

Shadows on the Maidan

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*A narrative discovering India,
Sai Baba and Reincarnation*



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ONE

A country in turmoil

It is one of life's great anomalies that we often learn our most profound lessons in the darkest moments of despair and hopelessness. Life could not have seemed gloomier than it appeared to me early in the 1990s. I had just returned to South Africa from a posting in Canberra, Australia, to find my turbulent country on fire. In those dying years of apartheid rule, I started to learn that mankind is not a lone entity adrift in time and space, that it is, despite beliefs to the contrary, an integral part of a minutely conceived Divine Plan. In the great turbulence that was sweeping through the country at the time, I started to catch glimpses of an underlying pattern, obscured as it was by fear and uncertainty and an ever-pervasive gloom.

A great wave of violence and terror had engulfed the country that had been teetering on the brink of catastrophe after the student uprisings of 1975 in Soweto, the giant black township on the southern borders of Johannesburg. Everything that I had believed in and all the hopes I had had of a peaceful settlement to the country's political problems had evaporated in the first few weeks of my return.

The black townships that had grown out of apartheid ideology were on fire. Years of resentment under apartheid's racist laws had finally burst into open revolt. It seemed as though young people had taken control of the segregated black townships around Johannesburg.

Founded on the wealth that flowed into the country on the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand in the late 19th century, Johannesburg was the business capital of the thriving country. The huge segregated black townships around the city and in neighbouring towns supplied the workforce that kept the wheels of commerce and industry turning in the vibrant, modern city and in the satellite towns on its peripheries.

In the years after violence first erupted in 1976, I had placed my own beliefs in a peaceful transition from apartheid's stark inhumanity to a lasting peace above all else. While there were dire predictions of the worst racial conflagration in the history of mankind, I believed that South Africans of all races were mature and competent enough to settle their differences without foreign meddling. A student of history as well as a practising journalist, I had seen how foreign interference had failed to settle political disputes in other parts of the world. In this frame of mind, I had agreed to represent my country abroad.

Now, on returning to South Africa, my dreams lay in ruins, in the smouldering shells of schools and government buildings, in the barricades of rocks and trenches and burning vehicles in the dusty streets of apartheid's hopeless townships and in the shipwreck of the country's economy on the rocks of political instability and widespread black unrest.

Gloomy reports in every morning's news on television and in the newspapers demolished every last vestige of hope that I had held out for a peaceful settlement in a deeply troubled South Africa. Death and destruction and depravity of the worst kind were sweeping relentlessly through the country's black townships, mostly in the Transvaal and in the townships and rural outskirts of towns and cities in Natal province.

In the satellite townships of the apartheid nation's financial capital Johannesburg, unbridled terror held sway. In black townships around the city and its affluent white suburbs, nameless dark forces rampaged through the nights and bleak, turbulent days.

In crowded commuter trains filled with tired black workers returning to their dormitory townships, faceless assassins with balaclavas pulled down opened fire with automatic weapons and slaughtered innocent men, women and children, vanishing without trace in the confused aftermath of the mayhem they had wrought.

Equally anonymous killers suddenly surfaced at funerals and wakes and mowed down mourners. In the aftermath of shock and confusion, they melted away into the night. There was fear and hopeless bewilderment. No one dared name names or point fingers. Tight-lipped fear held sway. Yet there was whispered speculation.

In of my former home province, Natal, unspeakable terror stalked those beautiful, rolling hills tumbling down from the Drakensberg, the *Dragon Mountains* in the language of the early Dutch settlers of this land. Unknown assassins descended in the hours of darkness to riddle the grass and mud huts of rural Zulus with automatic rifle and shotgun fire, leaving scores of men, women and children dead, dying and maimed. Nobody claimed responsibility, as terror groups around the world often did. Nobody dared accuse.

It was obvious that a great power struggle was going on among various black political interest groups. There was much speculation and some obvious conclusions were drawn. In Natal there were two protagonists consisting of traditional Zulu groups on the one side and those allied to the African National Congress on the other. But everyone knew that, as in the townships of the Transvaal, there was a sinister third force, designed to terrorise and further confuse the innocent.

If the objective of the unknown third force was to confuse and mislead warring black power groups, it failed miserably, for black leaders and others opposed to apartheid had no doubt that it was an offshoot of legitimate government forces. This could not be stated openly in the news media, however, because of the fact that the government had declared states of emergency at various times and such reports would have been illegal. Apartheid's opponents, however, had no illusions of the depravity of the covert forces of the apartheid regime itself. Where the incidents failed to confuse black leaders, they succeeded admirably in demoralising the general population, black, white and brown. More than anything else, the turmoil effectively demolished the

country's gold-reinforced economy and sent its hitherto healthy currency spiralling down to third world levels.

I had returned to the country in the wake of the government's failure to dismantle apartheid laws. The country's then President, P W Botha, had started his "reform" process with much fuss and fanfare some four years earlier. With the backing of his party, he had set out to dismantle the racially-based laws of the country at a pace that would be acceptable to all groups. I had been transferred to Canberra in the wake of this development.

From my diplomatic posting at the South African Embassy in Canberra, I watched the snail's progress of Botha's reform progress. Then he made his infamous "Rubicon" speech and got cold feet, stopping further reform in its tracks after one or two cosmetic changes. In short order, the dour and humourless Botha had thrown the country into political chaos. Saddened by the turn of events, I saw no point in remaining in my posting any longer and was anxious to be posted back home.

The transfer was eventually approved, but my woes were far from over. During my absence overseas, regional offices of my department had been abolished. In former times, I would have been transferred back to my hometown Durban, in Natal province. Now I was posted back to Pretoria, the country's administrative capital and the HQ of my department. For various reasons, my family and I disliked the city intensely. It was against this background that we returned from Down Under.

Although the city has a large Indian community, it is significantly different from the Indian segment of the Natal population. The greater majority of South Africa's Indian people are concentrated in Natal for historical reasons. The Pretoria Indian community is a considerably smaller one than the Durban concentration. It had existed in isolation in a small segregated ghetto in the largely Afrikaner city of Pretoria for almost a century and a half.

Repressed and discriminated against first by the Boer government of the Transvaal Republic and later by the Union government under General Jan Christiaan Smuts and finally under the country's apartheid regime, the Indian community of Pretoria had developed differently from Indian communities in Natal towns and cities. The Indian ghetto of Marabastad in the city was among the first to draw the attention of the young lawyer Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi when he was resident in South Africa at the turn of the 20th century. The plight of the Indians there contributed significantly to Gandhi's stormy relationship with Smuts and his government and largely influenced his political stance in later years.

The Indian community of Pretoria grew to be considerably different from Natal ones in composition. Whereas the Natal concentration was largely Hindu and of south Indian Tamil or Telugu and north Indian "Hindi" or Gujarati descent, the Pretoria community, again for historical reasons, was largely Muslim. It resembled, in linguistic and religious composition, the Natal concentration, though in vastly different proportions.

It is in attitude, however, that the greatest differences between Pretoria and Natal Indians lie. The ghetto mentality of the old Marabastad community is hard to shake and even harder to camouflage. Ghetto people develop a survival mentality. They are suspicious of strangers and largely insular. They are jealous of their hard-won rights

and privileges and cautious with their possessions. There is a survival mentality with no place for outsiders who might pose a threat to their continued survival.

My family and I discovered, shortly after our arrival, that as a direct result of its past repression, it was a community at war with itself, a seething cauldron of hate, suspicion and sectarian divisions. Like an in-growing toenail, the community was a greater source of hurt to itself than any insidious apartheid law. My family and I never could become part of that insular, largely parochial community.

By the time I was transferred to Pretoria, the Indian community had been resettled for some thirty years in the new suburb of Laudium, some twenty kilometres to the west of the city centre. In terms of the old apartheid laws, each racial group had to live in separate residential areas. There was no racial mixing.

Quite by chance, in the city one day I ran into an old acquaintance from Natal who happened to be selling his house in that suburb. By then resigned to the fact that my family and I would have no choice but to remain in Pretoria for some time, I bought the house without quite knowing whether we were doing the right thing. It turned out to be a fateful decision.

The transition from our way of life in Natal, Britain and Australia to the Indian suburb of Pretoria was soul-destroying. Our social life withered away rapidly and we were painfully isolated from friends and family in Natal. I knew that my family was suffering as much as I was, but there was little I could do to change the situation. Short of leaving the civil service, there was no other recourse in sight. To return to Natal and find employment as a journalist at my age would have been almost impossible.

After many happy years among family and old friends in Durban and eventful years of international exposure, my family and I were marooned in an unfriendly, closed environment. We found ourselves suddenly becalmed after several brisk, eventful years. There was little we could do but make the best of a bad situation, like the survivors of a shipwreck on alien shores. It turned out to be one of the saddest phases of our lives, one from which we would never emerge intact as a family.

TWO

The Call

Throughout its incredibly long history on this planet, mankind has been obsessed by three puzzles: Who am I? What am I? Why am I? Sages and sinners alike have asked those questions and through the ages, advanced myriad answers. I was no different from untold others before me; I too asked those eternal questions. It is only now, in these mellow autumn days of a life that has been as varied as the seasons of the year, after a lifetime of wandering over many parts of this planet and through a vast cornucopia of experiences, that I have come to the conclusion that we are divine beings dreaming in an enchanted milieu.

That realisation dawned sometime early in 1992, when my only son had just turned twenty. He had reached a difficult phase in his academic progress and was unsure of what course to follow towards a future profession. At university, he had enrolled for a degree in fine arts. Although I did not tell him so, I was unhappy with his decision. Ever since he was a little boy, my wife and I had hoped he would choose science as a career, for members of both my family and hers had been inclined towards the arts for lack of choice in the years when this country was in the selfish grip of apartheid.

I too had followed a course of study in fine arts when I was his age but after some years as a specialist art and English teacher, resigned from teaching to forge a new career in journalism. I had told my son that the final choice of a course of study had to be his decision, for his future happiness depended on it. I told him that teaching was one of the few career choices for a fine arts graduate. I made a point of telling him too, that my late twenties, I had discovered that it was almost impossible to raise a family on a teacher's salary. I had resigned from teaching to go into newspapers where the scope and prospects were somewhat better.

Years later, I was offered a position in the country's Foreign Service and my postings abroad began. After a diplomatic posting in Australia, I had been transferred to head office in Pretoria in 1989. My family and I had spent most of our lives in the city of Durban on the Natal coast so when we arrived in Pretoria, we knew few people among the locals other than my colleagues at work. Because of my experience in newspapers, I knew many academics and other professionals in Natal and could have sought their advice to help my son decide on a career path. In Pretoria, I knew almost nobody in academic circles in the months immediately after we arrived there.

I was particularly troubled that Kamal had become distant and reclusive. He spoke very little to me and when I tried to discuss his studies, he became almost

monosyllabic. It puzzled me for he had always been the most lovable boy, always willing and eager to do the little things around the house that I wanted him to do. I had noticed the change in his demeanour while we were still in Australia; he had started to become quiet and withdrawn even then.

What had particularly worried me was that after we had returned from Australia, he had developed what seemed to be an abiding fear of me. At home with the family, if I called him for whatever reason and however gently, he would come almost furtively, obvious fear on his face. I could not understand it and I was deeply hurt. Ours was a peaceful household and I had always doted on my children. Neither my wife nor I ever used physical chastisement nor used harsh words. There was no need to in any case, for both our children were adorable and extremely well-behaved, both with my wife and me and with family and friends. Both were popular with everybody and Kamal's gentle manners were noticed and appreciated by all who knew him.

The change in my son became so worrying that it was almost all that I thought about while driving to and from work and even at odd moments during the day. I discussed it with my wife and suggested seeking psychiatric help, but my wife vetoed the idea. She argued that it would make our son believe that he was mentally unstable if I suggested a psychiatrist.

"Leave Kamal to me", she insisted, "he tells me everything and I know his mind. As could be expected, he has run into some racism from students at the university but I think that will come to an end if he changes to the University of South Africa. That is where he wants to go. So let's give it some time while you make enquiries about his further studies."

At the time, our son was at the University of Pretoria. This had been traditionally an Afrikaans University, a stronghold of Afrikaner academia. In keeping with the changing times and the relaxing of rigid apartheid, the university had opened its doors to students of all races. Even so, Kamal was one of the very few students there of Indian descent. He got on reasonably well with his fellow students, particularly with those who were English-speaking. Even so, a degree of racism was entirely to be expected in those days before the demise of apartheid.

I started to make enquiries on other universities but made little progress. I was starting to become frustrated when the strange thought that I should find a Brahmin to consult a Hindu astrological almanac suddenly came into my mind. It surprised me and I could not fathom why it came into my head. A thoroughly westernised third generation South African recently returned from a lengthy diplomatic posting in a Western country, I cannot until today fathom why I had thought of consulting a Hindu priest.. Previously, I had gone only when my parents took me to one when I was much younger or for special reasons such as my marriage or the birth of our children. On this occasion, I felt an inexplicable compulsion to find a priest, something I had not done for years and certainly not of my own accord.

So began my acute awareness of events that seemed to indicate a hidden intelligence behind the course of our lives. At that stage I did not understand what that intelligence

was or what its intentions were. The thought simply started to emerge that nothing in our lives happened at random, that there was a mysterious purpose and a guiding benevolence. It was at this stage too that I started to notice what seemed to be a series of coincidences that affected my life. These were to grow with such intensity that I started to become convinced of a hidden intelligence. I had not been certain at that stage whether it was benign or malevolent.

After making enquiries among the few local Indians I had come to know by then, I ventured into the old Indian ghetto not far from the centre of Pretoria to look for the resident Brahmin at the only Hindu temple there. Driving into the busy enclave, I found it quite easily because of its prominent, single gopuram, a pyramid-shaped tower, rising above the surrounding shops and dwellings. The Brahmin whom I estimated to be in his mid- thirties welcomed me warmly for it was my first visit. He spoke fluent English as we introduced ourselves. His name was Nadarajan Sarma and he had been “imported” by the local Tamil community from Jaffna in Sri Lanka to take care of their Shivan temple in Marabastad. I did not know it then, but Nadarajan was to later predict momentous changes in my life.

I told him the purpose of my visit and he led me into the temple lined with brass sculptures and smelling of marigolds, camphor and rock incense. Taking a thick book and a slimmer one from a shelf, he placed both on a low table and sat cross-legged on the carpeted floor before it. He pointed to the carpet in front of the table and invited me to sit. Though unaccustomed to sitting in that posture, I imitated his yogic pose.

Many Hindus consider the Panchangam an excellent guide to the future. It outlines possible events in one’s life, with several variables. It is believed that using certain “milestones” such as illnesses or accidents or happier events such as the completion of schooling or some other academic highlight, a discerning Brahmin can map out the variables that are likely to apply to his client. Much of the interpretation depends on the particular talents of the Brahmin reading the almanac; some are better at working out future trends than others. For this reason, many Hindus in South Africa do not treat the almanac seriously and many westernized ones reject it completely as so much of hocus pocus. In South Africa, only a small handful of educated Hindus still consult the almanac although the practice is very much the norm among Hindus in India and within the Hindu diaspora of recent decades, particularly in the United States, Canada, Britain and Australia.

The Panchangam contains sets of variables for those born between certain dates. These are not cast in stone, for Hindus believe that the future is not rigidly fixed, in other words, there is no such thing as an unavoidable fate, although many less knowledgeable Hindus tend to resign themselves to what they regard to be the unavoidable vagaries of their fate.

