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Spirited, Resilient Malaysian
Indian Woman*



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V. G. KUMAR DAS

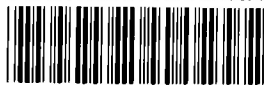


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V. G. KUMAR DAS

PUSTAKA PERDANA



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PARTRIDGE

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PREFACE

This book is a biographical tale based on the life of my beloved mother, Gowri – her trials and tribulations, her joys and sorrows, the events that she shared with her children and those vividly recalled by her family. It is a story that reflects the grit of an immigrant Indian woman, widowed at a young age, who brought up seven children all born in a new land, the Malay Peninsula, where her progeny now extend to three generations. Save for some individuals to whom pseudonyms have been applied, the names have been left intact.

Gowri's biography spans the history of her adopted country, from pre-independence to the late 1990s. Thus it captures significant moments of this period. Gowri was a Malayalee, originating from Kerala, a state situated on the tropical Malabar Coast of south-western India. The casual reader will find Malayalee traditions sprinkled in abundance throughout the book – the same traditions Gowri's descendants inherited and which contribute to the rich multicultural fabric of the Malaysian society they live in today. Gowri's motherly joys and woes in bringing up her brood of children in the early years add as much to her story as the challenges of single parenting that she subsequently faced.

Also woven into her biography are her travel experiences – especially in her later life – which she enjoyed sharing with her grandchildren, and interesting facets of Malay and Chinese cultures that touched her life, which she loved to share with her relatives in India and abroad. Events in her life as they happened are faithfully recorded with no malice intended to parties from any quarter. Indeed, even when disappointed or hurt, Gowri brooked no malice against anyone in her life. Her kind and forgiving nature stamped her as an exceptional individual. Her biography is written, and is to be read, in this light.

My decision to embark on this book-length work about my mother's life is intensely personal. She is the finest woman I have ever known, brimming with admirable qualities. The book depicts her gentle transformation from the daughter of a conservative aristocratic Nair household in Kerala to a more liberated woman. I want this book to convey core parts of my mother's personality. She was a strict mother of seven children with somewhat traditional core values of how individuals within a family and children in general should behave. I want to share her pride in bringing up her children, with myself being the eldest, as true citizens of the country she had come to love; her ability to love unconditionally; her boundless benevolence; and above all, her inspirational positive attitude drawn from her unflinching faith in the Divine.

"I've had a lot of obstacles in life, but God was always there with me," she would often say by way of encouraging her family and others to shed their negativity. These are the facets that made Gowri who she was. I believe they have universal relevance for all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must first thank my wife, Ambika, for supporting the idea of writing this book so soon after my publication in retirement of a technical tome. I must say that I have had enthusiastic support and numerous contributions from all my family members in this undertaking, without any exception. The most difficult part was not so much in observing the chronology of events but rather in deciding how much of the story of her children could be woven into the biography of our matriarch. She was the receptacle for all our successes and disappointments, and her guiding light mattered to us even in adult life. Her presence was central to sensitising her children and grandchildren to the joys of sharing their love and being there for each other both in good times and bad times.

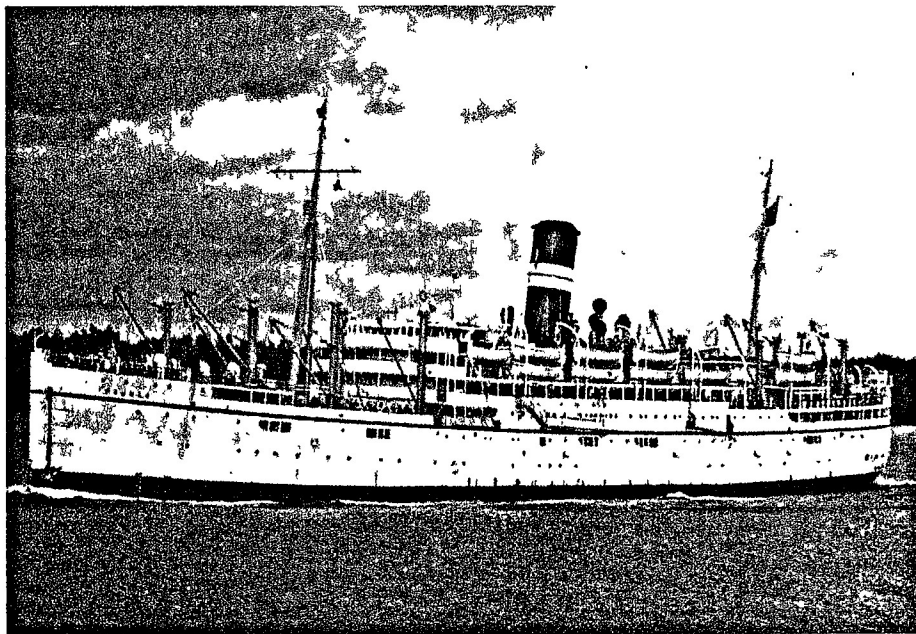
To my mother's lifelong friend Ponnu, I owe a vote of thanks for her vivid recollection of the Kluang years. My sisters, Valsala and Ambi, provided valuable insight and helped on a few anecdotal passages, while my niece Nisha and nephew Sharad – the literary talents in our family – unflinchingly gave critical comments on the early draft of this book that have enabled me to enhance its flavour as a novel as compared with the original narrative. My daughters, Gouri and Sathya, who were with her the most, gave me valuable personal insights on their grandmother as well as insights gleaned from their cousins, and they persuaded me to include a section for their voice in the book.

I am grateful to Sheela Nair for her assistance in the transliteration of the hymn in Appendix 2 from Malayalam into English, and to Raghavan Nambiar for his invaluable assistance in setting up the *Vishukanni* for the camera. The book has also benefitted from a critical final read by my son, Ashwin. I thank them all.

This book is dedicated to all members of Gowri's growing Malaysian *tharavad* that now includes great-grandchildren, and to all those whose lives she touched in some way or another, both in her native birthplace and in her adopted country.



