phone rang. It woke me up rudely from my train of thoughts. As expected, it was Lakshmi. I didn't answer it. The phone continued to ring. Then there was abrupt silence. After a couple of minutes, it rang again and I thought it prudent to attend to her call.

"Why did you not pick up my call?" There was a mix of worry and anger in her voice.

"I was in the washroom," I lied.

"So, tell me how is the hotel and how did your day go?" She wanted all the details.

"It's a great hotel. I woke up late and just had my tea. Nothing much has happened to report, madam."

She was offended. I wanted to tell her to leave me alone but just couldn't. So I asked, "How's Meenu?"

"She's still sleeping. Did you have your breakfast?" She was still curious.

"No. Not yet." Despite my rising anger, I said this

gently.

"Go have your breakfast. It is already late." I didn't like her guiding my life like a remote control even as I was seeking liberty, albeit temporarily. For a change, I wanted to decide what I did.

"Okay. I will call you back at night," I replied and cut the call.

"Control freak!" I murmured to myself. As a sign of rebellion, I decided to skip breakfast. How would she know? I reasoned to myself.

I walked towards the large windows. They were my insulated gateways to the world outside, the world of the hoi polloi...the crowd I belonged to a few years ago. I cringed as I admitted to that. Kochi treated me differently now and I viewed her differently. I felt a cruel satisfaction as I now viewed the outside world as one of the 'ordinary folks'.

The arterial road and the battered bus stop looked as though they had been victims of the alternating twin forces of scorching sun and hard rains. The road had a fair amount of traffic. The large red local buses that looked like old boxes stopped very briefly at the stop and rushed out again in search of new passengers.

People patiently waited for the bus. Those standing outside the confines of the bus stop used umbrellas to protect themselves from the harsh sun. We Malayalis have an innate desire for fair skin and live in mortal fear of melanin. My tanned complexion was often a subject of ridicule even within the extended family. Fairer cousins were considered more attractive. When young, I have liberally used various fairness creams in an attempt to whiten my skin. Keralites are arguably one of the biggest consumers of such creams even today. These days many brands are marketed as Ayurvedic or herbal medicines claiming to have no side effects. The only side effect seems to be loss of money. What other results can we expect? I thought. In a land of the scorching sun, it is but natural that melanin remains the persistent villain.

This infatuation for fair skin is only matched by

the adoration for gold. Many women waiting for their buses were wearing several pieces of gold jewellery. The Malayali woman's love for 22k gold jewellery and silk saris are stuff of lore.

Auto rickshaws, cars and motor cycles zipped past. Most scooter and motorcycle riders were not wearing helmets. Despite constant attempts by the traffic police to enforce its use, helmets are universally abhorred here. The lame excuses are many. Some complain of the heat and others about hair loss. They never understood the logic that it was better to have a bald head than not have one at all.

I had to cut my rebellion short as my stomach declared war. I called the reception and the person at the desk, in an unusually cheerful voice, informed me that I had missed the complimentary breakfast. It seemed to me that he was secretly enjoying denying me what he thought was a rare experience, as it might be for a lot of the 'ordinary' travellers. Presumptuous idiot, I thought. He had no clue that I was a globe-trotter. With a smirk on my face, I simply ordered a Spanish omelette and toast. I think I was able to convey the order rather rudely.

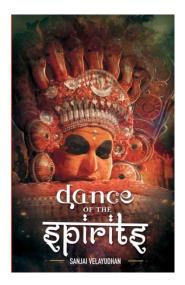
I was famished as I had not had a proper meal since lunch yesterday. On top of the two drinks that I had at the Dubai International Airport, I had also gracefully accepted two large pegs of single malt the airhostess had served in the business class. The alcohol overdose had lulled me into deep sleep and I missed the sumptuous dinner served in the sky.

Though I wasn't a big drinker, I did enjoy my tipple on the weekends. Lakshmi had an alcohol phobia as one of her close cousins had died due to alcoholism. On weekends, to discourage me from visiting friends and risk getting drunk, she permitted me to drink at home. The rule was that she fixed the drinks. Her leniency did not extend beyond two small pegs. She would dutifully measure the whisky and turn a deaf ear to my complaints that the drink contained more ice and soda than scotch. My frequent travels abroad gave me the opportunity to breach the liquor limits. More than the alcohol, it was the mutiny that gave me a high.

While waiting for breakfast to arrive, I started unpacking my favourite leather duffel. Lakshmi's packing unravelled itself. I knew exactly where each item was. Though I was the frequent flyer, she was always the one who planned and packed my bags. I had one less complicated task to do.

Among the multiple roles she donned, packing was a prominent one. Each of the roles would come to the forefront based on circumstances. I would often taunt her saying that she had a multiple personality disorder. She hated that. If she missed packing something, it was still my fault. Didn't the great man Darwin once say, "It is not the strongest of the species, nor the most intelligent that survives but it is the one that is most adaptable to change?" So, I adapted. I learnt to praise all her skills, including that of packing.

Despite my protests that good hotels always provide fresh towels and toiletries, Lakshmi insisted on packing them along with spare clothes, as part of her imaginary contingency plan. Inevitably, I always ended up lugging heavy luggage across airports. Like an undesired continuum, Lakshmi seemed to have shades of my mother in her. She seemed to have the very attributes that I hated in my mother.



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