Certain highlights in the course of one’s life are identified in the Panchangam, but it is believed that the less desirable of these can be averted through fasting, prayer and ritual “havans” or cleansing fire ceremonies. Indeed, this is the reason why many Hindus consult the almanac: to avert undesirable trends through fasting and prayer. To Hindus, God is the omnipotent, omnipresent Super Intelligence that permeates all

of creation. That Intelligence is just yet merciful. One's karma cannot be avoided, for that is entrenched in the immutable cosmic laws of the universe. The Cosmic Intelligence, however, in its infinite love and mercy, can soften the pain of the karmic expiation of one who truly demonstrates repentance through fasting and prayer.

It is a fact that some sages in India had, and undoubtedly still have, the ability to see past and beyond the restrictive boundaries of man's concept of time. We all subscribe in this age to the western, linear concept of time with a distinct past, present and future. Yet it seems that time is closer to what Hindu sages perceived it to be, more of a loop or a spiral rather than a linear progression, with no distinct past, present or future. Divisions, if they do exist, become somewhat blurred. Time is so unlike the modern concept of it that it is known to those who study such matters that it seems to double back on itself, that the past is yet to come, for instance, and that today, impossible though it may sound, could well be in the future.

The Panchangam can be a very useful guide if one accepts that it is that and nothing more. If one progresses along a chosen line of variables with determination and with a singularity of purpose, keeping one's objectives constantly in mind, the mental visualization of that object or situation or state of affairs has to eventually eventuate. This is the law of karma: all thoughts, words and actions simply have to materialize. This is why Sai Baba constantly reminded his devotees to watch the thoughts, words and deeds.

Asking for the date, time, and the place of my birth and the same details for my son, the priest began to make quick calculations on a scratch pad. Then he circled one of the many numerals he had scribbled and opened to a corresponding page in the slimmer, soft-covered book. He explained that the slimmer book was the annual update of the Panchangam. He began by reading a character analysis from the larger volume, based on my son's star sign. It described my boy and his personality perfectly. Then he opened the almanac to read what could be expected in the near future.

He said that my son was anxious and uncertain about his course of study. He felt he had not made the right choice of courses for his degree and was contemplating a change. To complicate matters, he seemed to be unhappy with his environment. It seemed to be the cause of some mental agitation. In the long term, however, there was no cause for concern, for my son would change his course of study as well as his university and would eventually qualify with a science degree. Yet in spite of the long-term cause for optimism, there was a dark cloud over his immediate future. Indications were that he would meet with an accident towards the end of the year some ten months hence.

Alarmed, I listened anxiously as the priest continued: "Your son could be seriously injured, but he would not die. However, he could lose something precious in the accident."

Fearful that this could mean the loss of one or more limbs or his eyesight or other faculties, I asked:

"Would he lose one or more limbs? Would he be paralysed or blinded?"

“No, he would suffer no permanent physical injury. The loss would relate to something other than his person”, the priest replied.

“Can anything be done to prevent the accident?”

“Nothing we do will stop it. It is karmic, so nothing can prevent it from taking its course. We can however, do a nine-week Navagraha fast and prayer on Saturdays dedicated to the nine ruling planets and a fire ceremony or homa on the ninth Saturday. This would minimise the effects of the accident where your son is concerned. I would advise you to do the prayer as soon as possible to ensure that it is effective.

“It would also be advisable for you and your family to start the fast on this coming Saturday. All of you would have to abstain from eating meat completely for nine Saturdays after you commence. It will also help if your son could give up something else, like smoking or drinking. If he does neither of these, he could stop taking sugar or salt in his food for the nine weeks of the prayer.”

When he spoke of a fast, what the priest meant was abstention. Meat dishes had to be avoided on Saturdays. He continued to read the almanac, his lips moving silently as he mouthed the Tamil words. As I sat silently watching him, he years looked up at me with a puzzled look on his face.

“There’s something strange here”, he said. “There seems to be a personal message for you.”

“Since when does the Panchangam contain personal messages?”, I asked. “Doesn’t it contain general predictions that could apply to anybody born on a particular date?”

Regardless of the accuracy or otherwise of the predictions, these are given in general and could apply to any number of people born under the same star sign and at the same time and on the same day. However, there are never any personal messages in the book. No person is ever singled out with a prediction or message that applies exclusively to him or her.

“That’s correct, but here it is in black and white. I have never seen anything like this in all my years of reading from this almanac”, he replied.

I said: “Nadaraj, I have never heard of the Panchangam containing personal messages.”

“Neither have I”, he replied, “But here it is in black and white”, he held the book out for me to see, but it was in Tamil script, in which I am almost totally unschooled.

“In all my years as a priest I have never seen anything like this”, Nadaraj said again. “Shall I read it to you?” I could see that he was amazed by what he saw.

“Please do that”, I said. “I cannot read and write Tamil.”

He continued to read the rest of the page, his lips moving silently.

Looking up, he said, "The message is definitely for you. Your name is here. It says that you must go without delay to your guru. Do not concern yourself with matters such as leave from work and money. Just prepare to go and all the necessary requirements would fall into place. By the way, who is your guru?"

At that time I did not quite regard Sai Baba as my guru, even though I had been thinking of him almost constantly in solitary moments and reading books about him by an assortment of writers.

Yet I found myself saying: "Sai Baba, I think, though I am not sure."

The priest stared at me, his eyebrows raised.

"It says here that you must go without delay. In fact you must be at the guru's feet within just over two weeks from today. For such a personal message to appear in the Panchangam so miraculously, Sai Baba must be an extraordinary being. You must also be special to receive the message in such a remarkable way."

At that stage, Nadarajan Sarma had only heard and read of Sai Baba. I learned later that after this incident, he made a point of going to Prashanti Nilayam on his next annual visit to India and Sri Lanka. Other visits followed over the years. At the time of this writing, he was a staunch devotee.

The expression to "be at the feet" is used by Hindus to express the humble submission of the disciple to the superior knowledge and intellect of the *guru*, the teacher.

He looked at a calendar on the wall and counted on his fingers. "You have to be with him by the 18th of next month." It was then the end of January, 1993.

"You must make immediate preparations to leave", he said, raising his head from the book, a surprised look on his face.

"I cannot", I replied. "I do not have enough money at the moment and I do not have any leave due". I was at that time assistant director of media relations in the government communications department. Nadaraj continued to read and translate.

"The book says you must not concern yourself with money and leave from work. You will be given the wherewithal to travel, leave from work and a travelling companion. Someone will guide you and your companion from the time you leave this country until you arrive at your destination. There are others waiting to take care of you there." He looked up at me.

"I find all this difficult to believe", I said.

Nadaraj said : "For reasons best known to God, you are receiving special attention. Be happy in the thought that you are being given divine consideration. Prepare yourself to leave this country for India soon, no matter how impossible that may now seem to you. What I have just read is a miracle in itself. I have never seen this passage in this book before, yet I have paged through it many hundreds of times in the course of giving readings. Has anyone else ever given you this message before?"

“No”, I replied. “You are the first, even though the Panchangam has been read for me many times in my lifetime.”

“Then go to India and leave matters in God’s hands, for it is plain that He is now in charge of your affairs. Even if you make no effort yourself, you will be in India within three weeks. Just remember that you must be with your guru by the 18th day of February, not any later. Do not waste any time on the way and do not miss your appointment. Why, I cannot fathom, but that is what it says here in the book.”

I told the priest that my wife and I would be in touch with him, I took the business card and a small parcel of holy ash that he proffered. Giving him a gratuity for the reading, I took my leave. At dinner that evening with my wife and two children, I recounted my meeting with the priest and his reading from the Panchangam.

I had spoken with my wife earlier in our bedroom. She was greatly disturbed by the prediction of the accident and began to cry. I comforted her, saying that we were in a position to minimise the effects of the accident through prayer, that it was not as if we were totally powerless. I told her about the special prayer that Sarma had recommended. She knew Marabastad and the temple and said she would go there to consult with the priest to set a date for the prayer.

She was comforted by that thought and so composed herself. It was important that we gave our children no inkling of the prediction. We would try to continue as usual, agreeing not to mention the prediction of the accident to either my son or daughter. We would give the children the impression that the prayer was necessary to improve family fortunes and our well-being in that strange environment. This was not difficult to do, for neither our children nor my wife and I felt at home in that unfriendly community.

The CODESA talks which would eventually lead to the first ever multi-racial election in South and the demise of apartheid as political policy was then in full swing at the World Trade Centre in Midrand near Johannesburg. My name was put onto the roster for media duty. At first this involved a shift of three or four hours every alternate day. As the deadline for consensus approached, the sessions became longer, Eventually, I had to go on duty every day and often went home late in the evenings.

Anxious to start the fast and prayer without delay, my wife and I agreed that she should take over the responsibility of making the arrangements for the prayer with the priest. I telephoned to inform him that my wife would be in touch with him. Because of my work commitments, I would have to be excused.

When Lalitha met with him, he had explained that it was necessary to return to the temple only on the final, ninth Saturday. On the eight other Saturdays, the family could pray at our shrine at home. He instructed her on what was to be done and she had taken notes. On the ninth Saturday, we had to be at the temple at eight in the morning for the final havan or fire ritual.

It turned out that I had to be on morning duty at the World Trade Centre on that final Saturday, so my wife went to the temple with our children. That evening she told me that they had been as fascinated with the fire ceremony and the rest of the proceedings at the temple as she had been. In their years in England and Australia, our children had never been exposed to Hindu ritual simply because an opportunity had never presented itself. This was their first experience, and they were enthralled by the proceedings. My son did not have the slightest inkling that he was the object of the entire exercise. My wife and I had taken the precaution of tipping off the priest to be discreet in this regard.

The fire ceremony on that ninth, final Saturday gave my wife and me much peace of mind. Yet we were aware that we had to exercise caution in the coming ten months, especially where our children were concerned. There was no difficulty with our daughter as she went out only with my wife or me and occasionally with our son, and then only to nearby shops or to visit friends in the neighbourhood.

With our son, it was a different matter. He would be turning twenty-two, and had a circle of friends and a social life of his own. Short of putting him under house arrest we could do very little other than to caution him. My wife had told him that the priest had told us that the family faced all kinds of potential dangers in the coming ten months. All of us had to exercise extreme caution, especially with regard to our movements. All we could do was to impress on our boy that we had to exercise extreme caution as a family for the next ten months. We implored him not to stay out late at night and to avoid joy rides with friends.

Other than that, all we could do was pray.

THREE

The Great Mystery begins

After Lalitha had met with the priest and ironed out the details of the fast and final ceremony, we discussed finances for my journey to India. At that time, she held the family purse strings, insisting that for some thirty years that I was too extravagant. In reluctant acquiescence in the interests of domestic peace, I had let her assume the role of family treasurer and accountant.

“It will be impossible for you to leave right away”, she said. “I’ll only be able to give you nine or ten thousand rands at the end of March.”

“But the message in the book is that I should be in India before the 18th of February, and that is a little more than two weeks away”, I replied.

“Then I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do”, she said. I knew from her tone that there was no point in pursuing the issue.

Later that evening I telephoned my close friend and confidante of 25 years, Leon Londt. We had first met in London in 1976, when I was stationed at the South African Embassy there as an attaché. He was an official in the offices of the South African Department of Immigration and was posted at its London office near the embassy. An Afrikaner born into the Dutch Reformed faith, he had turned to spiritualism years previously. With several common interests, particularly in spiritual matters, we had grown very close. He was transferred back to Pretoria from London long before my posting there ended and our paths did not cross again for many years, something that is quite common in the Foreign Service.

Then, in 1988, I was transferred back to South Africa from Canberra, Australia. The following year, I left the Foreign Service and joined the government communications department. I was transferred to the Pretoria office then under the directorship of the refined and sensitive Gerhard van Rensburg, and was overjoyed to find a youthful-looking Leon Londt there. He had left the Department of Immigration to join the government communications department.

Once again, Leon and I became inseparable. Then, in 1992, the government offered early retirement to senior civil servants who were still up to 15 years from retirement age. Having just turned 50, Leon opted for the retirement package and left the civil service. Our friendship, however, continued to grow and we met often.

When I called to tell him about the strange message in the Panchangam, Leon was fascinated. Through our discussions on the subject over the years, he had become familiar with the almanac and knew almost as much about it as I did. Although it was unknown to me at that time, Leon had been searching for a spiritual path for many years. He was disillusioned with the Dutch Reformed Church into which he was born, and had turned to a non-denominational spiritual church many years previously. He often spoke at the spiritual church in Sunnyside and in the years that I was still abroad, had become well known in spiritual circles in Pretoria.

Then I came onto the scene and rekindled his lifelong interest in Hindu philosophy. He had read Swami Yogananda's, "*Autobiography of a Yogi*" while still at university and this had whetted his appetite for spiritual exploration. We had numerous discussions on philosophical and spiritual matters and eventually I told him about the Hindu belief in Avatars.

I explained that according to ancient Hindu tradition, the Cosmic Intelligence that we call God incarnates on earth from time to time in the form of a human being, as likely as not in a phenomenon akin to the Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception. When this happens, the incarnation is referred to as an "Avatar". Some six thousand years ago, after the departure of Lord Krishna, the Kalki Avatar had been promised. It had been prophesied that He would come at the time of Kali Yuga, the present age, the Hindu equivalent of the Bible's End Times.

Leon was a devoted pupil. He was an excellent listener and followed up our discussions with a study of the books I recommended and often loaned to him. Although it had not occurred to me at that time, Leon often reminded me of the belief that when the pupil is ready, the teacher always appears. He believed I was his spiritual mentor. At that time I was starting to think very seriously that Sri Sathya Sai Baba was the long-awaited Avatar. In fact, in the years immediately after my return to South Africa from Australia, I was completely preoccupied, in my moments of solitude, with the speculation that with the advent of Sri Sathya Sai Baba, an ancient prophesy could have been fulfilled.

A strange thing began to happen immediately I considered this possibility. Books on Sai Baba began to come to me from various sources, even without my requesting them. The flow of books started from the time I arrived in Pretoria and did not stop until much later. White friends would call to say that they had come across a book on a mysterious person called Sai Baba. If they brought the book to me, could I please read it and explain certain things to them? Indian people, some of whom I knew only in passing, would do the same to me in Laudium, where I lived at the time. The flow of books grew with such intensity that I was soon reading them to the exclusion of all other literature. Among those first books was Howard Murphet's "*Sai Baba Man of Miracles*".

Leon had also heard of Sri Sathya Sai Baba, and we discussed him at length, exchanging numerous books relating to him. We decided, sometime in 1992, that we should go to India to see for ourselves. So when I called Leon that evening to tell him about my experience with the Brahmin, he reacted immediately.

“Let’s go”, he said.

I explained that I did not have the money, that my wife could only give me nine or ten thousand rands in two months’ time. However, I explained that the message in the Panchangam stated that the wherewithal to travel to India would be given to me. I did not have the faintest idea how this was to happen.

Leon told me that he had invested his entire retirement package except 8 000 rands. If I agreed to let him accompany me to India, he would lend me half that money. I protested that I could not take his money if I did not know how I would pay him back.

“But the Panchang message states clearly that the money will come to you”, Leon retorted, “Let’s book our tickets and I will pay for them. When your money arrives, you can pay me back. Perhaps this will happen even before we leave.”