THE ARRIVAL (1939-1940)



The SS *Rajula*, the longest-serving troop and passenger ship of the British India Steam Navigation Company Ltd. (1926-1973)

Photo courtesy of Reuben Goossens at smaritime.com

[1]

This is a story of a woman's exceptional courage, a mother's unconditional love, and a matriarch's uncompromising will to see her family survive against insurmountable odds.

It is a story that begins in the last quarter of the tumultuous decade of the 1930s. Much of the world was still reeling from the devastating effects of the Great Depression. It was also a momentous period in the history of the Indian subcontinent, with the quest for independence from British rule led by Gandhi fuelling much enthusiasm and public unrest. The astrologers in the land may have foreseen winds of change in their charts, but they refrained from issuing strong predictions; the best among them were more drawn to the ominous global turmoil and restlessness they foresaw for the new decade that would soon dawn.

No astrology was needed, however, to predict the weather pattern in July 1939. It was monsoon month. At sea, huge waves, whipped up by gale-force winds, were lashing at the SS *Rajula*, which had set sail from Madras headed for Singapore via Nagapattinam and Penang. The passenger-cum-cargo ship was crossing the turbulent Bay of Bengal with its course set in a southerly direction to the Indian Ocean. On board the battered ship was a newly married young Keralite woman on her first-ever journey abroad. Her name was Gowri.

Fair of complexion and endowed with features that never failed to attract a second look, she seemed totally forlorn in her cabin. The tossing and turning of the ship had confined her to her bed for the most part, much to the chagrin of her spouse. He had privately hoped that the SS *Rajula* would provide a perfect romantic start to their lives in Malaya, a new enclave of the British Empire offering unrivalled job opportunities.

The young man had just turned 34. He was returning to his inventory-management job at the Johor Labis Estate¹ accompanied by his new wife, who was ten years younger than he, and his ageing mother, Sathiabhama. The estate was a rubber plantation owned by the Franco-Belgian company Socfin. He had been working there for a few years after an initial period in Singapore, where he had picked up elements of bookkeeping and shorthand at a well-known centre managed by a fellow Keralite. The decision to leave home to seek his fortunes abroad was his own, but the presence, before him, of his older cousin Unnikrishnan in Labis was enough to assuage the fears of his family.

He was well-read and very much aware of current events, including the rising crescendo of beating war drums in Nazi Germany, which had boldly adopted the swastika emblem of Hindu mythology as the national flag of the Third Reich. He fleetingly wondered about that. He was sure that Gandhi, who was bent on uniting the Hindus and Muslims, would not have opted for that as a rallying sign for independence.

Having served a brief stint in the medical corps of the British Indian Army, he had come to admire the discipline of army life, but he'd had insufficient encounters with British officers to form an opinion on them. His first encounter with a Briton had been at Labis, when he was interviewed for the job. The manager – a middle-aged, somewhat suntanned man in a smart khaki outfit – took out just one document from the file on his desk. The questions came at him thick and fast, but none had any bearing on the plantation crop or staff management; they centred in their entirety on his army training. He was hired literally on the spot. Towards the end, the manager had remarked: "Your name is too long. Can we just call you Panicker?"

And so it was that Govindan Kutty of the Velloli Panicker household from the Palakkad District in Kerala got christened as Velloli Govinda Panicker, or V. G. Panicker. He knew this meant that Gowri would henceforth be formally addressed as Mrs Gowri Panicker and that the birth certificates of any children Gowri might bear him would also carry this new paternal name. He was, however, not sure whether his children

¹ "Estate" was commonly applied to the names of all plantations in the country.

would bear his Panicker clan name as their surname or, as the Keralite matrilineal custom demanded, take the clan name of his wife, who hailed from a Menon family. Either way, he felt it didn't quite matter – for after all, the Panickers and the Menons were just subdivisions of the same Nair caste. (This caste is really a group of castes in Kerala who live in large family units called *tharavads* housing descendants of one common female ancestor. They follow the matriarchal family system to this day.)

Coming out of his reminiscence on the upper deck, Govindan Kutty reached for his cigarette and tried to light it, but the wind was too strong. He retraced his steps and descended the stairs to his second-class cabin. His mother, who inexplicably took well to sea travel, was fast asleep. Gowri, on the other hand, was still in a daze, finding it difficult to lift up her head. He touched her head fondly, whispering something that brought a smile to her face. Bending down, he brought up a bottle of ginger beer and poured a small amount into a cup. He allowed her to sip slowly the invigorating drink that somehow seemed to keep nausea at bay.

On a couple of occasions, when the sea was less turbulent, Govindan Kutty had managed to bring Gowri up onto the upper deck to soak in the fresh air. Holding her close at the railings to further steady her, he would distract her by asking her to count the flying fish making their majestic leaps into the air and then gliding over the water. Gowri was fascinated by the spectacle and enjoyed the salt spray carried by the wind that landed on them both as the ship lunged into a big wave. But the nausea would return before too long.

Govindan Kutty would then urge her to fix her gaze on the horizon. It worked a couple of times, but when the rollicking became intense, he had little choice but to take her back to the cabin so she could lie down. Unfortunately, the wobbly motion of the ship was somehow more exaggerated in the cabin environment. This combined with the thick aura of chicken *kurma* that seemed to engulf the deck area only exacerbated Gowri's situation, since she was a vegetarian from birth. Porridge with a bit of salt in it and lime pickle were the mainstay of her diet.

Govindan Kutty occupied the upper berth in the four-berth cabin. He preferred to take his dinner in the ship's dining hall, but only after ensuring that Gowri and his mother had taken their meals in the cabin.

At times, Gowri, down with nausea, would resist intake of any food, but Govindan Kutty would patiently sit with her and feed her small morsels at a time interspersed with sips of ginger beer. He would then leave the ladies on their own.

Sathiabhama caught Gowri sobbing on a few occasions. The realization that she had left her loved ones behind was tearing away at Gowri's emotions. When would she see her siblings again? What would it be like living in a foreign land? Questions intermingled with acute homesickness were tossing in her mind as her body was being rocked by the ship battling the waves.

