

## My Memoirs of a couple of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Dr Ranjit Abraham



The couples wedding photo in 1947 at Madras (Chennai)

The man was born in 1909 and the woman in 1920. They had a gap of little above 11 years and were married sometime during Indian Independence. She was Mary, the eldest of 10 children born to a Church of South India (CSI) priest and a simple house wife, and due to a fall into a deep well as a child sustained pretty bad head injuries. On account of that fall, she suffered severe migraine's and ill health and her family gave little hope in her excelling in studies. However, she had one characteristic which was unique of her – the spirit of adventure and to try what others considered difficult. So, at a very young age after some coaching of few words of Hindi & Urdu by her father, she travelled boldly all alone in a steam train in those days with a pair of large sized cloth scissors hidden at her waist for protection all the way from Kerala to Lucknow to learn nursing. Her dream in life was to financially support her parents and younger siblings and so she saved all the little she made working as a nurse at Lucknow. She was so happy to contribute to the education of her siblings who many of whom were very good at studies and made themselves Doctors and high professionals later in life. She continued helping the family that was facing hardships on accounts of the poor income of a priest. On the other hand, he, Abraham was a naughty child and there were stories that included plucking newly planted Tapioca to see their roots and accidentally causing a bad wound on his sister's hand by throwing a large knife towards her. His father was initially a wealthy business man married to a cute and beautiful woman who gave birth to my father and 5 other siblings (3 were older to him and 2 were younger to him). He lost his mother at a

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young age of 4 and sadly remembered he was not allowed to meet his mother when she was isolated due to smallpox in a small hut all by herself to die all alone as it was during those days. Later on, after his mother's death, his father left his business at Alleppey and moved to Ayiroor Chirappuram to become a farmer. His father later had 2 sons through his second wife but financially they were struggling to meet ends due to the World Wars and poor produce from the land. To him, his eldest brother who was a teacher at the Madras Christian College High school was his mentor, provider and more than a brother figure. It was this brother who took him to Madras and helped him complete his BA and LT from Madras Christian College. He was good at sports and won several laurels including the first place in the 110-meter hurdles at the Indian Olympic meet and captained the Madras Presidency volleyball team. He would often say that the primary motivation to join sports and the Boy's scouts was because he could get a free shorts and extra dresses to wear. He attributed his athletic skills to the running and jumping between rocks and climbing trees during his childhood at Ayiroor. He later joined as a Mathematics teacher and thereafter, his sole purpose of life was to support the family since his brother told him it was now his turn to do what he was doing for years. So, all his savings were sent to his father and he also maintained a diary of accounts in great details which exist even today in good shape. Marriage came late because he was the sole bread-winner for the family at Ayiroor. When he crossed 39 years of age and his elder brother told him it was time to marry. So, he and she met at a relative's house and the marriage was solemnised at a church in Madras attended by just a few friends and relatives. There after came the offer for him to go to Ethiopia as a one among the very first Indian teachers and so off they went to Ethiopia (then known as the land of savages) – a place they both loved and cherished until 1969.

This couple were none other than my parents and one would wonder why I chose to write about them. The simple answer being, many a life of people known in public are well known to everyone, yet there are those who led a noble life, devoted unselfishly to the welfare of the immediate and extended family, led a moral and simple life but are yet unknown. They never or wanted to do things to get fame or name. But truly they were angels whose hard work, commitment and simplicity made many others including me what I am today. So, let me narrate a few - what makes me proud of them.

Firstly, the controversy regarding the belief in God. The only time I ever saw a break in the morning and evening prayers led by my father and mother respectively was the day my father died in 1989. Never had they missed a prayer whether we were in a plane, train or any other place other than home. It was ritualistically done as a duty. She was the daughter of a CSI priest who knew 11 languages and had written books in 4 to 6 languages – a top spiritual intellect. My father was the son of a highly god-fearing man who was instrumental in building the Edappavoor Marthoma church and a preacher too. However, I was a rebel as young as 8 years of age and used to argue with my parents and many others, much with my own grandfather priest over several hours and days in my difficulty in accepting a supreme power or being I couldn't see, feel, touch or experience. Belief in something I couldn't realise meant plain stupidity to me and so for many years I remained in a dead-lock regarding worship and belief of Christ or any other supreme being. So, perhaps I got the answer from my own parents. My father's answer was – "Although I have never seen God, I believe because my father told me that God exists and hence going to church was what was expected of a true

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Syrian Christian". My mother's answer was also similar - she too acknowledged that she never saw God, but forced herself to believe in the Bible because her father and several others told her so. Thanks to both of them as I am at peace and happy in being an Agnostic for the past 40 odd years. I also learnt in due course to respect and accept others for what they believed. I finally put to rest this debatable subject once for all.