Being as spiritually inclined as he was, Leon obviously had more faith in the strange message than I had, so I reluctantly agreed. Later that day, I went to a travel agency in Laudium and booked Leon and myself onto a Gulf Air flight to Bombay via the United Arab Emirates and onto a connecting flight from there to Bangalore. We were to leave in a week’s time, on February 15. Only one thing troubled me despite the exciting prospect of going to India to see Sai Baba. I had not applied for leave, so I decided to discuss it with my director the following day.

As usual, I was among the first officials to arrive at work the next morning. Later, I looked for the director but his secretary told me that he had an early morning appointment in another government department and that he would be in the office only closer to midday.

The telephone on my desk rang at about ten that morning. It was our administration office, located in another part of the city centre. A clerk in the personnel leave section asked me whether I had taken my annual vacation leave regularly while posted in London. I replied that I hadn’t, simply because work piled up and there was nobody else to handle it while I was away. For this reason, I usually took leave only on the days between the Christmas and New Year long weekends and perhaps a few days afterwards.

“In that case, sir, the lady said, what I have to tell you will be very good news.

“We have just completed a manual check of all leave due to personnel and have discovered that somehow, perhaps through a “finger error”, 90 days due to you fell out of the computer. Now you have another 90 days due to you over and above your other accumulated leave. You can take it whenever you wish.”

At that time, officials were allowed to accumulate a maximum of 365 days. Any days over and above that had to be used up as leave or forfeited. It occurred to me that the required leave from work had fallen into my lap.

Soon afterwards the phone rang again. It was the travel agency to tell me that I could fetch the flight tickets for Leon and myself. I called Leon, then picked him up during my lunch break from his house in a suburb not far from my office. We drove to Laudium and Leon paid for the tickets with a cheque. I drove him back to his house, then returned to the office. I was still digesting the unexpectedly good news about my leave when the telephone rang again. It was my old friend and former colleague, Jean Moreau. He had immigrated to South Africa from Belgium shortly after the end of the Second World War.

“Have you planned anything for your lunch break tomorrow, Viv? Would it be possible for you to get away from the office for an hour?” Jean asked, adding that he would pick me up and take me back to the office.

He explained that he wanted to introduce me to his accountant, a young man of whom he thought very highly. Jean had mentioned the man’s name to me several times in preceding weeks, so I agreed. It was my job to communicate with the public at large. Who knows where this new contact may lead?

The next day, Jean arrived in my office just before midday. He drove me to Lyttelton, where his accountant had his offices. In the car, Jean explained that the accountant and I had much in common in our humanitarian views. Karl Stander, Jean said, was a remarkable man in many ways. Like me, he was greatly concerned for the future of the human race and for the planet.

Karl was obviously a very successful man. His offices were spacious and impressive and his staff were obviously extremely busy. Jean had told me earlier that Karl, through his industriousness, had become one of the city’s youngest multi-millionaires. Karl welcomed me warmly and immediately made me feel at ease. He rang his secretary to fetch refreshments and asked me what I would like to drink when she arrived.

“Jean has told me a great deal about you and I have been fascinated that a person of Indian descent should agree to work for the apartheid government”, Karl said.

I told him that I was as opposed to apartheid as any other person of colour and that I could hardly wait to see the back of it.

“I want to see apartheid die, but not people”, I said. I explained that as a Hindu I was a pacifist and that killing was abhorrent to me. Black people were being killed all over the country in the great struggle that was taking place against apartheid. Sadly, in the name of the “struggle”, black people were killing black people in an orgy of murder and mayhem. It was obvious, though there was great confusion over who the killers were and who was behind them, that there was a great power struggle going on among black people themselves. I argued that the violence of the black townships could easily overflow into the areas occupied by the other race groups and that whites, Indians,

Coloured people and blacks could find themselves in an unprecedented orgy of bloodletting in which there would be no victors.

I said: "I believe that we South Africans of all races and persuasions are big enough and committed enough to change things in this country for the better and avert that potential for bloodletting. We can do this ourselves, without outside interference. Right now, the whole world wants to tell us how to settle our differences, yet so many other serious disputes around the world remain unresolved and nobody – not the Americans or the Russians, the Chinese or the European Community for that matter, can offer solutions.

"I believe that ours is a South African problem for which we ourselves must find solutions. This is what I constantly say in this country and this is what I say when I am overseas. We would welcome a benign international interest and encouragement, but the final solution must come from ourselves and not from some foreign mentor. In view of what happened in Korea and Vietnam and in many parts of Africa, I am most intolerant of outside interference.

"I have discovered that I am able to influence people of all races who come into my ambit. Being in the unique position that I am, I am able to talk to white people as well as to black people. I can talk openly of the alternatives to a peaceful settlement without fear of being labelled an agitator, as would happen if I were outside the system. But now I am within the laager, as it were, and I can say certain things with impunity. If I were on the outside, a journalist, say, the police Special Branch would be on my back in no time. I know that people, white and black, Coloured and Indian, are listening to what I have to say. I know they are turning things over in their minds. And I know that God put me in this position to do exactly this."

Karl listened intently. "You're a remarkable man, Viv". I'm glad I've met you", he said.

He wanted to know my views on Sai Baba and I told him. I was surprised that he knew of Baba. He explained that his wife, to whom he had introduced me, suffered from a rare disease that was gradually turning her blind.

"She will be blind within the next ten years. She has her own religious beliefs in which I do not interfere", he said. I gathered from this remark and his interest in Baba that his wife was a believer. At that time, many Afrikaners were, but were reticent to say so in public.

While we had the tea his secretary had brought, Karl told me that he had learnt from Jean Moreau that I was leaving for India. I replied that I was booked to fly but whether I would actually go was another matter. He asked why and I told him that I would have the money to go only in two months' time.

"What would a trip like this cost?", he asked.

"Oh, about ten thousand rands."

"As much as that?"

“Yes, with air fares getting there and for internal flights and hotel accommodation in Bombay and Bangalore and personal expenses for three months.”

He said: “I hope everything goes well and that you go. When you come back, please contact me. My wife and I would love to have you over to dinner to listen to an account of your experiences.”

It had been a pleasant meeting. Pleased for reasons of his own that he had brought Karl and me together, Jean dropped me off at my office in Hatfield.

The next morning, the first telephone call I received was from Karl. He said his wife had told him about a dream she had had during the night, during which she had been urged by someone she could not recognise to advise her husband to help me to go to India. Karl was struck by the fact that she seemed to know more about me than he had told her. Other than being introduced to me by her husband, she did not take part in our discussion.

“How far from your bank are you?”, he asked.

I replied that it was virtually across the road.

“Can you give me one of your account numbers?”

“Why? I asked, puzzled.

“Give it to me and I will call you back and tell you”, he said. I gave him the number of one of my savings accounts.

Ten minutes later, Karl called again. He asked would I go to the bank and check my account. I did, and found ten thousand rands in it. I called him back immediately I returned to the office.

“Thanks for putting the money into my account, Karl”, I said, “But I cannot accept it.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Simply because I do not borrow money, Karl, especially such large amounts. I will take me ages to pay back a sum like that with my salary”, I replied.

On returning home from a foreign posting, a diplomat’s salary reverts to the local scales and Foreign Service allowances fall away. In the first few years of a diplomat’s career, this see-sawing of income levels always takes a bit of getting used to.

I said: “Moreover, Karl, you’ve known me only for an hour. I could be a total fraud, you know.”

“Who’s talking about paying back?”, Karl said.

“It’s a gift that I can well afford for I can write it off my tax. If you have reservations about accepting gifts, you can always consider paying it back sometime in the future when your fortunes change with another overseas posting, perhaps, even if it should take fifty years. Or you can just forget about it. And as for being a fraud, Viv, I’m a

good judge of human character. That's how I got to where I am now. If you're a fraud, then I'm Genghis Khan."

I was in a daze for the rest of that day. The sudden rush of events had completely overwhelmed me. I realised that the most crucial Panchangam predictions had materialised within a matter of hours. Leon insisted on travelling with me to India, all the leave I needed had materialised unexpectedly and now the money had come. Every event I had experienced that day related to the summons to go to my guru. It dawned on me that the priest had been right. God had, indeed, taken over my affairs. I was immersed in a feeling of unreality, as though everything were a dream. In that mood, I picked up the telephone and called Leon. Then I went home to tell my wife.

She was not impressed, especially with the money from Karl.

"You cannot accept money without thinking about how you will pay it back", she insisted. "We cannot afford to pay back that amount of money for a long time."

I repeated what Karl had told me but she remained sceptical.

Later that week her older sister called to say she was driving to Durban in a day or two, and invited my wife, son and daughter to accompany her for a short holiday with the family on the coast. They went away a day later. I was left alone for the rest of that week to get my things together in preparation for my journey to India.

FOUR

Vaithalingam's Ganesha

My leave from work started a few days before I was due to fly to the United Arab Emirates and India. On Friday the 12th of February, I drove the 60 kilometres to Dakshina in the south of Johannesburg to say goodbye to members of my extended family.

While there I visited Dan and Sylvie Doorasamy and later Krish Ramlackan, all devotees of Sai Baba. Dan was a refrigeration engineer and devoted much of his energy towards doing charitable and religious work in the community in which he lived. He had gone on several pilgrimages to Puttaparthi and had had interviews with Sai Baba. On one of those visits, Baba had materialised a magnificent panchaloha (a silvery, non-tarnishing alloy of five metals) ring for Dan representing the Holy Trinity: Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma: Creator, Preserver and Destroyer. Dan told me that it was charged with so much of energy that when he sometimes walked into certain houses or offices in the course of his work, the electricity supply tended to trip.

Krish, a professional photographer, somehow found the time in his busy schedule to do a considerable amount of charitable work- *seva* - in his community. He was at the time one of the leading lights of the Sai Centre in Lenasia South. He had also been to Baba several times and had had many remarkable experiences.

Both Dan and Krish thought they knew why I had been instructed in the Panchangam to arrive in Puttaparthi by the 18th of February when I told them about the message. Shivarathri, the holiest of holy nights to Hindus, when Shiva's divine energy descends to bless the earth and all things both animate and inanimate, would fall on the 18th of February in 1993. Krish and Dan were convinced that for some mysterious reason, I had to be in Puttaparthi on that holy night. As it turned out, they were correct in their assumptions.

Later that afternoon, at my nephew's house, his neighbour Mr Vaithalingam Chetty came to say goodbye to me. I had met him and his wife some months earlier, when they came to live opposite my nephew's house with their son and daughter-in-law, both teachers who had been transferred from Durban where they originally lived and

worked, to schools in Dakshina. Mr Chetty is a retired printer and he and his wife and their immediate family are all followers of Sri Sathya Sai Baba.

I told the charming gentleman about the message in the Panchangam and he agreed that it was most unusual. However, he said, in matters relating to Sai Baba, it was quite normal. In the months that I knew him, he had told me of some of his own experiences relating to Baba. One in particular is worth retelling here for its relevance to my narrative.

On rising one morning some years ago, Mr Chetty had a strong urge to model a Ganesha in clay. He told his wife and son at breakfast about his inexplicable urge. He could not understand it for he had had no training in any branch of the fine arts, sculpture particularly.

That afternoon his son brought home some potter's clay for his father to indulge his sudden craving. The following morning the aspiring sculptor piled the clay onto an old table in the back porch and got to work. Although he had tried his hand at painting and some modelling over the years, he did not consider himself particularly talented in either pursuit.

That morning, however, some strange power seemed to take over. He felt an unknown energy throbbing through his hands and fingers and a Ganesha began to take shape almost by itself. With his fascinated wife watching, he worked through most of the day as though in a trance, with a brief break for lunch. The more the statue took shape, the more he was convinced that he had become an instrument of some higher power.

Exhausted after his labours, at the end of the day he wrapped the unfinished statue in wet hessian to keep the clay moist, intending to complete it the following day. Both Mr Chetty and his wife were fascinated with the manner in which the statue was emerging out of the pile of clay. It was the subject of animated discussion at supper with the family that evening. At his family's urging, the bemused sculptor promised to unwrap the statue before everyone went off to school the following morning.

The family gathered excitedly in the back porch the next day, waiting expectantly for the elderly sculptor to remove the damp hessian. He thought he felt a movement beneath the hessian but continued to remove it. When the last layer was lifted off, there was a shout and everyone except Mr Chetty stepped back. Wrapped around the exquisite clay Ganesha's middle was a large cobra with its hood extended. Telling his family not to panic, he put his palms together in the Hindu fashion. Then he started to chant, "Om Nama Shivaya, Om Nama Shivaya, Om Nama Shivaya..."

After remaining motionless for what seemed like an eternity, the snake gradually relaxed its swaying hood and began to unwind itself from around the Ganesha's waist. Mr Chetty continued to chant. The snake lowered its head to the floor of the porch while the rest of its clay-smeared body slithered onto the table. Only then did the family realise that the enormous snake was some three metres long. It slithered out of the porch onto the lawn. When it reached the boundary fence, it raised its head with the hood extended, looking back towards the house and the family on the porch. Then it disappeared into the long grass beyond the fence.

The cobra is integral to the Hindu mythology relating to Ganesha, the elephant-headed god. The snake is symbolic of great wisdom and is invariably associated with Shiva, who in His Destroyer aspect forms the Holy Trinity with Brahma, the Creator and Vishnu, the Preserver. In Hindu art, to echo a story from Hindu mythology, Ganesha is often depicted with a cobra wrapped around his middle. When the excitement died down and the family went off to school, Mr Chetty finished the statue, modelling a cobra wrapped around the midriff as a finishing touch.

Before Mr Chetty told me the story himself, my nephew had told me about the cobra wrapped around his elderly neighbour's clay model, so I went to see it myself some weeks after the incident with the live cobra. The original clay statue had disintegrated as clay models usually do, but the unlikely sculptor had taken a latex mould before it broke up and from this he had thrown a resin cast. He was busy giving the cast its finishing touches when I went to visit. I was astounded at the quality of the craftsmanship.

With a background in fine arts, I had qualified as an art teacher and had taught painting and sculpture for some years before turning to journalism and finally the Foreign Service. Mr Chetty had never had an art lesson in his life, yet his Ganesha could have come from the workshop of any professional sculptor in India, trained in accordance with ancient traditional methods. To my practised eye, the figure was anatomically perfect, with the expressive hands, always the most difficult part of the anatomy to depict in correct proportion, particularly exquisite.

“God manifests throughout our lives in many ways but we often do not notice”, Mr Chetty said. “As far as my family and I are concerned, the cobra that morning was none other than a manifestation of Shiva. In much the same way, the message read to you from the Panchangam, normally merely an astrological almanac, was also a manifestation of the Supreme Intelligence, or the Divine Spirit if you want, that permeates the universe and everything within it, including ourselves.”

“Farewell”, he said. “Considering the miraculous way you have been summoned to Prashanti Nilayam, I have little doubt that much awaits you.” As it turned out, his words were prophetic.

FIVE

The Guide

Already deeply moved by the incredible events of that week, I was filled with awe and a tremendous sense of expectation. The evening of Friday the 12th, when I was due to leave on the first leg of my journey, could not come fast enough.

My nephew Inba left me at Johannesburg Airport at six that evening. Leon and I had arranged to meet in the international departures lounge by 7.00. I took the escalator down to the departures lounge. It was crowded, mostly with Muslims on pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. It was still too early for Leon.

The first boarding call was announced and there was no sign of Leon. He was already 20 minutes late and I was anxious. When the second boarding call was announced ten minutes later, there was still no sign of him. I kept glancing at the top of the escalator but he did not appear. Then I saw a huge man step onto the escalator. Even at that distance, I could see that he was dressed in the most garish fashion. I was fascinated.