One night, the sobbing was more prolonged. Sathiabhama got up from her berth and went over to sit by Gowri's side. Gently wiping the younger woman's tears, she said in sweet Malayalam, "Don't be sad. I'm here with you. Treat me like your mother." The words had a soothing effect on Gowri, who quickly came out of her reverie. Sathiabhama then engaged her in a short prayer before returning to bed.

On another night, Govindan Kutty excitedly came down after dinner and coaxed Gowri to come to the upper deck to watch the spectacular, star-studded night sky and the shooting stars that came by. The moon was low on the horizon and the shimmering reflection of its light on the waves gave the night a romantic aura. Govindan Kutty pulled his wife close for an embrace. Instinctively, the shy Gowri tried to move away, but her husband pointed out other romantic couples at the railings and whispered into her ear, "Do we need to stand out by being the exception?" She acquiesced but was not entirely at ease with the public display of affection expected of her. Govindan Kutty was content with holding her for as long as the night allowed.

On the seventh day, the swell of the sea quieted as the ship descended into the calm waters of the Strait of Malacca. The colour returned somewhat to Gowri's ashen face, and she mustered enough energy to come to the upper deck on her own to join Govindan Kutty and her mother-in-law.

Here they had their first sight of land. Gowri closed her eyes momentarily and reopened them, engulfed by a warm beckoning feeling that she would recall time after time in the years to come. What she saw was the coastline of Malaya. The ship would anchor soon, she was told, for a day's stop at the port of Penang before proceeding further to Singapore, where they would

all disembark and take the road across the causeway to the sultanate state of Johor. Singapore, Malacca, and Penang were the only provinces without a sultan as head, and they were then styled as the Straits Settlements of Peninsular Malaya.

It was a sight to behold as the ship finally docked at the Tanjong Pagar wharf at Singapore's Keppel Harbour, boasting then the just-completed largest dry dock in the world and the third largest floating dock. Although there was no British fleet in sight (there never was), one could sense a strong British presence in the strict and methodical protocols being followed for the first batch of disembarking passengers from the ship.

Gowri had her first glimpse of local residents on the wharf. Back in her village in Palakkad, one could not have imagined what a Chinese or a Malay person would look like, although her father who had served for several years in the British Indian Army in Burma had in bygone years shown her pictures of some ethnic peoples.

The harbour was bustling with activity, with cargo in wooden crates and large gunnysacks being unloaded by the ship's own derricks. The dockworkers, many of them manning handcarts, appeared to be mostly of South Indian ethnicity. They were essentially barefoot, and many were wearing tattered singlets and faded sarongs. Almost all of them carried a curled-up cloth of white cotton for wiping their sweat and using as headgear. There were also Chinese coolies among the labourers, wearing loose jackets and trousers. Some had straw hats on to shield their heads from the sun. Gowri was amused to see that they wore wooden sandals on their feet, which made such a clatter when they walked. The air was thick with the pungent smell of onions and spices – quite probably the contents of the gunnysacks that were being unloaded from the ship.

Observing the first batch of disembarking passengers from the ship's bunk and deck, Gowri was surprised to see among them a fair number of migrant Indian labourers, both men and women, who were escorted by a British official. From the noise and shouts reaching her ears from the wharf, she could distinctly make out some Tamil words, but the louder and dominant language was Chinese – the Hokkien dialect, as she later learnt. There were some uniformed personnel posted at specific exit points and also guiding the movement of passengers alighting from the ship. She spotted a

Sikh gentleman who stood out against the others with black songkok on their heads instead of turbans. She surmised that the latter were Malays.

From her vantage point on the upper deck, Gowri was able to observe the few visitors who had come to greet the passengers. They were all assembled in one corner of the wharf, and among them were immaculately dressed European and Asian women. The European ladies, she noticed, uniformly wore light-coloured outfits but sported colourful, stylish straw bonnets or hats with their crowns variously decorated with silk, lace, velvet, and feathers. The various headgear pieces exuded an exquisite charm and individuality of their own. Gowri had not seen women wearing bonnets or hats before, let alone such handsome pieces. Women from her native country merely used their saree folds to cover their heads.

Unlike the Europeans, the Asian women seemed to prefer more loud-coloured outfits. The Chinese ladies present were all young, and they looked elegant in their body-fitting red or blue *cheongsams* (long dresses), but Gowri's attention soon fell more on the Indian ladies present. Nearly all of them wore colourful embroidered sarees. She noted with some amusement that many preferred sleeveless blouses to go with their sarees. She made a mental note of this. A new fashion, perhaps, she thought to herself.

The humidity was already getting to her when she was ushered back into her cabin to gather her belongings and ready her mother-in-law for the disembarkation. Sathiabhama was a joyful person with whom she had little difficulty in bonding. "How should I address your son?" was a question Gowri had hesitated to ask since her marriage. Since they were now for some time in close quarters, she took the opportunity.

"Not by name," Sathiabhama replied. "We women don't do that. Call him *Etta* [elder brother] or utter a verbal sound which he understands is meant for his response."

"What verbal sound?" Gowri pressed.

Sathiabhama suggested, "Try *Pinne*." (In English, "Well then ...") Both women laughed, and Gowri decided to test this out at the first opportunity.

It was a hot day, and the humidity was soaring along with the clamour as the disembarked passengers crowded the exit point after their immigration clearance. This was not a place to get lost under any circumstance. Gowri held tightly to her husband's hand and that of her mother-in-law. No

sooner had they come out of the exit than a voice called out for her. In utter amazement, she turned to see her maternal cousin, Jayaram (affectionately called Jayam), waving at her. He wormed his way forward through the crowd to give Gowri a warm welcoming hug, and then he introduced himself to the rest of the party.

Gowri was over the moon at seeing Jayam, a familiar face so many miles away from home in a distant land. A captain in the British Indian Army, Jayam had been sent to Singapore for logistics training. The cousins had a high regard for one another. Gowri counted him as the brightest among all her cousins; he had topped Presidency College in his university days and also distinguished himself on the sporting field. Jayam was later to join the Indian Civil Service and distinguish himself further as an able problem-solving administrator, holding several key central government portfolios in assigned duties under the Home Ministry.

