



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 was the visiting dignitary from a faraway place, diminished by this slip of a girl with the voice of a veteran.



Before the expressive monologue – in effect the finale - *Jaya* had joined with her classmates in cultural dance, beautifully presented with such practiced movements, typical of *Telugu* celebration. But it was as the *Freedom Fighter* that she truly excelled; the applause she received in unison from all around the quadrangle was just that little bit more intense and heartfelt. She was their star! And coupled with the symbolism of the performance, it was for me, a defining moment in time.

St Joseph's High School is to be found in Nellore, a dusty provincial town, towards the centre of one of India's poorer states, Andhra Pradesh. This school for girls is run by Catholic nuns, in an all-white, hooded attire. I visited on a Friday - designated as non-uniform day - when all the students came to school in traditional dress.

Thus, even before the welcoming ceremony had begun, the thing that struck me was the festival of colour that met the eye, from all around the mini stadium: a *Roland Garros* without the net. It was as if *Renoir* had dropped a gigantic pallet of paints on the occasion, and as the pixels for this colour extravaganza rose in unison, for the Indian national anthem, the hairs stood on the back of my neck. It was a special moment in my life.

The next day 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.



Through succeeding years, Jaya and I communicated back and forth as she progressed through college and on to university studies. 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.

We did meet again, briefly, when I re-visited India several years later. I had travelled by train from Mumbai to Tirupati (the small town where she was then completing second year within the engineering faculty), on route to Chennai. She remained the same slim person I had met those years before, but now with a new maturity gained from university life and time away from home. She proudly showed me her campus, and together we climbed up the hill, to view the famous Hindu shrine (along with a million other pilgrims).

Now, many years later, I still picture Jaya, in her orange jumpsuit, glaring at me: the representative of empire; the conqueror about to be cast out from his colonial podium!



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