As he descended, I could see his Bermuda shorts and loud shirt with bright splashes of yellow, blue red and green, reminiscent of a tropical rain forest after a thunderstorm. I could not take my eyes off the man, for even at that distance, he seemed unreal.

He seemed to have a most unusual clothes sense. One leg of his Bermuda's was a nondescript mustardy yellow; the other was a bilious green. He had huge, bulbous calves and wore sandals. While he sported an Afro hairstyle, his skin was as black as a winter's night. He wore cheap black sunglasses with a white frame and carried an expensive, tan coloured ostrich-skin brief case with gold fittings in his right hand.

As I watched mesmerised as the incongruous apparition descended, I thought he must be an African American dressed in what he fondly believed was the norm for Africa or perhaps, I speculated, he was a homesick West Indian in national dress. Reaching the floor of the departures lounge, he walked straight up to me and said, "Hi! I'm Krish Naidoo. What did you say your name was?"

I was completely taken aback; until he spoke to me I hadn't said a word, let alone tell him what my name was. There was nothing about him that was even remotely Indian except his name. I told him mine.

"Hmmm", he said. "Unusual name that, but I heard it, once or twice. Where you from?"

“Pretoria”, I replied.

“I’m from Tongaat. Know Tongaat?”

“Yes. I’m a former Natalian”, I said. “Used to live in Durban until a few years ago.”

“I see”, he said. “Goin’ to Bombay?”

“Yes”, I said.

“Got any contacts?”

“No”, I replied, presuming he meant in Bombay, “I don’t know anybody in that city.”

“Not good. Not good”, he said, shaking his head sympathetically. “Gotta have contacts. But don’t worry. This my eleventh trip. Know India inside out. Hundreds of the right contacts. I’ll take care of you.”

He spoke in a kind of verbal shorthand. I wondered what it was about me that gave strangers the impression that I needed care.

Then he noticed me glancing anxiously to the top of the escalator.

“Expecting somebody?”

“Yes. My travelling companion.”

Just then I spotted Leon stepping onto the escalator in a most leisurely fashion, some twenty minutes after the last boarding call.

“There he is”, I said to Krish Naidoo. “Leon Londt.”

I introduced Leon to Krish as we hurried to the boarding gate. The huge man went through the gate first. Leon turned to me, puzzled eyebrows raised, and gestured silently towards Krish Naidoo’s back. I shrugged my shoulders and shook my head, indicating that I was as puzzled over Krish Naidoo as he was.

“Don’t know the fellow from a bar of soap”, I mumbled to Leon.

“Is he really Indian? Leon asked, thinking exactly what I had thought when I first saw Krish on the escalator, it turned out later when we discussed it. Again, I shrugged my shoulders. As we stepped into the plane, Krish turned to ask for our boarding passes. He checked our seat numbers and said, “You sitting behind me. But don’t worry, I’ll fix it.”

I was not worried about anything and I had no idea what he was going to fix.

We were the last passengers to board the flight. Hurrying to our seats, we stowed our luggage and strapped ourselves in as the plane began to reverse out of the apron. Then the Gulf Air Boeing taxied to the end of the runway and with a roar of its Rolls Royce engines, sped down the runway and rose rapidly into the black African sky. The

plane had barely levelled off when we saw Krish Naidoo approach with the flight purser who scribbled on his clipboard and on Krish's boarding pass.

"I fixed it", Krish said, settling his huge mass into the seat next to me. Only then did we realise what it was that he had fixed. He had arranged to sit with Leon and me for the rest of the flight to Abu Dhabi and Bombay. Leon gave me a despairing sidelong glance.

Krish seemed intent on telling us about himself. He was in the luxury car and foreign currency business. This was his eleventh trip to India. He knew India as well as he knew the little town of Tongaat in the cane fields of the Natal north coast. And he had contacts everywhere.

"You nothing in India without contacts", he said more than once. Then he would remember that Leon and I, novices on our first journey to India, were totally innocent of all-important "contacts".

"Don't worry. I'll take care of everything", he assured us.

Seasoned travellers in the West, Leon and I wondered what it was about India that necessitated contacts to take care of "everything".

From that moment onwards, Krish fussed over me like a mother hen. When dinner was served, he inquired whether everything on the vegetarian platter was to my satisfaction. "If it isn't, just tell me. I'll have it changed", he insisted. I assured him I was delighted with my meal. When the cabin lights were dimmed to allow passengers to sleep, I fell instantly asleep. Throughout the flight, although in deep slumber, I was conscious of Krish pulling up my blanket and tucking it under my shoulders whenever it slipped.

I awoke when the plane began to descend towards Abu Dhabi. When I opened my eyes, Krish inquired whether I had slept well.

We landed and had to wait inside the impressive airport for four hours for our connecting flight to Bombay. Since we were in transit, we had to disembark and stay in the airport concourse. Krish insisted on taking us to a restaurant for breakfast. Neither Leon nor I was hungry, but we agreed to have coffee and croissants because he was so insistent. When the bill came, he would not let us pay.

We left the restaurant and went into the duty free section to window shop because there was nothing else to do before our flight. I walked into a camera shop and asked to see the latest Nikon. It was a beautiful instrument. Krish listened intently to my conversation with the salesman and realised I knew more than the average person about photographic equipment. I explained that I had been a photographer-journalist for many years.

"You like the camera?", he asked. "I'll buy it for you if you like." Surprised at the generous offer, I politely declined. The Nikon and accessories were worth a small fortune.

Throughout my life, I have been attracted to precious stones and gold although I myself wear only a gold ring. I have never been able to walk past a jeweller's window without stopping to admire the baubles and the gold trinkets, so I went into a large jewellery store. Out of sheer curiosity, I walked towards a heavy, solid gold belt made out of Kruger Rands mounted in gold in such a way that they would not be damaged or marked. The Japanese saleslady took it out of the glass case and placed it in my hands. I cannot recall the price as I write this but I do remember that it was a fortune in dollars.

"Take it", Krish said. I was not aware he was beside me. "I can see that you like it. Take it. I'll pay", he said. Again, I declined politely. This is how it went for the next four hours. I could not look at anything without Krish offering to buy it for me. Every time I declined his offer, he looked genuinely aggrieved.

We arrived in Bombay's Santa Cruz airport in the early hours of a muggy, wet morning. We made our way to the arrivals lounge and Leon and Krish, their passports checked by customs and immigration officials, passed through quickly. I had to declare my photographic and sound equipment at customs.

I was carrying two 35mm cameras and several telephoto lenses, a video camera and a tape recorder. There was an inordinate delay as I tried to explain that all this was my personal equipment and that I was on a private visit and not a professional one. Not happy with my explanation, the customs official rang for his supervisor who arrived and spoke to his junior colleague in an Indian dialect I could not understand. They went on talking for some time, totally ignoring me.

I glanced towards my companions on the other side of the barrier and realised they were observing the scene closely. I shrugged my shoulders despairingly when they looked at me and gestured inquiringly. Then I saw Krish march purposefully back to the customs barrier, the ostrich brief case swinging stylishly. Placing his free hand on his hip, he glared down at the two customs officials.

"Do you know who this man is? he demanded. "Do you know who he's come to see?" he thundered.

The officials did not wait to hear who I was or whom I had come to see. Suitably impressed, the supervisor spoke rapidly in the vernacular to his juniors and hurried away. An officer quickly noted my equipment with their serial numbers on my passport in an illegible hand and hurriedly stamped it, saying, "*Chalo! Chalo!*", he waved me on.

"The blighters probably wanted a bribe", Krish observed as we walked out of the airport to find a taxi in the sweltering night. A tout brought us a cab and we piled in with our luggage.

"Taj Hotel", Krish said to the driver.

Hooting its way through the wet streets, crowded even at that hour in what seemed like miles of the most depressing squatter camps on the approaches to Bombay, the taxi drew up before the portals of one of the finest five-star hotels in India.

Krish insisted on paying the driver and led Leon and me, a line of porters following with our luggage, into the foyer.

“This is where I stay whenever I come to Bombay”, he said. “Let’s book in.”

We looked around at our plush surroundings. Leon and I gave each other concerned sidelong glances.

“We’re most grateful to you, Krish”, I said after a moment’s thought. “But this is not what Leon and I had in mind. We will be staying in India for three months. We will have to stay in cheaper accommodation to stretch our funds, I’m afraid.”

“No problem”, Krish replied. “I understand.”

He spoke briefly to the clerk at the check-in counter, saying that he would be back. Leaving his own luggage there, he issued an instruction to the porters, and we all marched out again. We climbed into a taxi and Krish gave the driver the name of another hotel and the address.

“I know the owner”, he said. “Good contact.”

The taxi drew up in front of a modest hotel in a side street. Our colourful guide led us into the foyer, spoke to the night duty clerk and asked him to book us in. We handed over our passports. Leon and I thought the rates, displayed on the wall behind the clerk, were affordable.

A porter led us to our double room and Krish followed. It was pleasant and clean, though very plain.

“Are you happy? Krish asked. We said that we were.

“Then I’ll leave you”, he said. “I am going back to the Taj. Have to phone some contacts. See you in the morning.”

It was then about two in the morning, and I marvelled at the extent of the influence which allowed him to call “contracts” at that late hour. Suitably impressed, I asked him for his telephone numbers in South Africa and he gave me two numbers in Tongaat, Natal. I gave him my business card. Leon and I thanked him profusely and he departed.

The next morning we decided to check out of the hotel, take a taxi on a sightseeing tour of the city, catching our flight to Bangalore late in the afternoon. We had breakfast, then went to settle our bill.

“What bill? the day clerk asked.

“Our bill for the accommodation and breakfast”, I replied.

“Oh no, sarr”, he said, shaking his head from side to side like a dancing doll. “That has already been settled by your friend.”

Puzzled, we asked him who it was. He did not know the name, so we asked him to describe the person. He described Krish perfectly.

“Big man, sarr”, he said. “In strange clothes and black and white sunglasses. He came early this morning.”

Leon and I were impressed by this act of generosity but also embarrassed, for we could well afford to pay for ourselves. We decided to call the Taj Hotel. I asked the switchboard operator to put me through to Mr Krish Naidoo. He transferred the line to reservations. I repeated my request to the reservations clerk. After a moment’s delay, she came back to me to say there was no guest by the name of Krish Naidoo.

“Are you sure?, I asked her. “I’m positive, sir”, she said. “Nobody by that name has booked in here for the past two weeks at least. That’s how far back I can go on the computer.”

Leon and I wondered whether he might have gone to another hotel after leaving us, then remembered that he had left his luggage at the porter’s desk at the Taj. We recalled hearing him tell the porter that he would book in when he returned after showing us to our hotel.

We went on our taxi tour of Bombay and caught our early evening flight to Bangalore. Two days later, on the 18th, we hired a taxi in Bangalore and arrived at Puttaparthi in the early evening. It was the eve of Shivarathri, and buses and taxis were disgorging thousands of people into the grounds of the ashram. In the hustle and bustle and the tumult and excitement of being in such a varied multitude, Leon and I soon forgot about Krish Naidoo. In the incredible experiences we were to have in the weeks and months to come, our erstwhile guide became a distant memory.

Three months later, within the first week of my return to South Africa, I called both the numbers in Tongaat that Krish had given me. There were Indian families at both numbers but nobody had heard of Krish Naidoo. I described him as graphically as I could, but still drew a blank.

I neither saw nor heard from Krish Naidoo again.

Later, when Leon and I we recounted our experiences, including our encounter with Krish Naidoo, fellow devotees suggested something that had never occurred to us.

“Your Krish Naidoo, with his Afro hairstyle and concern for your well-being was none other than Sai Baba in disguise”, they said. Then the pieces began to fall into place and things that had puzzled me became clear. I recalled that the message in the Panchangam assured me that someone would take care of me from the time I left home.

The advent of the mysterious stranger that night in Johannesburg airport heralded a most amazing phase of my life, a period in which it started to dawn on me that life is

indeed the maya or illusion that the Hindu sage has always said that it is, that everything is not what it seems to be, that there are things on this earth plane that will always be beyond the understanding of men.

More than anything, I learnt, in the events that unfolded in that first pilgrimage to Prashanti Nilayam – the Abode of the Highest Peace – that we are not pieces of flotsam adrift helplessly on the swirling tides of life. We are, in reality, enclosed within the bosom of a loving Creator guiding and protecting us through the expiation of our self-imposed karma, enabling us ceaselessly to evolve to higher levels of existence.

That Creator, I have learnt, does not judge or punish. He loves each of us equally and unconditionally, demonstrating ceaselessly for those who have eyes to see, that love is the glue that binds together the universe and everything within it. We are integral to an endless mystery within the mind of an Infinite Cosmic Intelligence that is manifesting as a great, exploding universe above and beyond the comprehension of man.

I have learnt, since that encounter with the strange man in his incongruous dress, that we are integral to the mystery that men call God, that individual and separate though we may seem to be in the illusion of duality, we are in reality One Soul. I have learnt that I am not only my brother's keeper, but that I am my brother too, that I am integral to all things in existence, from a grain of sand to the unfathomable immensity of an expanding universe.

And so, through years of laughter and sadness, unbearable anguish and blissful healing, my adventures with Sri Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi began.

SIX

The Australians

After a taxi tour of the city centre, Leon and I caught our flight to Bangalore from Bombay's domestic airport. As our plane circled over the southern city in the early evening, the floodlit state parliament buildings, the Vidayana Soudha, caught our attention. The magnificent structure seemed to rise like a mirage out of what seemed in that fading light to be a lush forest. The buildings were breathtakingly beautiful so we decided while still airborne that we would spend the next day sightseeing. Within an hour of landing, we had booked into a city hotel.

Bangalore was then a leafy and elegant city with less of the frenetic crowds and chaotic vehicular traffic than today. Since the Information Technology boom started a few years ago, it has grown in leaps and bounds, much of it in a seemingly disordered and muddled way, with the city's once-magnificent tree cover falling casualty to the explosive proliferation of buildings, highways and flyovers. Many international IT companies are now located here, with assertive buildings of glass and polished granite rising continually in the city and outlying industrial parks.

Progress extracts a sad price: the graceful Bangalore that I revelled in during my first visits has all but disappeared in more recent times. Gracious old houses have given way to concrete and glass apartment and office blocks; majestically spreading trees have fallen before the unrelenting axe of consumerist expansion.

Formerly a laid back, comparatively cool city much favoured by retired civil servants and military people, it is now the destination of job seekers from all over India not only in high technology but also in building and construction and the service industries. Bangalore's graceful old ambiance has long gone. Where one heard mostly Kannada in the streets with the occasional Tamil and Telugu, the city now is a melting pot of dialects and cultures.

Two days later, we travelled by taxi to the once obscure village called Puttaparthi, across the border in Andhra Pradesh to the north. The road at the time was bad, even though it was the main highway to Hyderabad. In some places it was reduced to strips, reminding me of the old bush roads in parts of Africa north of the Limpopo. Now the highway is considerably better though much work still needs to be done.

We passed through impoverished farming villages, reminding me that my ancestors had come from parts of this state in the nineteenth century. Shepherds with flocks of sheep and goats and peasants driving the tiny donkeys common in these parts reminded us once again of the Holy Land. Used to their larger African cousins, we were fascinated by the diminutive size of these animals hardly bigger than large dogs. We were moved to see that grain bags or impossibly large mounds of rice straw and other animal fodder heavily burdened these pathetically small creatures.