Today, he came prepared with transport, and in a typical matter-of-fact way said, "I have arranged for all of us to have lunch at Ananda Bhavan – the best vegetarian Indian restaurant in Singapore!" The restaurant, located at Selegie Road, still stands today.

"*Nyaan bakshanasalayil kazhichutilla. Oone namaldemadri ayeriko?*" asked Gowri. ("I have never eaten at a restaurant. Will the food be like ours?")

"Sure, it is South Indian cuisine. Rice, sambar, rasam, and the works!" replied a bemused Jayam

For Gowri, after the meagre porridge meal on board the SS *Rajula*, the food was simply God-sent, and it was served on the traditional banana leaf. Both Gowri and Jayam chatted away about old times. Jayam gave her an update on his married sisters – and of course, about her favourite uncle, Pudukkottai Kesava Menon, then the inspector of police of Madras State, which brought tears to her eyes.

She recalled that Kesava Menon had previously put his foot down against her marriage alliance with a Brahmin widower with some young children. The proposal was then seriously being considered by his sister, Lakshmikutty Amma (Jayam's mother), with whom Gowri had spent much of her growing-up years. Kesava Menon wanted the hand of a handsome young man for Gowri, who was the fairest and most beautiful of all his

nieces. He was, after all, her maternal uncle, and he had a big say in such matters, given the matrilineal system practised by the Keralites.

The suitors for her older cousins who had come to Lakshmi Kutty's home – Chandravilas in Palakkad – had on one or two occasions sighted the beautiful Gowri and asked for her hand in marriage instead. But this was against tradition; the older girls had to be married off first. Gowri was often, therefore, asked to remain upstairs with her younger cousins. It was not until Govindan Kutty arrived on the scene as a suitor for Gowri that Kesava Menon finally gave his nod of approval. He even affectionately took care of the couple's travel expenses to Malaya.

Following lunch, Jayam arranged for a hired taxi to take them to Labis. It was a tearful farewell for Gowri. The taxi ride was quite uneventful, with both women dozing much of the way after the heavy meal. They passed monotonous stretches of rubber and oil palm plantations, but as they neared Labis, a tropical thunderstorm snapped them out of their slumber. It was a short-lived but vociferous unloading of one cloud's burden, and while it lasted it seemed as if the entire sky would fall down upon them. Never had Gowri experienced such long, ominous lightning streaks and deafening claps of thunder out in the open. Finally, with the downpour receding, the oppressive heat began to recede as well. Gowri welcomed the retreat of the heat, which had become unbearable.

"*Pinne*, is it always like this?" she enquired.

There was a moment's hesitation as Govindan Kutty came to understand that Gowri was addressing him. "No, I summoned it especially for your arrival!" came his reply, and everyone laughed, with the ladies exchanging understanding looks.

Moments later, they entered a bumpy dirt road which was the home stretch. In another fifteen minutes, the car came to a halt outside a staff bungalow on stilts curiously raised above ground level. Reading her mind, Govindan Kutty explained that all the houses were so constructed to ward off flood waters. As an afterthought, he added, "They keep out snakes too!" That prompted Gowri to go quickly up the stairs.

"Make sure you enter with your right foot first," whispered Sathiabhama, who was a step behind her. Gowri was aware of this traditional custom, which was followed by Hindus and Muslims alike.

The house was bright and airy, with plenty of natural light, and it seemed well furnished. A picture of Goddess Lakshmi greeted Gowri at the top of the stairs, but once she was well inside the living room, her roving eyes searched for and, indeed, found Ravi Verma's revered depiction of Lord Guruvayurappan (Lord Krishna as He is affectionately referred to in Kerala) propitiously positioned on the wall facing east. She clasped her hands to Him with a silent prayer in Sanskrit on her lips, thankful to Him for getting her safely to her new home in Malaya. She earnestly sought His divine blessings that, with her new-found family, she would finally find the happiness that had been eluding her.

As she finished her prayer, coincidentally on the hour, the grandfather clock chimed precisely seven times. Years later, she would fondly recall this chime as a lucky omen, foretelling her joy in bearing her husband seven lovely children.

[2]

Gowri's first child, a boy, arrived in mid-1940. Govindan Kutty had seen to it that the delivery was in the safe hands of a Dr Menon at the Lily Dispensary and Maternity Clinic, located on Upper Serangoon Road, Singapore. Remarkably, the clinic still stands to this day. Govindan Kutty named his son Kumar Das, but the boy was affectionately referred to as Dasu at home.

The child quickly became the apple of his grandmother's eye, and he could do no wrong. He took to twirling her hair tightly around the fingers of his left hand while sucking his right thumb as a self-induced recipe for sleep. His grandmother, besotted with the child, muffled her groan and put up a brave front. He also had a doting uncle in Shankaran (Unnikrishnan's brother), who had just arrived from India and found immediate employment in the same plantation.

With the arrival of the baby, Govindan Kutty arranged for domestic help, which came in the form of a Chinese maid with broken English addressed by everyone as Ah Moy. She would arrive early in the morning and leave late in the evening. Gowri found Ah Moy to be a sweet person who was very gentle in handling the infant, and soon she built up the confidence to leave Dasu under Ah Moy's care once he was weaned.

Ah Moy would also oblige Sathiabhama now and again with a foot massage. Sathiabhama would point at her feet and say, "*Ah Moy, anmo, anmo*" (*anmo* being the oldest Chinese word for massage). While *anmo* was easy to remember, simple Malay words often eluded Sathiabhama – who, for example, would ask Ah Moy to make her some tea by saying "*Ah Moy, mahu tai,*" a request that always had Ah Moy in stitches, giggling away at Sathiabhama's mispronunciation of *teh*, which meant "tea" in the Malay

language. *Tai*, on the other hand, meant excrement. When this was pointed out to Sathiabhama, she would laugh at her own goof, only to repeat the mistake a few days later.

