



Jaya: The Indian *Freedom Fighter*

Resplendent in orange robes supported by black beard, she screamed at me with all the power her young lungs could muster. As the revered Freedom Fighter, *Alluri Sitarama Raju*, she taunted me in animated fashion. I am the visiting dignitary from a faraway place, diminished by this slip of a girl with the voice of a veteran. The message was crystal clear: a revolutionary leader showing determination and pride in the face of an exploitative ruler.

Before this expressive monologue – the finale in effect - Jaya had joined with her classmates to offer various cultural dances, beautifully presented in colourful costume and with such practiced movements of *Telugu* dance. But it was as the *Freedom Fighter* that she truly excelled. I had seen nothing quite like this before in dozens of similar welcoming ceremonies across the South of India. Coupled with the symbolism of the performance, it was for me, an extraordinary moment in time.

Even then, right at the start, it was plain to see that this young woman was someone special. The applause she received in unison from her schoolmates all around the quadrangle was just that little bit more intense and heartfelt. She was their star: everyone knew it, and I quickly came to realise it too. The school principal sitting alongside me seemed to be almost waiting for the obvious question ... and I dutifully obliged.

“Who was the girl in the orange costume?” I enquired casually. Then back came the sequential answer: *“Oh yes, that was Jaya. Would you like to meet her?”*

And so, I came for the first time to speak to Jaya.

St Joseph’s High School is located on the outskirts of Nellore, a dusty provincial town, towards the centre of one of India’s poorer states, Andhra Pradesh. This large boarding school for girls is run by Catholic nuns, in an all-white, hooded attire. I visited on a Friday; significant because that was the day designated as *non-uniform day*, when all the students, ranging from eleven to fifteen years, came to school in traditional dress.

Often, on the first visit to a school, I would be welcomed by some sort of ceremony, so I was to an extent prepared - but then totally unprepared - for the scale of the event at St Josephs. Walking beside the principal, we entered what can only be described as an outdoor mini-stadium: a *Roland Garros* clay court ... without the net. The students stood on three sides, tiered perhaps eight or ten deep. At one end – the fourth side - was a platform, tented to shade the main table, with those ubiquitous plastic chairs, in alternate blue and white (I presumed to match the school’s colours) for the head people. Teachers were seated to the rear. I was ushered to a white chair, front and centre of the platform, and took my seat in the shade with a degree of excitement ... and just a little apprehension.

Before the welcoming ceremony had begun, the thing that struck me as remarkable, was the festival of colour that met one’s eye. It was as if Renoir or Monet had dropped a gigantic pallet of paints on the occasion. Every one of the students was dressed in bright colours, and when several thousand were seen together it made for quite a spectacle. As the pixels for this screen of colour stood, in unison, to sing the Indian National Anthem, the hairs stood on the back of my neck and I knew I was in a very special moment in my

life. It was, as Americans say for almost every other mediocre incident: *awesome!* But on this particular occasion I felt the word did the event justice, for I was indeed overcome and filled with *awe* by the ensuing spectacle of dance, drama, and combative dialogue.

The day after visiting the school, I went with Jaya, in a hand-drawn rickshaw, to meet her parents. Now, with long black plaited hair and dressed in her simple school uniform - pristine white blouse and blue pleated skirt - it was hard to reconcile the petite, mid-teens schoolgirl that rode alongside me, with the bearded freedom fighter from the day before.

Jaya was from the social class whom Gandhi christened *Harijan* (meaning Children of God); once known as untouchables. These were people who ranked below the lowest rung of the tiered Hindu caste system, consigned to a life of virtual slavery amongst their fellow Indians. But in Jaya's case, her family had benefited from recent affirmative action policy which had been put in place by the government, meaning that her father had a job in the civil service and the family of five now lived in an adequate, two-roomed house, which boasted brightly painted walls and tiled floors.

It was quite a different story a couple of days later, when I agreed to accompany Jaya to meet her grandparents. Again, we rode by foot-powered rickshaw, with shade hood unfolded to protect us from the hot sun. Her grandfather and grandmother (now in their sixties) lived on the verge of a road near the town's outskirts, in what might be described in other parts of the planet as a *humpy*, or small tent-like dwelling made from bamboo poles and thatch roof. I felt rather conspicuous, crouched on the dirt floor, eating and drinking what was offered, whilst Jaya translated our conversations. It was obvious to see that affirmative action had not yet trickled up to the elderly..

Like Jaya, her younger sister and brother were also top of their respective classes and it was envisaged that they too would be fast-tracked through education, providing the family could garner enough support for living expenses and books, etc. I offered to give some assistance to help with college and university costs.

From there on, for a number of years, Jaya and I communicated back and forth as she progressed through college and on to university in *Tirupati*, a Hindu pilgrimage centre

and university town in the South of Andhra Pradesh. She chose to study Civil Engineering, not Medicine as I had earlier thought. Medicine was the path reserved for her younger, and supposedly even brighter sister, Vidya.

Her letters followed a pattern of formality and reserve that was only broken on odd occasions. I was always *Dear Sir* and she, without fail, would send her regards to my wife and named children. There was usually an apology for a delayed reply (though she was much better than me in that regard). So, it came as a surprise to receive a letter, written from university, where she appeared to write in a less conventional manner. "*I will be waiting for your next letter and for the day when you come again to India,*" she wrote, after I had mentioned that I might one day return to her country, for work. The change came, I guess, from growing up and graduating to university: exceptionally talented, but one now amongst many, far away from that small-town life she once knew in Nellore.

And we did meet again, very briefly, when I re-visited India several years later. I had travelled 24 hours by train from Bombay (Mumbai) to Tirupati, on route to Madras (Chennai), stopping on the way to spend a day with Jaya. She was still the same slim person I had met at school in Nellore, and who had taken me by rickshaw to see her grandparents, but now with a new maturity gained from university life and time away from home. She proudly showed me her campus and living quarters and together we rode to the top of the hill, to view the famous Hindu shrine (along with a million other tourists).

More than twenty years later, that day of welcome to St Josephs, along with the subsequent friendship with Jaya, stays in my mind. I can still hear the proud voices of the multitude of schoolgirls, ranged around the rusty brown arena, as they reached the high notes of *Jana Gana Mana*. And I can still picture Jaya, in her orange jumpsuit, glaring at me: the colonial leader; the conqueror about to be cast out from his colonial podium!

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