As we neared the village of Puttaparthi, we couldn't help noticing the similarity of the rocky, almost barren hills and the rural villages we passed to countries of the Middle East, particularly the Holy Lands. In the old village itself, the similarities were then even more startling. We drove down the main street with the ashram wall on one side and entered Prashanti Nilayam through a large gate in the side facing the old village. We found ourselves in a broad driveway with buildings on either side.

Our driver stopped outside a building that housed the accommodation offices. At his suggestion, Leon and I stood with our passports in the queue for foreigners outside and were allocated space in the building reserved for westerners. Having done the trip hundreds of times, our driver knew the drill. After we were allocated accommodation, he took us to line of shops on the main street where he advised us to buy locally-made kapok-filled mattresses, sheets, pillows and cases and rectangular mosquito nets. He also said we should buy a large plastic bucket and an oversized plastic mug for scooping up water when we bathed and some enamelled mugs for tea.

We went back in our taxi to the shed. It was a simple structure built of local materials: plain whitewashed cement block walls, shuttered, unglazed windows and a floor of local stone from quarries we had seen on hillsides along the road from Bangalore. The wooden roof trusses were exposed for there was no ceiling. We were each allocated a space measuring about five by ten feet for our mattresses and other possessions by a seva dal assigned to the building. We paid the driver and he left. Later we found out that even though we had given him a generous tip, he had overcharged us by more than twice the usual amount.

We asked about bathrooms and toilets and the seva dal showed us the ablution block next door. It was divided into two rows of cubicles separated by a central passage. The toilets were of the eastern type and the shower cubicles had no shower roses. Instead there was a tap sticking out of the wall in each cubicle. We realised why the driver had advised us to buy the bucket and oversized mug. The seva dal pointed to a notice on the wall requesting devotees to ensure that they left the block in the condition in which they found it for there were no cleaners. It was the responsibility of the devotees to ensure that the facility was clean. Then the extremely polite seva dal led us back to the shed where he left us.

Dozens of western men were already in that spartan shed when we entered. All were lying on their mattresses or sitting on their haunches in groups in the central unoccupied space, their luggage and other possessions neatly stacked in the spaces allocated to them along the walls. All had mosquito nets stretched over their personal spaces, suspended from the roof trusses with string. We chose spaces near windows

in a corner where Leon had spotted light switches and sockets for appliances. His only concern was for a cup of coffee in the morning and he rejoiced that he could plug in his little travelling heater immersed in a mug of water right next to his bed on the floor. He unpacked his tins of coffee and sugar before anything else.

There were two men near our corner.

“G’day, mate. Where are you from?”, one of them said.

He and his friend were from Perth in Western Australia.

Two other Australians nearby also introduced themselves. They were Chris Parnell from New South Wales and Dion Remme from Queensland. I did not know it then but both were to become my lifelong friends. Chris Parnell would become my invaluable guide and mentor in matters relating to the Vedas and Hindu culture. Yet he was an Irish Australian born into the Roman Catholic faith.

Much later, an Australian much younger than all the rest, John Purnell, came to our corner to meet us. I enjoyed his charmingly playful company in the ensuing months. His delightful sense of humour and endearing helpfulness disguised a strongly awakening spiritual consciousness. He later became a Catholic priest.

All became our good friends over the following weeks. Although I never saw the two from Western Australia again after that first visit to India, I continued to meet Chris and Deon on successive trips to Puttaparthi and Whitefield outside Bangalore over the years since 1993.

Chris Parnell became a close friend since that first meeting and was destined to play a major role in my spiritual development over the years. More than that, he was the catalyst for what turned out to be undoubtedly the most momentous experience of my life, a mysterious, unbearably sad drama that saved me in the immediate years afterwards from plunging into the depths of hopeless despair and perhaps even extreme self-destruction.

Chris Parnell and I lost contact with each other for a few years after 1995, but were brought together again through an amazing coincidence late in 2002. It was only years later that I started to see not only the reason for my being brought into contact with Chris, but also the strange coincidences, the synchronicity that affected my life ever since that first trip to Puttaparthi, often involving my Australian friend

The Australians, Leon and I chatted away as though we had known one another for years as we stowed away our things and made up our beds. I told the Australians I knew their country well, having had a diplomatic posting there. This made for even greater conviviality as South Africans and Australians have much in common. As head of the media section at the South African Embassy in Canberra, I had to travel extensively over Australia and so I knew those parts of the country from where each of my new-found friends came.

Eventually my bed was made and my luggage stacked away neatly. I stood surveying my handiwork.

“Don’t forget the mosquito net, mate”, one of the Western Australians said, pointing to my net crumpled on the floor in a corner. I had forgotten about it.

“You won’t be able to sleep without it.”

“Thanks”, I said. “But how on earth shall I get it up?”

Someone tapped me on the shoulder and I turned around. It was the Englishman I had seen earlier with his young son. In his outstretched hand he held a ball of plastic string.

I took the ball thankfully and looked at it, then up to the beams overhead, wondering what to do next. The Englishman took the ball wordlessly from my hand, kicked off one of his plastic slippers, tied it to the end of the string with a slip knot and threw it over the beam above my mattress on the floor. He measured a length of the string hanging from the ceiling, cut it with his Swiss Army knife and threaded it through the slip knot and a loop in one corner of the net, then repeated the process in all four corners. In next to no time, he had the mosquito net like a rectangular tent above my bed. Then he proceeded to do the same for Leon.

The Englishman introduced himself as Ian Roth. He worked at the time for French Airlines and lived in Paris. In the ensuing days, I learned that He had been married to a Bolivian. He was divorced when I met him. The boy, also Ian, was from that marriage.

Ian Roth and I were to become good friends in the two weeks before he returned to Paris with his son. My meeting with him and my subsequent experiences up to the day he returned to Paris were the first indications in the years afterwards that the world and our existence is not what it seems to be, that life is far more mysterious and extraordinary than most people suspect. As I will narrate later in these pages, the remarkable events leading up to that realisation were so casual and ordinary at the time that the full impact of the mystery struck me only much later.

After that meeting with Ian Roth, a germ of an idea was sown in my mind. Over the years, that idea began to grow, nurtured and given impetus by other extraordinary experiences and a string of inexplicable coincidences that followed me throughout the ensuing years. Many of these were completely improbable, pointing to the fact that they could not have been mere coincidences by any stretch of the imagination. Once I started to notice them and their frequency, it became clear that there was an underlying synchronicity to all that was happening to me and to others within my ambit. Another thought began to stir in my mind: if there was an underlying synchronicity, there had to be a coordinated plan. It followed therefore, that if there was such a plan, there had to be a central planner or coordinator.

In the following fortnight, Leon, Ian and I became almost inseparable. We slept in the same corner of the shed, shared the ablution facilities, ate together in the western canteen and with little Ian tagging along, wandered together about the ashram, the

village and its surroundings. Ian knew the area well, having gone there several times through the years. He knew all the places associated with Sri Sathya Sai Baba's childhood, from the spot where he was born – now converted into a shrine and temple – to his first school, his parents' shrine and the now famous tamarind tree on the hill overlooking the Chitravathi River.

At every rest stop, whether in a coconut grove, under the tamarind tree on the hill or in the ruins of an old temple, Ian gave us impromptu talks on aspects of the Vedas or recounted a passage from the Gita. His knowledge of the Hindu scriptures was extensive and impeccable and he illustrated our discussions on Hindu philosophy with the most appropriate quotations from one book of scriptures or the other. Leon and I were overwhelmed by his profound knowledge; we lapped up his tutelage.

It occurred to me on more than one occasion that Ian took his role of tutor and mentor seriously, as though he had been assigned to the task by some unknown authority. On our walks around the village, he would suddenly suggest a rest under a convenient tree or the shade of a building.

“Let's rest for a while”, he would suddenly suggest. “It occurs to me this is the ideal moment to tell you something I once read of the Hindu concept of avatars.”

Always, his talks were directly related to subjects we happened to be discussing. Both Leon and I realised that to discuss such diverse philosophical subjects with such ease and authority, Ian must have had a tremendous reading background.

Both Leon and I were none too happy when Ian told us some two weeks after we first met that he would be soon returning to Paris. We had learnt much from our well-read English friend. I had found him most enlightening on religious and esoteric matters that I had long pondered. Yet it was only on the day that he left, when he explained why he had come to Puttaparthi for the Shivarathri festival when he had been there for Christmas barely two months previously that I started to glimpse a mysterious, celestial plan in the affairs of men. It was only then that I started to think that there was no such thing as coincidence, that there is an underlying synchronicity to everything that happens in our lives. I am getting ahead of myself though, so I'll get on with the narrative and return later to Ian's last day in Puttaparthi and his startling parting comments to me shortly before he left.

The 9pm lights-out rule was strictly followed at the ashram and Dion and Ian, who had both been to Prashanti Nilayam before, said there would be no early morning darshan, for the next day was the great festival of Shivarathri – Shiva's night. They did advise us, though, that we should have an early lunch in the western canteen and take our places in the Poornachandra Hall by one-thirty or two, so we set our alarms for much later than the three a.m. we were advised to by friends in South Africa. We were already dozing off under our mosquito nets when the seva dal knocked on our door to announce lights out at nine o'clock.

SEVEN

The Shivarathri miracle

I woke on the morning of the 18th in a state of trembling expectation despite my outward calm. The mysterious message had instructed me to be in Prashanti Nilayam by this date and no later. Moreover, Nadarajan Sarma, the priest in Pretoria, had made a point of emphasising the importance of the fact that the sum of the digits of the date totalled 9. The numeral figured prominently in my own date and time of birth. He had emphasised that I should make strenuous efforts to reach Puttaparthi by that date and I had done so.

There was no morning darshan for it was hours before the start of Shivarathri and the priests and their helpers would be preparing for the ceremony in the Poornachandra Hall that afternoon. Ian Roth and Chris Parnell advised our group that we should be seated in the hall by two in the afternoon at the latest. Otherwise we could not be guaranteed good vantage points. He suggested that we go for breakfast after ablutions.

Now that the 18th had arrived, a flurry of thoughts tumbled through my mind as I showered and dressed. Until then, I had never seen Sri Sathya Sai Baba in the flesh. Perhaps he would give me an interview. What should I say if that should happen? I speculated that he might materialise holy ash for me, perhaps even a ring. Hurriedly, I dressed for the first time in the mandatory white cotton kurta and pants I had bought in Bangalore and went out to meet Leon and the others, feeling a little self-conscious in my first set of Indian-style clothes.

Our new-found Australian friends and Ian Roth were perfect fellow travellers. They knew the routine at the ashram, some of them having been there on previous visits. They guided Leon and me to the western canteen where we had breakfast. Afterwards, our friends suggested walking through the crowded grounds to the Ganesha Gate which led to the main road of the village. It was still very early and we had hours on our hands before going to the hall closer to two that afternoon.

The grounds of Prashanti Nilayam were a riot of colour and a babble of tongues. The amazing variety of regional costumes indicated the great distances many people had travelled to get there. There seemed to be people from every corner of India. When we marvelled at the variety, Ian reminded us that this was typical of India's great mixture of ethnic types and regional cultures and that it had been like this from time immemorial. The ability of such a great variety of people with diverse religions and customs to live together in amity was unique to India and also its great strength, he said.

In the main road outside the ashram's Ganesha Gate, there was a carnival air, with buntings hanging from light poles and shop fronts, religious music blaring from loudspeakers and a sea of humanity, bullock carts, auto-rickshaws, hawkers and tradesmen, miniature donkeys with grain bags slung over their backs, children, sadhus and holy men, flustered policemen and excited monkeys adding to a great, happy hodgepodge of humanity and animals.

We followed Ian as he led us down the road in front of the Ganesha Gate to the Chitravathi River. The crowds thinned away and again the houses on the hilly, rocky land on both sides of the road reminded us of the Holy Land. Considerable building activity was going on, mostly of smallish dwellings perched precariously on the rocky hillsides. We passed under some trees and came to a riverbed. There was no water. All we could see was a wide swathe of sand snaking away into the distance. In isolated spots on that sandy bed, there were small pools of water around which groups of dhobis were gathered washing piles of clothes. Women laid the clothes out to dry on the white sands.

Ian explained that when the monsoons came, the river swells into a broad flow and sometimes becomes a raging torrent.

"Then boats come out, and men go fishing", he said.

I could not imagine this seemingly lifeless ribbon of sand becoming a river with boats and fish, let alone becoming a raging torrent. By then we had wandered upriver and had stopped where labourers were preparing to fire bricks they had made from the local clay.

Their method of firing clay bricks is ingenious and as old as the Indian civilization. Where in other cultures a furnace would be built to hold the bricks to be fired, from ancient times Indians have built the furnace out of the very bricks that are to be fired, so that the bricks serve a two-fold purpose: they are not only fired and hardened to be made fit to be used as building material, they themselves form the furnace containing the fire.

The bricks of uniform size are neatly packed to form the shape of a furnace, with a hollow centre and vents around the sides. The orientation of the furnace is crucially important, for it has to be placed just so in order to catch the natural draughts and the positions of the inlet and outlet vents carefully worked out. Then the structure is filled with wood, the main feeder openings sealed, again with unfired clay bricks, and the wood set on fire. It burns for days on end. When the wood finally turns to ash and the structure cools, the bricks are ready for use. The method is an ancient one and was used in Mohenjo Daro, Harappa and other ancient cities in India's oldest known civilization some six thousand years ago in the Indus Valley of what is now Pakistan.

I had been puzzled about fish suddenly appearing in the river with the onset of the monsoons. I wondered where they came from so quickly. We soon found the answer to the puzzle. On the banks of the river, which were lined with coconut groves and fields of sunflowers and peanuts, we saw immense, very deep, stone-lined storage wells, most of them ancient. They were cleverly angled to face upstream to catch and store monsoon floodwaters.

In a good season, Ian said, all the wells in the area are filled and farmers on the banks have enough water to last until the next monsoon and sometimes even longer. We saw fish in most of the wells and the puzzle was solved. When the monsoons fed the river again, the fish in the storage wells escaped.

We decided to rest in a shady coconut grove and, realising that we were foreigners, some men working there offered us coconut milk. The sun was climbing and it was already stiflingly hot, so we accepted gratefully. A boy clambered up a tree and dropped nuts that the men below cut open for us. In a mixture of English and Telugu, they asked whether we had come to see Sai Baba and we replied in the affirmative. They welcomed us and declined the money we offered them.

It was only when we started back that we realised that we had walked a considerable distance from the village. Trudging on the sandy riverbed was tedious under the already fierce morning sun, so we climbed up the bank to the road that runs alongside the river.

A cart drawn by two magnificent Brahmin bulls came up at a snappy pace behind us and we waved in greeting to the driver and the boy sitting next to him. The cart stopped and the driver asked whether we wanted a lift. By then well-broiled in the sun, we climbed aboard gratefully. The driver told us he was heading for a farm well past the turn off to Puttaparthi village. Despite the additional load, the bullocks continued at their former lively pace.

In all my years of travelling in just about every conceivable mode of transport in many parts of the world, that was my first ride on an ox cart, and I was revelling in the experience when we heard a loud whistling behind us. We turned to look back at the riverbed we had walked along and saw a low-flying aircraft approaching rapidly. It screamed deafeningly as it flashed directly overhead and streaked away to the south, following the course of the river valley.

The aircraft was a military fighter plane that Ian conjectured had probably come off the Hindustan Aircraft Limited's production lines in Bangalore and was undergoing low-level tests in the river valley. We learned later that it was a Jaguar interceptor-bomber, a British-designed warplane built under licence in India.