One day, a well-intentioned Ah Moy brought into the house a durian. “What on earth is that stench? Is it coming from that fruit?” Gowri demanded, pointing to the durian.

Ah Moy, who had by then prised open the thorny husk of the fruit to display its luscious seedy pulp, was soaking in the aroma. “It is delicious, mam, try it,” said Ah Moy, but Gowri had already fled the kitchen, covering her nose with her saree fold.

Sathiabhama, attracted by the smell, came into the kitchen and tried one piece and then another. She seemed to enjoy the taste but later admitted that she didn't quite fancy the rotten onion smell that lingered on her breath many hours later. The fruit is regarded by many people in Southeast Asia as the king of fruits.



The durian fruit

Sathiabhama, who had no daughters, was touched by Gowri's affection for her and often confided in her. Gowri soon came up to speed with the history of the Velloli House, her husband's *tharavad*. For the Nair communities, the *tharavad* name was identified through the mother's house. Every Nair *tharavad* boasted a prominent temple for their ancestors and serpent groves. The Nair families considered the serpent to be the guardian

of the clan, an old Dravidian custom that still continues to have its hold in many parts of Kerala.



CHILDHOOD ORDEAL

Gowri, in turn, opened her heart to Sathiabhama. Gowri was a member of the Kollaikal *tharavad* at Pudukerry (a village location in Palakkad), a highly respected and well-endowed family of landowners who, at one stage, owned half the territory of Pudukerry, including large portions of forested land. Palakkad is the rice bowl of Kerala and derives its name from the fusion of two Malayalam words: *pala*, a tree (*Alstonia scholaris*) that is found abundantly in the district, and *kadu*, which means “forest.”

Sathiabhama listened intently to Gowri’s personal history, which was tinged with some sadness on account of family neglect and a lost educational opportunity that Gowri begrudged. The second of four children – the youngest the only boy – Gowri in her teens found herself, along with her elder sister, Saraswati, and younger sister, Kamalam, being placed under the care of her aunt, Lakshmikutty Amma,² at Chandravilas House, where

² The suffixes *amma* and *kutty* are often appended to Malayalee feminine names, irrespective of religious differences; the suffix *kutty* is also applied to male names. The word *amma* stands for mother (as when spoken of) and *ammae* for Mum (as when spoken to). The corresponding words for father /Dad are *achan/acha*. The grandfather is addressed as *muthacha(n)* (mother’s father) or *achacha(n)* (father’s father), and the grandmother as *ammama* or *muthessi*.

Honorific titles are also used by family members when addressing other elders. Thus elder male siblings are addressed as *etta(n)* or *chetta(n)* and elder female siblings as *Chechi* by their younger ones. The eldest male sibling’s wife is often called *ettathiamma* by his younger siblings. A child addresses his or her father’s elder and younger male siblings as *valiacha(n)* and *cheriacha(n)*, respectively, with the word *acha(n)* replaced by *amma* for their wives. The father’s sisters are just addressed as *acheamma*. On the child’s mother’s side, male siblings are addressed as *ammaman* (or simply as *mama* following their names) and their wives as *Ammaye*; female siblings are addressed as *valiamma* (if elder) or *cheriamma* (if younger), with the word *amma* replaced by *acha (n)* for their spouses.

Gowri's education at the Moyan Girls High School in Palakkad stopped two years shy of a secondary school leaving certificate.

Lakshmikutty Amma did not resent the family decision that she should look after her nieces; she gracefully accepted the additional responsibility. However, Gowri (unlike Saraswati, who managed to continue with her pre-university studies) found herself obliged to help around the house. While grateful for the shelter, Gowri would sometimes reflect on this phase of her hapless life at Chandravilas and blame her father, T. V. Kunhiraman Nair, in particular for her predicament, although it has to be said that he did arrange for her a home tutor in Sanskrit, having heard that her formal education was being halted.

As a captain in the British Indian Army, Kunhiraman Nair served in Burma, Persia (Iran), and the Middle East, and he would only periodically return home. Gowri's mother, Kamakshi Amma, was aware that her husband had been sending regular remittances, but none of this was passed to her. Suspecting an interception of the funds, she finally summoned the courage to question her eldest maternal uncle on this matter, as well as on the lack of supervision of the labour force on their ancestral land, which she had begun to notice. This questioning was seen as an affront, and it set in motion a series of events that led to her daughters' eventual relocation to their aunt's home.

In a community steeped in the matrilineal system, the eldest maternal uncle bears sway in all major decisions, especially the management of the estate. A fiercely independent and competent woman, Kamakshi Amma decided she would regularly engage in site visits to the paddy fields and coconut and cashewnut groves, not considered then a province of womenfolk of the *tharavad*. Wagging tongues soon had it that she was involved in a romantic linkage while her husband was away. Although hurt by the aspersion and particularly by the attitude of some of her siblings who resented her "manly" actions of supervision of the estate, she was more determined than ever to ignore the distasteful rumour and fight her own cause. Her sole concern was to have her legitimate share of the annual earnings from her ancestral land in hand to take care of her children. For that, she was prepared to step into the field to oversee matters.

Her actions immediately sparked an internal feud in the family. She was seen as challenging the hegemony of the *tharavad*. Kamakshi Amma,

however, refused to succumb to pressures from the family to give up her site visits. She was a true believer in women's rights. Her husband had complete faith in her, but he too could not stand the internal bickering that he found in his wife's *tharavad*. Matters came to a head one day when he overheard a snide remark from a family member that, having returned from Burma, he was now having a free ride in his wife's house. He packed up his bags the very next day and left for his own Thazhatu Veedu *tharavad* in Pattuvam, a village in the Kannur District of North Kerala.

By this time, there were already widening cracks in the once proud and large Kollaikal *tharavad* at Pudu ssery, especially in the lineage of Kamakshi Amma's mother, Ammalu Amma (see *tharavad* family tree). Confronted by disunity and dissatisfaction among the clan about the management of their tilled land, the aging maternal uncles agreed to partition the property.