Secondly, the devotion to family. Both my parents thought a good son (in particular) or daughter would do anything for their parents and siblings besides their own children. Account books of my father indicate that he sent 33% (the maximum amount one could send of one's earnings to India) from the joint earnings of my parents (father earned approximately about 700 Ethiopian dollars and my mother approximately 350 per month – a time when the Ethiopian dollar was equivalent to 1.10 Indian rupees) since 1948 until the late Sixties without break. Yes, my mother was at times restricted by my father to some extent in giving to her siblings and parents stating that it was the sons of the family's duty to do so. But nevertheless, my father never ever refused my mother to buy medicines or old-age supplements for her parents and even fully entertained my grand-mother who lived with us when grandfather passed away in 1979. I have heard and was told by several that my grandmother simply loved her stay at Ayiroor with my parents more than any other places she lived in India and abroad with her other children with more earthly luxuries. To my grandmother life was full of activity, talk and sharing when she lived at Ayiroor. My mother used to remind me – "We have a short period of life on this earth and the greatest virtue would be to take care of our parents when they become weak and old". She told me that she took efforts to take care of her parents because she believed that I would do the same when my turn came. Yes, parents are very important and I have felt the joy of having my mother with me for several years after the passing away of my father in 1989. Her stories, narrations and enthusiasm of speaking about relatives and friends created a strong imprint on me to know the family genealogy although I never met several she mentioned repeatedly over the years she was with me. Family is everything, more than the accolades and money and power you could earn in life – a sweet lesson I learnt from the life and teachings of my parents.

Thirdly, simple living was the best course of life. My father disliked being an elder in a prayer group to give the words of benediction. He always said he was truly happy and content with life and said God was good to him over the years and whenever I used to say I was unhappy about the taste of the food prepared – he reminded me the days when he had just a few pieces of boiled tapioca and green chillies before going to school with a huge banana plantain on his head which he had to deliver at the market. He used to tell me that he hardly ever had more than a small bowl of rice (kanji) and some vegetables and dreamed of having a piece of fish or meat. My mother also had similar stories of hardships for food during childhood. My father always reminded me the value of having my mother at my side to prepare and feed me which he never had during his days as a child. Both of them always regarded themselves as simple mortals and used to see those with power and money as those gifted with intelligence and good fortunes. But never, did I observe in them jealousy towards others who were better off. That was an exceptional gift they both had. A new dress or a new gadget such as a fridge for the house did not make much difference in their jubilations of life. A good life to both of them was to do whatever was possible to the family and to be good role models to their children. My father could never tolerate or accept a lie told to him. Truthfulness was the virtue

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of a good human. The only desire my father had was that his children should educate themselves more than the Bachelor's degree he had. He wished one child at least would take a Master's degree. That was one motivation for me to take my Doctorate.

Fourthly, do good to others without expecting gains or acknowledgment. That was particularly what my mother did. During the years she lived with me; she would ask me regularly every week for some cash but never revealed to me what she did about it although I asked her. My guess was she was using it for travelling in buses (she loved travel) to meet friends and relatives. It was during her burial that I met several people whom I had never met before. Each one had a story to tell me of the goodness of her deeds like listening to their troubles and consoling them and paying them the little cash she had. I was simply moved to tears hearing their stories. My father also helped several in the family but never ever expected them to acknowledge the help which was a surprise to me. It took me some time to eventually discover the joy of sharing and helping those in need.

Fifthly, a family is stable when the father leads the family. My father always took the decisions in the house. Although he asked my mother most of the time for opinions, he would still do what he thought was right. My mother yielded all the time to his decisions (sometimes with a grumble) telling me that he was more rational in decision making. I think she was right and it explained the stability of the family. Many a times discords happen in families when both start fighting over decisions – not yielding and leading to disastrous family life. Although equal rights are no doubt there for both –it was best to amicably accept one among the two's decisions to move forward in life.

Sixthly, they gave me the freedom and space to think, act and decide for myself. I was born when my father was 50 and mother was 39. Probably as I was a growing child for parents passed their youth, I was given more freedom to choose my career, passions, hobbies and thoughts. That helped me mould myself after experiencing and experimenting many a thing in life. Although I went through a roller-coaster ride, it helped me mould a better understanding of life itself. My mother stood as a rock beside me, advising me at times that decisions in life need to be done rationally and thoughtfully. I enjoyed her support and the freedom of choice. Luckily for me life turned out to be pretty adventurous and good on account of it.

Seventhly, relationship particularly with elders was inculcated in me. Both my parents insisted that I visit elderly cousins and uncles in the family. Many a times, I did these visits whenever I happened to go to different towns and cities. Initially I disliked these visits stating that none of my peers or relatives of my age did this. But eventually, I accepted it and met and spend several hours with several elderly friends and relatives. Talking and discussing with these elderly people helped me shed away a good lot of my fantasy fears of life. Learnt to accept human life from birth to grave like a Zen master. As I look back, I am thankful to those stories and events I learnt from them and it helped me look at life more realistically. I attribute the interactions I had with several dying people over the years during my formative years helped me understand and have the courage to deal with people undergoing severe pain and death.

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I could keep going on and on – but let me conclude to say that both my parents left this world before the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Both wished they would not be in a vegetative state during their final days. Both said they did not care where they should be buried or ever wished a remembrance meeting in their names. Both wanted their burials to be held simple without any fan-fare. As it turned out, both silently passed away without burdening their children or anyone else who were part of their lives. They lived, served and passed away gracefully. As their only son I attribute my strength because of this man and woman, except that I cannot help shed a drop of tear when I visit A.T. Abraham's tomb at Edappavoor Marthoma Church, Ayiroor or Mary Abraham's at Elamkulam Marthoma Church, Cochin.

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