I have never forgotten that experience, for it etched into my mind the amazing paradox that is contemporary India. We were riding in a cart as old as the Indian civilization, complete with circular wheels made out of flat planks placed side by side and cut in the form of a circle, exactly as the inventors of the wheel made them, in pre-Vedic days, in the Indus Valley or perhaps even eons earlier in the magnificent, just-discovered sunken twin cities lying 2 000 feet beneath the sea off the coast of Tamil Nadu in the Bay of Bengal, in the dawn of man's great adventure on this charmed sub-continent.

The stark contrast provoked deep thought. While our peasant driver urged his Brahmins on with gentle tugs of the reins and softly called out their Telugu pet names exactly as his ancestors had done for untold centuries on these very roads, his countryman piloting a supersonic warplane was streaking across the burning Indian sky. Notwithstanding my forebears' departure from this vibrant land more than five generations ago, at the start of the great Indian diaspora in the nineteenth century, that bumpy ride reminded me of my essential Indian-ness despite my acculturation in

the west, of my ancestral roots that run deep into the unknown substrata of this hoary civilization.

We could not thank our bucolic chauffeur enough when he dropped us off at the turn-off to the village. We would have taken much longer if we had walked and perhaps missed good positions in the hall. We had just enough time for a hurried lunch and to follow Chris who was shepherding our group to the Poornachandra Hall in the ashram grounds. I ran to the shed to get my camera bag.

It was not quite two o'clock and thankfully the immense hall was only partly full, so we were free to choose the best positions fairly close to the stage with a podium in the middle and another slightly to the left. I sat on my haunches, on a folding foam cushion I had carried, directly opposite the podium and proceeded to set up my video camera on a low monopod I had bought in a duty-free shop in Abu Dhabi.

The hall began to fill and we were glad we had taken Chris' advice and come early. Within half an hour, the sliding doors on either side had to be raised, for the hall was already overflowing, with people being made to sit on the paved verge outside. We waited silently for two hours as time dragged by on leaden feet. My neck and shoulders were starting to become cramped through holding the camera on the monopod and keeping my eyes focused on the podium.

I was losing concentration and must have lowered my head when a rustle in the audience made me lift my head. Spotlights were trained on the podium and walking up to it followed by a group of devotees, mostly elderly men in white kurtas and dhotis, was a figure in vermilion. I switched on my camera, my eye glued to the viewfinder.

The figure in orange began to sing sweetly, his voice almost feminine. I checked the sound levels on my camera but otherwise kept my eyes on the viewfinder. He stopped singing and broke into a speech in Telugu. A man standing at the second podium was also speaking rapidly but I could not make out what he was saying or the language he was speaking.

This went on for exactly an hour. Although I had not understood a word, I carried on recording. As suddenly as it had started, the speech was over and someone handed the speaker a glass of water. He seemed to be uncomfortable, for he was frowning with his face lowered and his hand clasping a white handkerchief held to his mouth. His chest seemed to be heaving, for I could see the movement clearly through the viewfinder. The camera was still switched on.

Suddenly, he raised his chin towards the ceiling and his right hand with the handkerchief flew to his mouth. He lowered his head and held up his hand. Through the camera viewfinder, I could clearly see a shining ellipse nestled in the white fabric of the handkerchief.

There was a collective gasp from the audience and everyone strained forward to see more clearly, then started clapping thunderously. We had all seen the golden lingam come from the mouth of the figure in vermilion. Even through my camera viewfinder, it seemed too large to have emerged through his throat. Then the figure turned and with his attendants following, went behind the curtains.

My group joined the crowd pouring out of the huge hall. I was stiff and cramped through sitting on my haunches for nearly four hours, and perhaps a little irritable for I had not

understood a word of the speech. I was thankful, though, for my first experience with Sri Sathya Sai Baba.

“So what do you think of Sai Baba’s speech?”, Chris asked as we followed the crowd out of the hall.

“I am not impressed”, I replied. “I did not understand a word.”

“What about the translation?” he persisted.

“What translation?” I asked.

“Why, the translation into English by the man standing on his left”, Chris said.

“Good heavens!” I said, “Was that man speaking in English? I thought it was some Indian dialect.”

My companions burst out laughing and thought it was hilarious that I could not understand the translation. They thought I was joking, but I honestly did not understand a word the so-called translator spoke. He could very well have spoken in English, but his accent had me fooled. I had quite honestly thought that he was speaking in an Indian dialect. Someone said that the translator was a Dr Bhagavantam.

“No, I am certainly not impressed”, I repeated for emphasis. “If this Sai Baba is the Avatar of Kali Yuga, I still need to be convinced.”

I was uncharacteristically peeved with myself at having missed out on the speech and so lapsed into a wistful silence.

By then we had turned into the broad driveway leading up the slope to the western canteen and the accommodation blocks called the “roundhouses”, with the sheds beyond. It was about six thirty and the twilight was fading. I heard a woman’s voice next to me and turned to see a lovely lady in a sari. I thought she was European in that light but her delightful accent told me she was North Indian.

“I noticed the camera on your shoulder”, she said. “My son loaned me one almost exactly like that before I left home but I have forgotten the instructions he gave me to operate it. Can you help me?”

“Certainly”, I said. “But you seem to be heading to the canteen like us, so why don’t we have dinner and I’ll show you afterwards?”

She agreed and I asked her where she was staying.

“Block N21”, she replied.

“Good. That’s not far from mine – I’m in Block N18.”

We joined the separate queues for men and women leading to the canteen, but were still close enough to talk.

“I’m sorry”, the lady said. “I should have introduced myself. I am Mona Gulati and I am from Toronto, Canada.” She held out her hand.

“And I am Vivek Naicker from South Africa”, I said, taking her hand. She seemed startled.

“Are you serious? she asked, her eyes wide.

“About what?” I asked.

“Your first name. Did you say it was Vivek? That’s also my elder son’s name, the one who loaned me the video camera. How strange that both of you should be called Vivek and you both should have similar cameras and that I had to ask you of all the people here.”

I also thought that it was a remarkable coincidence. What I did not know then was that that incident was the start of a tidal wave of synchronicity that would puzzle and intrigue me throughout the years ahead. It would convince me eventually that there is a cosmic synchronicity that affects the lives of all beings everywhere, that our lives and this universe are unfolding along the lines of a great celestial blueprint, but more of that later.

Mona told me that her family were in business in Canada. They were originally from Delhi and had moved to Burma years ago. When the climate for their type of business declined in Burma, they had decided to immigrate to Canada where the family was by then well- established.

While I spoke to Mona I looked at the tops of the coconut palms around the Mandir where I knew Sai Baba was. Since it was late winter, the sky was cloudless and would remain that way until about late May or early June, when the first monsoon rains usually came.

The sky was a velvety blue and the first stars were not yet visible. Suddenly I saw a mist-like blur directly above the Mandir’s dome, very high up in that rapidly darkening sky. It seemed to be approaching and was rapidly growing brighter. Up to today, I still cannot explain why I did what I did next. I raised my camera, found the range in my viewfinder and switched it on. It was as though my body was acting of its own accord.

Mona swung around to see at what I was pointing my camera. She focused immediately on the spot of light which was rapidly turning brighter and larger. In a split second it had grown so bright that it was almost blinding, like an oversized arc lamp. All the while it seemed to be plunging towards earth at a tremendous speed.

By now the object looked like molten silver and as we watched in awe, a drop seemed to separate from the base of the larger object. The drop grew larger and a smaller drop separated from this second, smaller mass. Now there were three round lights plunging towards earth, getting progressively larger as they did so.

“Oh my God!”, Mona shouted. “It’s a miracle! Oh, Sai Ram!”

She started to chant, “Sai Ram, Sai Ram, Sai Ram.....

Without quite realising it, I joined her in the chanting but did not take the camera from my eye. In retrospect, I reckoned that from the time I first spotted the blur until we started chanting must have taken about three seconds.

Others in the queue, mostly westerners close to us, turned to the sky to see what I was recording in the dark and why we were chanting. When they saw the object plunging down towards Prashanti Nilayam like a meteor, they also started to chant with Mona and me. Some devotees shouted in great excitement to draw the attention of their companions to the mysterious phenomenon.

By now the largest of the three objects started to grow rapidly larger and brighter. As it enlarged, it swallowed the two drops that had separated earlier. Then it started to change colour, all the time growing larger. From the intense arc white it changed to an electric blue, like a gas flame. Then it turned pink and finally a bright, flaming orange. It continued to plunge towards the earth, directly above the Ganesha Gate of the ashram.

People around us were kneeling with their hands clasped together and eyes skyward, while others were lying face down on the ground. Some were shouting Hail Marys while others called out the name of Christ. Many continued to chant, as Mona and I did, "Sai Ram, Sai Ram, Sai Ram..."

The object had grown enormously, much larger than a full moon. It was so large that I could see craters on its surface even through my video camera's viewfinder. Suddenly, directly over the Ganesha Gate, it abruptly stopped plunging. It hung in the air, seeming as though it would crash down at any moment. The shouts of the devotees around us intensified, some in awe and others in great fear. Then the strange object reversed its downward fall. It began to rise as rapidly as it had plunged downwards. All this happened at amazing speed, much, much faster than it took me to describe it later. From a flaming orange, it turned to pink, then blue and finally to a blinding white. As it receded higher into the sky above the mandir's dome, it became rapidly smaller.

When it had become what looked like a bright star in what by then had turned into a velvety black night sky, there was a flat report like an exploding fire cracker and it seemed to disintegrate into a puff of bright mist. Everybody, including Mona and I, was still chanting. Then, as Mona and I and dozens of people outside the western canteen watched, the most astounding thing happened. The "mist" grew progressively brighter and began to disintegrate. Then it seemed to coalesce into three stripes and become motionless, one above the other, exactly like the three stripes of ash on a black Shiva lingam in a temple.

We knew instinctively then that what we had seen had not been a meteor. We had seen a miracle. We had seen a manifestation of Shiva on his own night. We had witnessed his descent to earth, we had been privileged to see Nadaraja's great cosmic dance. There was no mistaking the symbol of the three stripes in which the great celestial spectacle ended. Even though the whole episode could not have lasted more than a few seconds, it carried a deep underlying message.

I ran the sequence of events through my mind. From the large silver mass, a smaller orb had emerged, and from that second orb and even smaller one. To my mind those three orbs symbolised Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva: the Holy Trinity. But one orb had grown larger and swallowed the other two. This to me symbolised the illusion of duality when in reality all that exists is One. In reality all things, including the illusion of duality, return to One – Shivan, the destroyer of the ego and the duality under which we labour.

There was almost pandemonium when the spectacle ended. Many people were still praying on their knees, others were excitedly telling friends and relatives what they had seen, some were quietly crying while others ran about looking for friends and relatives.

I realised that even though thousands were on the grounds of the ashram and on the streets of the village, few would have been looking towards that particular section of the sky where the great spectacle took place at exactly that moment. Given the fact that the entire episode was soundless and was played out in a matter of seconds, few would have seen it. I also realised that if I had not raised my camera, Mona would have missed it too. It was my camera pointed at the darkening sky and our chanting that had attracted the attention of the westerners in the queues outside the canteen.

Fortunately, almost the entire group of Australians, together with Leon, had seen the spectacle, for they were all close to Mona and me. I quickly tore pages out of my large diary and passed them to my friends with pens and pencils from my camera bag.

“Get as many names, addresses and contact numbers as you can of witnesses”, I said to them, for I realised that it would be difficult to prove later that we had really witnessed a miracle in the sky. Three of the youngest of the Australians, Sharon Keay of South Australia, Dion Remme of Queensland and John Purnell of New South Wales managed to get a total of eighteen names and contact details of people from Australia, New Zealand, several European countries and the USA.

Many who had witnessed the event started to pester me to let them see the footage I had shot on my camera. After rewinding the tape and letting a few of them look through the viewfinder, I decided that the tape was too valuable to risk damaging by repeated re-winding. I announced to the crowd gathered around me that I would transfer the footage to a VHS tape the next day and arrange public screenings in the lecture hall at pre-arranged times. I said that I would place notices on the board outside the Poornachandra Hall the next day.

Even after we went into the hall to have dinner, people continued to come to my table to discuss the screening the next day or what I had seen through my viewfinder while filming the phenomenon. There was considerable excitement and even after dinner when I went to the open area outside Mona’s cluster of accommodation blocks to show her how her camera worked, people still continued to seek me out. Wishing Mona a good night, I went to my shed. I never saw her after that night although I did make several attempts to contact her through friends in Canada, for I often wondered in later years why the two of us, perfect strangers until then, had been brought together that fateful day to witness that marvellous event.

When I got back to the shed, Ian Roth was there. He and his son had not been with us outside the canteen, so I asked him where they had gone.

“Little Ian was thirsty, so I took him for a cool drink”, he said

“Well”, I said, “you missed a great fireworks show while you were gone.”

“If you’re talking about the strange fireworks in the sky over the ashram, we saw it. Right over the Ganesha Gate. The amazing reversing meteor”, Ian said.

“So you saw it, too? What do you think it was?”, I asked excitedly, for the mysterious spectacle had supercharged all of us who had witnessed it.

“Now that you ask me, I think that show was put on specially for you, Viv.” Ian said.

“Why do you say that, Ian?”

“Because it was you who was the Doubting Thomas. You were the one who was ‘not impressed’, to recall your exact words.. So Swami had to drop you one of his calling cards.”

It was a frank opinion, so I said: “I made a video of the entire episode.”

“Did you now?” Ian asked, his eyebrows raised. “May I see it?”

I unpacked my camera, switched it on and rewound the tape to the end of a sequence I had shot just before the great spectacle and handed it to Ian. He peered through the eyepiece for several seconds then lowered the camera and looked at me.

“There’s nothing here”, he said.

I took the camera from him, rewound the film to the sequence I had shot before the aerial phenomenon, then looked through the viewfinder. It was blank, like new, unrecorded tape. Shocked and disappointed, I all but took the camera apart until I realised that the entire sequence had been surgically removed from the tape in the camera. Everything else that I had shot, including some scenes of the excited witnesses praying and running about after the great spectacle were intact.

“So many others saw what I had taped” I said, crestfallen. “It was there only moments ago. Thank heaven several other people also got to see it, so when I write about this in time to come, people will not say I imagined it or made it all up”, I said.

“Don’t fret, Viv. Swami put on that show for you, as I’ve already told you. It was inevitable that a handful of other people would also see it with you, but it was not meant for a wider audience. This is why it was removed so mysteriously from your video tape.

Afterwards, I had placed the lists made by my young Australian friends of the names and addresses of witnesses in my diary and took them back to my home in Pretoria when I returned some three months later. A few weeks after returning, when I set about recording my experiences on my new computer, I discovered that the pages with the addresses of the witnesses and my diary containing my notes of that journey to Prashanti Nilayam had disappeared without trace. Two weeks later, for no apparent reason, my new computer crashed and the first draft of my book was irretrievably lost.

I made one more attempt later in 1993 to start writing an account of my experiences on that first journey to Prashanti Nilayam and Whitefield. The computer crashed again, wiping out everything for the second time. By now I had got the hint. My more experienced friends among local Sai devotees told me that it was obvious that the time was not ripe for certain things to be generally known.

Thinking that they could be right, I stopped searching for the lost manuscripts and indefinitely abandoned plans to record my experiences. What I did not know then was that I was not meant to write this narrative until more than twenty years later, for only

by then would most of the pieces of the jig saw puzzle have fallen into place and the great drama be seen in its entirety.