This was hastened by the death of Ammalu Amma in 1927. Ammalu Amma had five children, two of whom were sons who had the rights to only one portion each of her landed property inheritance. The daughters had the greater share, as per the matrilineal system. The tillers of the land at the end of each harvest season would give to the *tharavad* their proportionate share of the crop yields. The teak-lined *ara* in the *tharavad* house was the traditional strongroom for storing rice grains. With the passage of time, part of the produce from the land was given in kind, and the rest in the form of cash from the proceeds of sale.

Kamakshi Amma lamented that she did not quite enjoy her share of the dues. In the absence of her husband, her brothers Kesava Menon and Parameswara Menon – backed by their maternal uncles – seized the opportunity to isolate their rebellious sister and place her three daughters under the care of Lakshmikutty Amma at Chandravilas. For all intents and purposes, Kamakshi Amma found herself ostracized by her siblings. Kesava Menon forbade any contact with her. This drastic course of action could have been motivated by their anger and embarrassment over the defamatory rumours about their sister combined with a genuine desire to ensure an unblemished future for their nieces. There was no consideration of the psychological impact of separation of the children from their mother, especially of their emotional needs. For her guardianship role, Lakshmikutty Amma received a major portion of the income derived in kind and cash.

from Kamakshi Amma's share of the cultivated land. In addition to this, both Kesava Menon and Parameswara Menon also generously relinquished their share of the property income to her to help manage the large household at Chandravilas.

It didn't take the siblings long to realize that Kamakshi Amma was now the sole occupant of the *tharavad* house of Ammalu Amma. Both Kesava Menon and Parameswara Menon were no longer in Pudussery, as they had joined the police force in pursuit of their careers. The siblings wanted her out, and the only way to accomplish this was to take the painful step of demolishing the house. This was, conceivably, a planned move – following partition, Kamakshi Amma and her son were reduced to holding only a marginal share of the land on which the house stood. That the demolition would yield teak wood that could fetch a lucrative price in the open market was not lost upon them either, but this was far from being their motive. Rightly or wrongly, they believed that, as a result of her overtly independent acts, aspersions had been cast on the good name of the *tharavad* and that, therefore, she was not entitled to stay in their ancestral home.

Only the detached kitchen portion of the house was spared demolition, and Kamakshi Amma resigned herself to her fate of occupying this remnant with her son, Bala Govinda Menon (Bala Menon for short). This area fortunately had a road frontage and a hundred-year-old well just beside it that had never run dry.

As the years went by, Bala Menon joined the military, and Kamakshi Amma was left alone in the house. Soon thereafter, her siblings applied to court and obtained an order to evict her from the house on the basis that she had no proprietary interest in the property. She was thus forced to vacate and live elsewhere for some time. Little did they know that Kamakshi Amma, being the fighter that she was, would challenge the eviction order with the support of her son. After a lengthy court battle, she managed to successfully set aside the eviction order on equitable grounds and move back to her house. Her alienation from her siblings further deepened as a result.

“Effectively then, the Ammalu Amma *tharavad* home ceased to exist, and the two sisters had their own homes – the one belonging to Kamakshi Amma which was the remnant part of the old common *tharavad*, and that

of Lakshmikutty Amma, her own established home at Chandravilas to which her two male siblings were also connected. All of them proudly kept the initials P. K., for Pudussery Kollaikal, against their names," concluded Gowri.

"It's sad that your *tharavad* went into such disarray," commented Sathiabhama.

"I have not seen my mother or brother for some ten years," said Gowri with tears flowing down her cheeks. "I miss them very much. I pleaded many times for at least a glimpse of them, but the answer from Lakshmikutty Amma was always no."

"Why didn't Lakshmikutty allow you to go?" asked Sathiabhama.

"She was a kind soul, but I guess that on this matter, she had little choice but to acquiesce with the decision of the menfolk in her *tharavad*. I'm sure she would not have particularly fancied being burdened by her elder sister's children, and especially so given the circumstance of her marriage."

"What do you mean?"

"She was given away as a bride by the family elders in an arranged marriage that was first thrust on my mother, who had adamantly refused. Her husband, P. K. Krishna Iyer, was a Brahmin. He was a senior officer in the Salt Department of the British government (later renamed as the Salt and Customs Department). A jewel of a man, Krishna Iyer had been unlucky with his earlier two marriages. His first wife was a Brahmin lady through whom he had five children. She died in a tragic accident when she jumped from a moving train to save her son, who had fallen off it. Ironically, the son survived the fall. His second wife was my mother's elder sister, Madhavi Amma, who died after giving birth to two sons, Thangam and Chellam. After her death, my grandmother sought the return of Thangam and Chellam to their maternal Nair family household, but their father objected to this. His marriage to any of Madhavi Amma's sisters was thus proposed as a compromise. And Lakshmikutty Amma became his bride, seeing as the elder sister Kamakshi Amma had refused."

"Was Kesava Menon equally relentless on the matter of your wish to see your mother and brother once in a while?"

“He was hardly there in Chandravilas, as his job required him to be stationed in Madras. To be honest, I was frightened to communicate with him.”



Lakshmikutty Amma had a son, Jayaram, and four daughters (Ramani, Chandra, Radha, and Devi), all of whom enjoyed a good university education and were married off into upper-echelon families. When it came to Gowri, however, there was no apparent rush to getting her married off, especially ahead of her cousins. There was some foot-dragging even when a couple of proposals came her way earlier, with the suitors, attracted by her looks, being prepared to overlook her lack of higher education. Her marriage ahead of her cousins was simply out of the question.

Gowri recalled that even the suggestion by both Chellam and Thangam to get her married as part of an exchange marriage proposal was not seriously entertained. This was a common enough practice in the community then, where a brother and sister of one family are matrimonially linked to a brother-sister pair of another family. Gowri's sister Saraswati, after some years, married Jayaram's older Brahmin stepbrother Krishna Iyer (same namesake as their father), who was also staying at Chandravilas. It was a love marriage.