One Saturday morning nearly a year later, I switched on my computer and as soon as it booted up, the first few pages of my first attempt to record my experiences in Prashanti Nilayam appeared on the screen without my doing anything to call them up from the hard drive. I searched excitedly for the rest of the manuscript but found nothing else. It occurred to me then that that fragment was all that I could work on at that stage. Those few pages, edited and shortened, form the prologue of this present account.

I have met with Dion Remme over the years since that first meeting at Prashanti Nilayam and I am in regular contact with Chris Parnell who has become an invaluable mentor and guide over the years. I have lost contact with John Purnell and Sharon Keay, although I learned from Chris in later years that John Purnell, despite his playfulness and great sense of humour, had turned to theology and training for the Anglican priesthood.

There were many others besides those I have named who witnessed the spectacle. One of them was a Swedish scientist who worked with explosives. He told me after the incident that no fireworks in existence could do what we witnessed in the south Indian sky that Shivarathri night.

The three stripes remained in the sky for hours that night of the great spectacle. Those who had witnessed the marvel pointed them out to those who had not. When I came out of the shed just before eleven that night, the stripes were still in the sky although they had grown a little fainter.

I underwent a momentous transformation after that wonderful night. Throughout my youth and early manhood, I had privately questioned everything my parents and teachers had taught me about religion and divinity. I had wondered, but dare not ask, whether God really existed or whether the concept was merely a cynical sop to a mankind caught on a treadmill of continual strife and suffering.

That glorious Shivarathri, all doubts were to vanish from my mind. Now I would have personal proof that God existed, that humanity and indeed all life was not as aimless as driftwood on a capricious sea, that there was a celestial plan for mankind and Mother Earth. That fateful morning I would be overjoyed: I would know, once and for all, that God was alive and well.

Yet, as elated as I was that morning, what I did not know was that the final, key element in my transformation was to drop into place later that morning, in the courtyard of Swami's mandir in the ashram.

In our corner of the large shed, my companions and I awoke at first light. The excitement of the previous evening continued to animate our conversation that morning. As though simply carrying on with the previous night's discussion, we continued to analyse and theorise about what we had witnessed.

"After what we saw last night", one of the Australians said to me, "are you still unimpressed?"

“Let’s not confuse what I was referring to and what we saw last night. I meant that I was not impressed with the fact that I could neither understand the Telugu in which Swami delivered his speech nor the simultaneous translation”, I replied. “What we saw in the sky is another matter. In any case, we do not know who or what caused it to happen

Impressed?

In the simple warehouse-like shed that served as our dormitory, we arose before dawn the next day and made our way to the ablution block. Washed and dressed, back in the shed Leon, Chris Parnell and I made ourselves coffee using our immersion heaters and then trooped out with our other Australian friends to the assembly area outside the courtyard of the Mandir. Still enthralled by the events of the previous evening, we discussed what we would say to Swami about the miracle we had seen. Leon said that he would question Swami closely about the wonder of the previous evening. Everyone agreed that we should ask whether He had been responsible for the phenomenon. Leon was determined to get to the bottom of it all, with the most questions.

In the assembly area, we sat with our group on the ground in a row behind one another and continued to discuss what we would say to Swami. There were more than twenty rows of devotees with new people arriving continually. A seva dal came and held out a bag of tokens to the first devotee in each row. Someone at the head of our row picked token number one, so our group was the first allowed to file into the courtyard of the Mandir.

We were elated as we walked in and continued to talk in whispers about what we would ask Swami. Strict discipline was enforced and talking loudly and flippant behaviour in the lines was frowned upon by the seva dals. Leon and I sat on the hard ground with the Australians in the first row facing the Mandir. This was some years before the Kulwant Hall which now stands there was built, so it could be a gruelling experience in hot weather. However, most devotees were prepared to face the discomforts for the reward of coming face to face with Swami and perhaps having the opportunity to talk with Him.

As temple music wafted from loudspeakers, Swami appeared on the ladies' side. He was an imposing figure in a long vermilion robe and frizzy Afro hairstyle. Women who were closest asked His permission to take *padanamaskar* – to touch His feet as a mark of respect by the pupil for the Teacher. Others held up their cupped hands in the hope of being given *vibuthi* or some other blessing, or they held out letters which He took and passed on to the aide walking behind Him. He passed the rows of women and approached the men's side where we sat.

Several men rose to their knees to make requests for blessings. The Avatar made His famous hand gesture, circling the right hand with the palm facing down. What seemed like white mist would appear below the downward facing palm and Swami would close His fist. Sitting on the ground as we did, we could clearly see the holy ash forming below the palm of His hand. He would then pour *vibuthi* through the fingers of the right hand into the devotee's waiting hand. Several men lucky enough to receive the materialised ash shared portions with others nearby.

We watched in great excitement as Swami progressed up the front row, materialising ash here, talking to another devotee there or taking letters from outstretched hands. I

was on Leon's left, so Swami would reach him first. He came to stand before Leon and I expected him to ask Swami the questions that he had rehearsed. Yet not a word came out of Leon. Then I heard a stifled sob and saw his shoulders shaking. He was sobbing as Swami looked down at him. He continued to sob as Swami stood there. Then Swami held out His hand and placed *vibuthi* in Leon's outstretched hands. Then He abruptly turned and walked past me without the slightest glance in my direction.

A surge of emotion swept through me. I could not believe that Swami had walked right past me without so as much as a glance. I thought of Ian Roth and the others saying that the celestial phenomenon the previous night had been especially for me because I had appeared to be a Doubting Thomas. Now it seemed that they were wrong; perhaps the Shivarathri spectacle in the night sky had nothing to do with me. I ruefully watched as Swami began to walk away.

The gliding figure- He seemed to glide rather than walk- suddenly stopped and turned. Looking directly into my eyes and raising an eyebrow with a faint smile on His lips, He said just one word, "Impressed?" Still smiling at my startled face, He turned away and continued to move down the line. I was speechless.

I thought of my scepticism of the previous afternoon, of how I had told all and sundry among my friends that I was "not impressed" after Swami's Shivarathri speech. I had also said that if this was the Avatar of Kali Yuga, I still needed to be convinced. Now that one question - I will never know whether I had heard it physically or telepathically - swept away whatever doubt I may have had.

"Impressed?" Swami had asked. That one word said it all. Nothing humbled me as much as that simple question did. It was obvious that He was referring to the celestial spectacle we had seen the previous evening. Only God could have done that. Whatever ego or arrogance with which I might have been afflicted with earlier left me completely at that instant. I still did not know who Swami was. Yet what I did know was that He was unlike any other being I had ever experienced. In the next two decades and even afterwards, That Being would become the most significant influence in my entire life.

Two days later, the Australians, Leon and I were once again in the front row. After Swami had passed, seva dals came to call several of the men to a group interview. Leon and I were not called. We were disappointed but still optimistic that we would be called in the days yet to come. Together with the thousands who were in the courtyard, we watched ruefully as the last of the lucky devotees went into the interview room and the door shut behind him.

Then unexpectedly, the door opened and a seva dal hurried out of the interview room and walked towards our line. He came directly to Leon and me and putting his hands together, said, "Sai Ram, brothers. Swami wants you two inside." Stunned but elated, we shot upright from our seated positions and followed him up the steps and into the interview room.

Swami was seated in a high chair facing the door through which we had entered. Some thirty devotees whose distinctive national scarves indicated that they were from various parts of the world were sitting on the tiled floor facing the only chair in the room. Swami smiled as we entered and gestured to us to come closer. Leon was before me, so Swami gestured to him again and pointed to the floor beside the right

arm rest of the chair. He gestured to me to sit on the left. The devotees sitting with their backs to us parted to let us pass and we went to sit on the floor next to Swami, facing the devotees.

Without further ado, Swami began to ask everyone what they wanted of Him. As the first devotee Swami looked at started to talk of his ailments, He said, "Yes, yes. You are suffering from diabetes. Here take this and wear it constantly." He waved His hand and there was a green flash through the air. The man reached up, caught the object and gasped as he opened his hands. It contained a gold ring with a large emerald set into it. He held it up for all to see.

Swami turned to look at the man next to him and raised his eyebrow. The man half rose and clutching at his heart, began to speak. Swami said, "Yes, I know. You have a serious heart problem."

For him too, Swami materialised a ring but it was unlike the one He had given the first man.

"Wear it always", He said, "but see your doctors immediately after you go back to your country. Your problem will be cured."

Both the men were Indian South Africans.

In this way, Swami worked through all the devotees in the small interview room. He asked each person about their health or other problems. Always, he told each devotee with what ailment or other problem they were afflicted before they could speak. For each He materialised an object of jewellery or *vibuthi*.

I must confess that I was hoping at the time that He would materialise a ring for me like the one He had given the devotee Dan Dorasamy of Dakshina. It was a beautiful object made of the traditional five metal alloy, panchaloha, and had the three faces of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva – Creator, Preserver and Destroyer. It was endowed with so much of energy that the power often tripped when Dan entered certain premises.

Swami turned to Leon and asked about his health. My friend started to tell Him of a problem he sometimes suffers but before he could speak further, Swami said, "Yes, I know. Your leg sometimes goes numb and you cannot feel it. It happens even when you are walking, not so?" Leon nodded.

Swami leaned towards him and massaged his knee. "Do this as often as you can. It will improve the circulation", he said. Then he placed a handful of ash in his hands, asking him to take a pinch in water every day. He did not ask me what ailed me and I was greatly disappointed. I had planned to ask about my son. Swami rose and began to walk out of the interview room, followed by the two men in white who always walked behind Him. Then He stepped aside and let the devotees file out, each man or woman putting their hands together as they walked past Him.

When I walked past, He looked into my eyes and asked, "How are things in your country? Stopping, I thought I should tell him about the unrest in the black townships and the severe economic recession.

Yet before I could open my mouth to speak, He said, “Do not worry. The unrest will soon come to an end and peace will come to your country. Carry on with the work that you are doing, but a change is coming in your career.

“The economic difficulties will start to lift from the 15th of next month. The money situation will improve in America and it will spread from there across the Pacific to Japan and other countries in the east until it reaches India. Then it will spread through countries in the Middle East and the west and finally even your country. There will be a new economic upsurge in the world and business confidence will improve. Much prosperity would follow. It would last for nine years.”

I said, “Thank you, thank you, Swami.” Putting my palms together, I bowed my head.

He held up His right hand in blessing. There was no gift of *vibuthi* or the panchaloo ring that I had been hoping He would materialise for me, but He looked deep into my eyes and I felt a surge of energy. Yet, recalling all that had happened since the message in the Panchangam was read to me by the priest in Johannesburg, I knew that I had already received the most awesome gifts.

Sad that our moment of glory on either side of Swami had been so brief even though we had been in the interview room for some two hours, Leon and I walked through the veranda silently into the courtyard where we had been sitting. We were immediately besieged by the men who had been in the interview room with us. Some who had been in the room with us simply came to shake our hands. They were curious to know who we were to be given special treatment.

One young man introduced himself as Teddy Komal of Sea Tides near the Natal coastal town of Tongaat. I knew it well. A school teacher, he thought Leon and I must be very special to have been given seats of honour on either side of the Avatar. Months later, Teddy was to invite me to a regular Thursday Sai service in his home in the tranquil seaside suburb. It turned out that my sister-in-law who lived nearby attended the Thursday services at his house, yet another coincidence of many that were to eventually become a tsunami sweeping through my life.

For years afterwards, I thought of the words Swami had spoken to me. I had been delighted with his prediction of peace in South Africa. Like everyone else, I had had my fill of the rampant violence in the black townships and rural areas. I was aware, in my position as a civil servant, of the intense power struggle in which various black groups were engaged in those dying days of apartheid rule. Peace did come shortly after my return to South Africa some three months later. Unknown to me at the time, I was to become involved at a high level in the process that led to that eventual peace after the abomination of apartheid. I realised only then that this was what Swami meant when He said to me that a change was coming in my work situation.

Besides the political violence, the country was also in the grips of a severe recession. My family and I were particularly affected because we could not obtain a bank loan to purchase the house in which we were living and had the option to purchase. Banks had stopped giving mortgages despite the fact that as a civil servant I had a Government guarantee. So it was a relief when the recession did indeed begin to lift all over the world from the 15th of March, exactly as Swami had said it would. By the end of that year, 1993, the economic situation would return to almost normal. Yet I

could not help but wonder what would happen in nine years' time to end the global prosperity. That thought was to exercise my mind for years.

In a state of great shock, I was to recall the Avatar's words one morning almost nine years later. I had just switched on the television in my townhouse in Centurion near Pretoria to watch the news. A nightmare suddenly exploded violently across the screen. A passenger airliner was going through a skyscraper in a big city. It was an incredibly horrendous sight. At first I thought that I had chosen the wrong channel and that I had inadvertently picked up a Hollywood movie channel. As I watched the blood-curdling scenes, it slowly dawned that I was watching reality and not make-believe. The full realisation of what was happening came and for the first time in my life, found myself crying in front of the television screen.

There was utter confusion all around, reflected in the rapid, almost hysterical commentary of the news reader. I watched in shocked incredulity as the watershed event of the twenty-first century unfolded: Twin Towers, New York, 9.11.2001. It was obviously an act of terrorism; in my abject despair, I could not believe that human beings could sink to such utter bestiality regardless of what their cause might have been.

Those terrible scenes of helpless people jumping off the blazing skyscraper after it had been struck by the airliner, of the inferno of flames, of the facade of the towers sliding down to ground level in slow motion amidst great clouds of white dust, of terrified pedestrians fleeing for their lives through traffic-choked city streets, these were to be aired again and again on television not only in South Africa but throughout the world. No one event shocked all of humankind as much as did "9/11", as it came to be euphemistically known in the years afterwards. Simply the date came to convey the inhumanity of that most horrendous depravity in the history of humankind, when some 3000 innocents perished in a few terrifying minutes.

Those blood-curdling scenes would become the icon of the 21st century, of the degeneracy of the times, the harbingers of an unrecognizably transformed world to come. When years later I heard Sri Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi in discourses promise an approaching Golden Age that would descend on earth in the most incredible way, I could understand. In my own lifetime, the world had already changed almost unrecognizably. As the years flew by so quickly, it eventually dawned on me that the world I had known through my youth to manhood would never be the same again: a phase in the history of mankind had passed forever. One of the only two prophecies I have known the Avatar to make had come to pass. A brief period of world-wide material prosperity had ended. A new, diametrically different era was dawning.

To return to my first pilgrimage to Puttaparthi: those who had seen me talking with Swami as they left the interview room sought me out in the days afterwards. They wanted to know what He had said to me. The fact that the world economic recession would start to lift within the next thirty days was welcome news to all. The South Africans were overjoyed with the prospect of peace returning to the troubled country.

Ian Roth told me at dinner in the western canteen the following day that he and his son would be returning to Bangalore the next day. Their flight to Paris was in two days' time. He was both disappointed and mystified.

He said, "Swami came into my dream just after Christmas and said that I should come to Puttaparthi before the middle of February. I could not understand why He wanted me back so soon because I had been here in November for His birthday celebrations. I was convinced that it was because He wanted to give me an interview."

Because he worked for Air France, he was entitled to a certain number of free flights each year, so that was not a problem. He decided to answer the call and bring his eight-year-old son. On his second or third day in Puttaparthi, he ran into Leon and me. We had arrived from Bangalore not an hour before. Although he was happy to have guided me over the past two weeks, he was disappointed that Swami had not even looked at him in the time he had been there, yet he knew that Swami was aware that he, Leon and I were together. He had come to Puttaparthi often enough to know that when one dreams of Swami it is a real contact with Him. Swami often said in His discourses that He used the dream mechanism of the human mind to actually convey thoughts and messages to his followers.