The young Krishna Iyer had four siblings through his mother: Parameswara Iyer, Natesa Iyer, Kalyani, and Ammini. Natesa Iyer was the brother who survived the fall from the train. Parameswara Iyer's eldest son, Krishnan (nicknamed Veeramani), settled down years later in Malaya with his wife, Kamalam (affectionately known as Manni). Gowri knew him and everyone else in the patriarch Krishna Iyer's extensive family rather well, and they, in turn, very much liked their cousin who had come to live with them.



An archived photograph of P. K. Krishna Iyer (seated wearing scarf in the middle row) with wife Lakshmikutty Amma (on his left) and his brood of children and grandchildren.

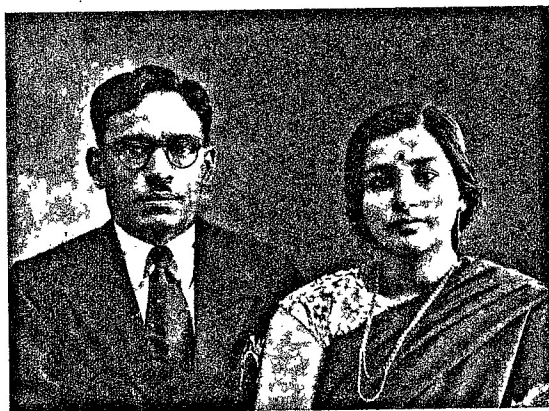
Photo courtesy of P. K. Devidas (2015).

Gowri, in spite of her lack of formal higher education, picked up Sanskrit from a regular tutor at Chandravilas that her father had arranged, and she was self-taught in English. With her older cousins at college, the numerous bookshelves at Chandravilas – packed with a variety of reading material – provided Gowri with unfettered access to English books. She soon found her command of English improving by leaps and bounds. Through sheer force of habit, she had become a voracious reader.

She did not limit herself to just English texts but also enjoyed reading vernacular texts in Malayalam and Sanskrit. She read the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics inside out and would, in times to come, narrate these to her own children. She was well versed with the Bhagavad Gita and several of the Puranas, in particular, *Bhāgavatam* and Shiva Purana. She also began to compose a number of *stotra* (hymns) in Sanskrit and Malayalam which she would impart in later years to her grandchildren. She conceded to the publication of this collection many years later. Sathiabhama admired her daughter-in-law's courage, perseverance, and mental agility, and loudly wished that the next child that Gowri bore would be a girl.

Gowri's second child, who was born at the same Lily Dispensary and Maternity Clinic in Singapore in November 1941, turned out to be a boy. He was named Venugopal but referred to affectionately as Venu. Both

mother and child returned to Labis within a couple of days, as rumours of an imminent outbreak of war in the East initiated by Japan were getting stronger by the day. Locally, there were ominous indications that could not be ignored; the Japanese were already in the country forging active links with Malay and Indian pro-independence organizations as well as with other groups, especially dwelling in some Japanese-owned plantations.



Govindan Kutty and Gowri in 1939

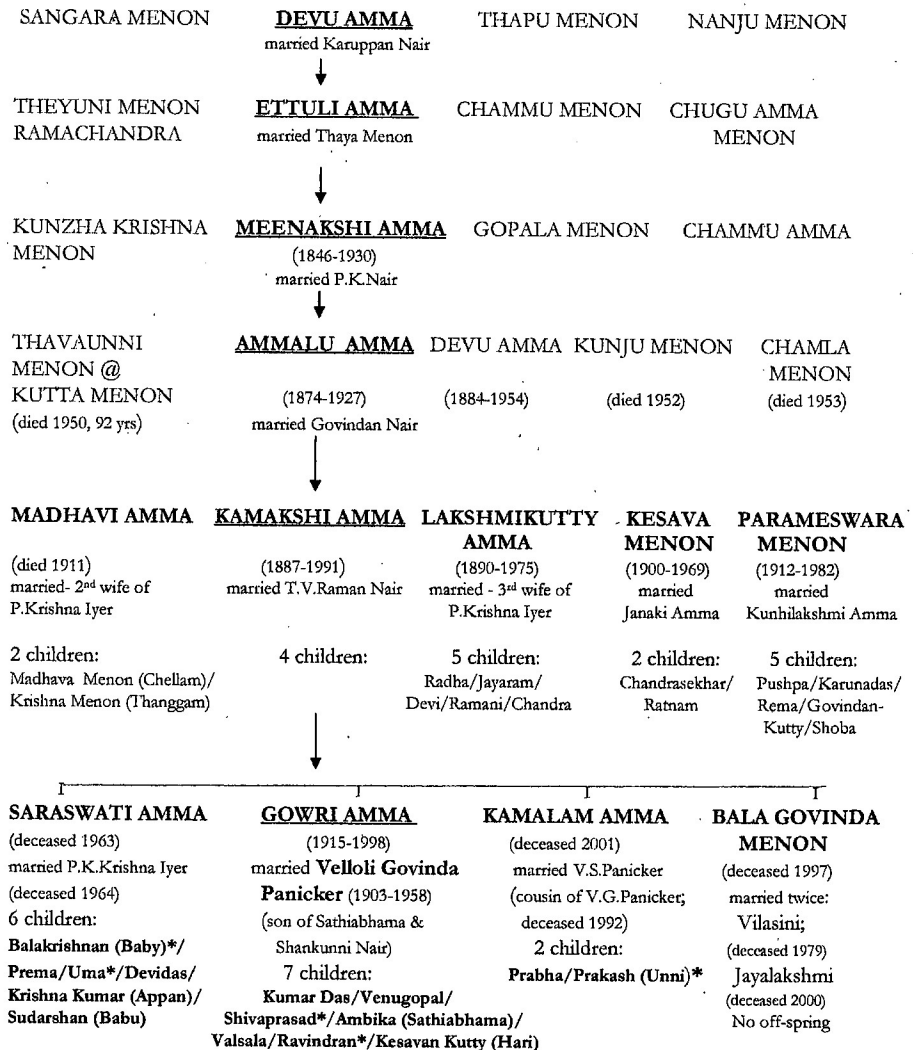


The proud parents with their eldest son, Dasu, and Sathiabhama in 1940. On the extreme left is Unnikrishnan, and on the extreme right is his brother, Shankaran.

It was certain that Japanese intelligence officers had garnered sufficient information to size up the current and potential strength of the Commonwealth forces coordinated from Singapore. If war were to

come, Singapore would certainly be in the thick of it, along with the rest of Malaya. The capture of Singapore would provide Japan with a strategic military base and greatly undermine British authority in the region.

PUDUSSERY KOLLAIKAL THARAVAD FAMILY TREE



(*deceased)



THE WAR YEARS (1941-1945)



Japanese troops in Fullerton Square, Singapore, February 1942
Source: British Imperial War Museum. Reproduced with permission.

[3]

The much-anticipated war did, indeed, come the very next month. Startlingly, it originated in Malaya. The Japanese army, under cover of darkness in the early hours of 8 December 1941, invaded the country, landing in South Thailand (pushing into Kedah) and at Kota Bharu in Kelantan. The invasion, which took place an hour before the attack on Pearl Harbour, signalled the start of the Japanese Pacific War campaign. The Japanese knew that the western part of the Malay Peninsula was heavily fortified by the British forces operating from their base in Southern Thailand, but not so the eastern part. A two-flanked attack was thus planned under the command of Lieutenant General Yamashita.

Although the Japanese still encountered stiff resistance in their amphibious assault on the beach fronts in Kelantan, they faced no major resistance in their steady march southwards, winning battles at Slim River and at several townships in Johor. In little more than two months, they had outflanked the British forces and overrun the whole country. Their ability to move their war materials quickly was aided by their ingenious use of seized bicycles and the deployment of Type 99 Pontoon Bridges for river crossing of tanks and heavy artillery. They also had the help of a segment of the population they could count on for their on-route needs. Fear of the dreaded Japanese secret police, the Kempeitai, also played well into the hands of the Japanese. Eyewitness accounts of their extreme brutality towards dissidents were relayed daily by word of mouth. The reports also appeared in some vernacular papers.

The Japanese were particularly severe in dealing with the Chinese community, as there was spillover animosity from the ongoing Second Sino-Japanese War. Ordinary civilians whose only fault was that they had

not bowed sufficiently low to the sword-bearing officers of the Japanese Imperial Army were mercilessly beheaded. There were regular bombing sprees by Japanese airplanes, and many living in towns and estates close to townships had to move to interior villages or seek shelter in trenches dug out in the jungle. Many unexploded bombs are still being discovered today.

The pet dog in Gowri's household would make a quick dash for her spot under the table even before the drone of the aircraft could be picked up by human ears. This was a bit uncanny, as she did not respond similarly to thunder. It proved to be a useful advance safety signal for the family to heed.

The garrison defending Singapore surrendered to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, only a week after the invasion of the island commenced. That Singapore's vulnerability was always a land invasion from Peninsular Malaya was a common-sense observation, but it was not seriously factored in by the overly confident British High Command at that time. Singapore's fall was a disaster that irrevocably tarnished Britain's image as a protector, but when America also declared war on Japan, hopes of its early recapture by the Allied Forces were ignited.

The period under the Japanese occupation was one of coercive rule and hardship suffered by a wide section of the population. There were daily accounts of cruelty and merciless killings. Many fell victim to psychological trauma, and many more for the first time in their lives experienced some degree of starvation. Food items became more scarce with each passing day, and particularly after America declared war on Japan and engaged them in the Pacific, supplies of rice, milk, flour, sugar, and other essential food that came by sea from Japan started to dwindle. The food shortage soon gave rise to a black market. By this time, the Japanese government-issued dollar was the official currency. It came to be called banana money because of the banana tree motif on the ten-dollar banknotes. The money became worthless at the end of the war.

The plantation's management, as part of its corporate social responsibility, organized a rice-rationing scheme to assist the workforce. Govindan Kutty was tasked to oversee distribution, and Gowri recalled the efforts of several parties to obtain favours from him to exceed their rations. Govindan Kutty would have none of that. Everyone, including his own household, received the entitled rations only.

This is a story about a woman's exceptional courage, a mother's unconditional love, and a matriarch's uncompromising will to see her family survive against insurmountable odds. Widowed at a young age with seven children to rear, her biography narrates her life from a hapless childhood in her native Kerala (India) through the span of history of her domiciled country, Malaya, from World War II through independence and beyond. The book is a poignant read of events that she had to cope with in her life, bringing to the fore the special attributes that she possessed and displayed - in particular her strong positivity, her magnanimity of love and her unflinching faith in the divine. Her kind and forgiving nature stamped her out as an exceptional individual. Also woven into her biography are the rich cultural traditions that she instilled in her progeny; her travel experiences, especially in her later life, which she enjoyed sharing with her grandchildren; and interesting facets of Malay and Chinese cultures that touched her life, which she loved to share with her relatives in India and abroad.

The author, V. G. Kumar Das, PhD (Q'ld), FASc, FTWAS, D. S. D. K., is a well-known figure in academic circles in his country with scientific and civil honours to his name. An emeritus professor and founding vice-chancellor of two universities following his retirement from the University of Malaya as dean of the faculty of science, he has authored numerous technical publications and three scientific books on chemistry. His latest book, "Tin in Applications -Meeting the 'green' challenge" won the coveted Malaysian Scholarly Publishing Council - Ministry of Education Award 2014 for the best book in the science, technology and medicine category. This, however, represents his first effort at novel writing. In the years following the loss of his father at the tender age of 17, the author dutifully assumed both co-parental responsibility for his six younger siblings and the role of confidant to his widowed mother. Consequently, he could not be better placed to recount and document the trials, tribulations, and joys of life as experienced by this admirable woman whose indomitable courage, unfettered love, and unerring faith in the divine carry a universal message that needs to be told.



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