Ian said, "When Swami appears in your dream, it is not a dream like others that you may have. He is really there with you. He has explained so many times in discourses that it is as real as He was then standing before us. He came into my dream again after you two arrived. But He simply nodded at me and smiled. So I cannot understand why He has ignored me at darshan these past two weeks."

It was then that I recalled the message that the priest Nadarajan Sarma had read in the Panchangam weeks earlier. It had clearly stated that I should go without delay to my guru and that there would be someone to take care of my needs at all times. I thought of Leon who insisted on accompanying me from Pretoria and of the flamboyant though eccentric Krish Naidoo on the flight from Johannesburg to Mumbai and now Ian Roth who had taken me under his wing.

I told Ian about the message in the Panchangam and he brightened up. He seemed overwhelmed by the thought of having been appointed to his task by the Avatar.

"It makes perfect sense", he said, smiling happily. "This is why He appeared nodding and smiling in my dream. Well, it was not only an honour to have acted as your guide here in Puttaparthi but also to have been specially appointed by Swami to do so. I feel humbled as well as honoured to have been His instrument in your first pilgrimage to Prashanti Nilayam. I hope that you return here often in the years to come."

Both Leon and I were sad when we said goodbye to him the next morning. He had been a most knowledgeable guide and mentor. For a Christian, he was exceptionally well-versed in the Vedas. All that he had told me in numerous spontaneous talks over the previous two weeks had been an eye-opening education for me. In my narrow, Christian-oriented education in South Africa, I had learned nothing of my own ancient scriptures. My experiences with Ian were to stimulate an exploration of the Vedas and other ancient Hindu scriptures for the rest of my life.

Leon, young John Purnell and I walked with Ian and his son to the taxi outside the ashram gates. It was a sad parting, for we had been inseparable for more than two weeks at Prashanti Nilayam. I did not know it then, but I was never to see Ian or his son again. Although I wrote physical letters several times to the address he had given me in Paris, he never replied.

Over the years, I often thought of Ian. In my decade in Prashanti Nilayam, I kept an eye out for him, but he never showed. Over the years, I ran into or heard of others I had met on that first pilgrimage, some of them like Chris Parnell and Deon Remme quite frequently, but Ian disappeared forever. I have never forgotten the erudition with which he had tutored me, much as Lord Krishna had taught Arjuna as recorded in the Bhagavad Gita.

In recent years, when pieces of the jig saw puzzle of the past two decades began to fall into place, I have started to wonder: was Ian Roth a real life person or another of Swami's disguises? The only anomaly in that respect was that there was no eccentricity in dress or behaviour in Ian as there had been in Swami's "cameo appearances". Ian was as serious-minded and thoughtful as Swami in disguise had seemed eccentric and playful. Even so, in recent years I have often wondered.

For two days before Ian and his son left, there had been rumours that Swami would be leaving for the ashram in Whitefield, then in the rural outskirts of Bangalore. In February or March, when Puttaparthi became very hot, it was cooler in Whitefield, so Swami stayed in Brindavanam, His ashram there, for two or three months. Young Chris Purnell, who seemed to know everybody and always had a following of Indian boys of his age, advised us to keep an eye on the garages attached to the Mandir and facing the darshan area on the men's side. If a seva dal opened one of the doors after the morning darshan, it would be a sign that Swami was leaving for Whitefield. We would then have to rush out ourselves to find transport to take us there.

The day after Ian's departure, the garage door went up after morning darshan and the car was started. There was a huge rush for the exit gates by those who were staying in the ashram, for when Swami transferred to Whitefield, his western devotees followed him there *en-masse* in taxis and buses and whatever other transport they could hire. John Purnell had volunteered to arrange transport for our group. While he rushed off to see someone he had already tentatively booked, we hurried to have breakfast before going to the shed to pack.

Later that morning, young John Purnell returned with a mini bus and its owner-driver. It accommodated our entire group, a few Scandinavians who had places near us in the shed as well as the women with the Australian group. When we arrived that afternoon at Brindavanam, Swami's ashram in Whitefield, it was already crowded, mostly with westerners. The only accommodation left was one large room for seven of us at the far end of the second floor.

I was most unhappy in the room. It was cramped and stifling at night. To make it worse, the bathrooms were at the far end of the long corridor. Making the best of it, we fell into the routine of twice daily darshan, meals in two canteens, going to the Internet Cafes outside the gates and frequent bus trips into Bangalore city.

Leon, Chris Parnell and I became very close while at the ashram in Whitefield. Both Leon and Chris were more spiritually inclined rather than religious, exactly as I was, so we were birds of a feather. Much of our free time was spent discussing the spiritual principles taught by Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Chris was an erudite and convincing guru. His knowledge of the Vedas and other spiritual matters was comprehensive and I was most impressed by his scholarship. I had confided in him privately about the strange personality change in my son and he had given it much thought.

One evening after dinner he asked whether I had considered a regression and I replied that I was familiar with the technique but had never thought of it as a solution to my own problem. He said that he sometimes used regression to get to the root of puzzling problems among those who approached him for help and advice. He said it was a safe and uncomplicated process and more often than not, in cases such as mine, an answer would come up.

It was a pleasant evening just after seven and Chris suggested that we do the regression right away. I was most eager, so we looked for a quiet spot in the ashram grounds. We found a raised concrete platform just in front of the assembly hall. Although there were many people sitting in groups or strolling to enjoy the cool of the evening, the platform area was deserted because it was comparatively dark there. We made ourselves comfortable.

Chris told me to sit in the cross-legged yogic posture facing him, with my spine straight and hands on my knees. He sat in a similar manner opposite me, with his hands on his knees. We were about two feet apart. He told me to close my eyes and imagine a beam of light starting at the base of my spine and rising through it and emerging from the top of my head. He would do exactly the same in every detail. He explained that both of us should imagine our individual beams of light rising far above our heads and eventually meeting to form a triangle. I was to concentrate on the empty triangle and tell him what I saw there, if anything at all.

We had sat quietly for about five minutes until Chris quietly asked whether I saw anything in the triangle. There was nothing, so he said that we would sit for longer in the second phase. After about fifteen minutes, a picture began to emerge. It was like watching television.

What I saw in a flash seemed like a wood-panelled court room. There was a high bench for the judge and another slightly lower one below with two men, obviously assessors, behind it. I thought I recognised one of the assessors, a lanky, gaunt-looking man. He looked like my childhood friend Bala Pillay. Below that there was a third table with another man, probably the clerk of the court for he was writing in a journal. He also looked familiar, but I could not place him. On the floor was the dock with two prisoners and behind them a public gallery filled with an assortment of people. Next to the dock and along the sides of the court room were guards or soldiers dressed in the red and white uniforms of British soldiers of some two hundred years previously. They carried muskets of the time with long bayonets.

The male prisoner in the dock was tall and distinguished-looking. He was bound in arm and leg irons and had his dishevelled head bowed. He seemed utterly broken and hopeless, but the woman next to him was screaming abuse at the judge. She was also dishevelled, with unkempt auburn hair and soiled clothes in the English style of two centuries ago. The public gallery seemed to be agitated and noisy.

It seemed that the judge had just passed sentence on the man and the woman was on the point of hysteria. She screamed and hurled curses and insults at the judge until two guards rushed into the dock and seized her, one by each arm. As they dragged her still screaming past the judge's bench, she tried to spit at him but his bench was beyond reach. The guards dragged her out of the court room.

Two other guards went to the male prisoner and prodded him out of the dock. He went without a murmur, dragging his manacles noisily across the wooden floor. With his hatless head bowed and shoulders stooping, he seemed an utterly broken and pathetic figure.

As I watched the scene, something strange happened. I knew what the judge was thinking. He was disturbed by the woman's curses, but he had a feeling of self-righteousness. He felt he had carried out the letter of the law and that his judgement was a fair and just one. I wondered how I could read the judge's thoughts and realised with a shock that I was the judge. I also had the feeling that I was in some kind of military position.

I had an even bigger shock when I saw the face of the woman screaming abuse as she was dragged past the bench. It turned to that of Usha, my wife's sister in this incarnation and the face of the condemned prisoner transformed into that of my son Kamal. Astounded by what I saw, I opened my eyes to see Chris gazing into my face.

"Did you see anything?" he asked.

"A great deal. It seemed as though I was watching a scene on television", I replied.

"Then tell me what you saw", Chris said.

I described the scene in great detail, for it felt for all intents and purposes as though I had been actually there.

Both Chris and I were puzzled and could not make any sense of it. Chris felt I might have had another life in Britain, for everything in the vision had be so English. Other than that, neither he nor I could make anything of it. Yet what I had seen during the regression had disturbed me greatly and I felt a vague sense of guilt and overwhelming pity for my son even though I could not fathom why.

Young John Purnell introduced us to an Australian family he knew from back home, a divorced mother and her two teenage children. A little older than they were, John took the lively teenagers under his wing. They stayed with their mother in a one-room flat in one of Swami's guest houses next to the boys' college further up the road. The mother knew some of the Australian women in our group. When two other women sharing the flat returned home, John left our room at the ashram to join the family.

What happened next was among the first examples of the synchronicity that seemed to run through my affairs after I received the message in Johannesburg from the Brahmin priest Nadarajan to go to my guru. Strangely and most uncharacteristically, I started to snore heavily in my sleep. Invariably, Leon or someone else on the mattress next to mine would nudge me and I would stop. One morning after darshan when we were alone, Leon gently told me that my snoring was driving the other men to distraction and that they had discussed it among themselves. They had wondered what could be done about it without trampling on my sensitivities.

Young John had saved the situation. He had told them that the Australian mother and her children were leaving in a day or two. If I would share the modest rent with him, I could move to the guest house flat. A heavy sleeper, my snoring would not disturb him, he had said. I thought it was a capital idea, for the room in the ashram was extremely cramped and the bathrooms far away. I was not happy there but kept it to

myself. The men left it to Leon to talk it over with me. I left the room happily the next morning after darshan and took an auto rickshaw with young John to the guest house half a mile up the road.

I was delighted with our little first floor flat. A large window looked out into the heart of a gnarled old mango tree which grew almost against it and beyond that to the grounds of the boys' college. From the shadows of the flat, I could watch, unobserved, the antics of a tribe of squirrels which lived in the tree as they went about their daily business only feet away. There was a bonus, for in addition to the squirrels, there were frequent avian visitors. That tree and my stay in the little flat was the start of my education into the habits of the little Indian squirrel and the great variety of Indian birds. I stayed there for two blissful months before returning to South Africa. One morning after I had moved there, John told me that he had noticed something strange. He said that I slept very quietly and never snored. My wife had often told me that too. Sometimes she would wake in the night and become alarmed that I might have stopped breathing.

Young John was a stimulating room-mate. He was as energetic as any healthy youngster his age. In addition, he had a great appetite for life. Just about anything and everything Indian fascinated him and he had a great love for people. He exuded friendliness, so much so that he soon had a following of local Indian boys of his age. He became a mine of information on the villages around the ashram through which he often wandered with his motley following of boys who regularly invited him to their homes. He never missed a festival, whether Hindu or Muslim.

One evening, he told me that he had met an Indian man from Durban, my former hometown. The man had an amazing story to tell. He had recalled my name when John mentioned it and had asked whether I was a journalist. John had replied in the affirmative and the man, a Mr Chetty, asked to be introduced to me. He had told John that he had often read my newspaper reports. Young John suggested that I meet him after darshan the following morning. He would bring him to our flat. I invited Leon and Chris Parnell to join us.

We met in the flat the next day. Jaya Chetty was a modest, quiet-spoken man not much taller than Swami. He was just over fifty and had suffered several heart attacks. He had recently had a cardiac operation after years of pain and suffering. As Leon, Chris Parnell and I listened enthralled, he told us his amazing story.

He had been a clerk in a blanket factory in an industrial town west of Durban. After his marriage, he started to get pains in his chest. Doctors diagnosed a weak heart and put him on medication. Over the years the condition worsened but he simply had to continue working for he had three young children. Eventually, it became too much to travel the long distance to and from work by bus. He simply had no breath and the slightest exertion was torture. Doctors he consulted recommended an immediate operation. The delicate operation was performed at the Wentworth Hospital not far from his home.

He was still recuperating from the operation after his doctors had advised him against going back to work. A father of three teenage children, he was in a quandary. How would the family survive? His employers were aware of his situation and had offered him early retirement with a reduced pension and he had accepted. Only the eldest of

his children, a boy, was old enough to leave school and go out to work to supplement the family income, but Jaya had little choice. The family had to simply tighten its belt.

He owned a sub-economic house in the giant Indian suburb of Chatsworth to the south of Durban, making it the largest concentration of people of Indian origin in Natal province. The house was opposite the local co-educational high school. After his operation, his eldest son had to seek work. He would not earn much, but would help supplement Jaya's modest pension. That and the small pension would be all the money the family of five would have and things looked bleak.

One day there was a knock on the door. When Jaya opened it, he saw a prosperous-looking Indian man on the step. Jaya invited him into his modest lounge and offered him a chair. Accepting the invitation gracefully, the stranger asked whether he had undergone a heart operation recently and Jaya nodded. He did not have the slightest inkling who the man was and was intrigued that he knew of his operation. Jay and the stranger introduced themselves.

As he glanced through the modest lounge and the equally modest kitchen beyond, the stranger asked about Jaya's wife and children and their ages. He also inquired about the monthly household expenses. Jaya told him his eldest boy, then fifteen, would have to leave school to find work.

The man explained that he was a Sai devotee and that he went each year to Prashanti Nilayam in the village of Puttaparthi in Andhra Pradesh. He took a colour photograph of Sai Baba from his jacket pocket and gave it to Jaya who gazed at it and seemed to go into shock. Alarmed, the businessman rose from his seat when he saw the expression on Jaya's face.

"What's the matter?" he asked, afraid that Jaya might be having another heart attack.

"I'm sorry", Jaya spluttered, "but that is the person I saw while the operation was performed on my heart." He began to recount what he had seen during the operation.

In the course of the surgical procedure, Jaya said, he had either a vivid dream or a vision. Although he was anaesthetised, he was aware of lying on an operating table with six specialists around him. It seemed that another doctor had joined the team of six at the table, for they made way for the newcomer to join the chief surgeon. They were all in green gowns and caps. The seventh doctor was garbed in deep orange and had an uncovered Afro hairstyle. He stood to the right of the chief surgeon who was going into his heart and seemed to be guiding the surgeon's hand and scalpel. He remembered nothing else after that.

Remembering the photograph in his hand, Jaya raised it and said: "This is the person that I saw."

He started to give the photograph back.

The startled stranger told him to keep it and continued with his story. Swami had come to him in a dream a few nights previously and said he was to find a man who lived in a small house immediately to the right of a high school in the second unit of a large southern Durban suburb. He made a few inquiries among his workers who lived in Chatsworth and after that it was easy to locate the house which was in Unit Two of the giant housing complex.

In the dream Swami had told the businessman that he was to help the man in the house, who had recently had a heart operation, to travel to Puttaparthi. He was also to help the man's family to survive while he was away in India. The businessman mentioned the name of a well-known clothing shop in the Indian business sector of Durban and invited him to accompany him there. Jaya was free that morning, so he went with the man. Before they left, the man advised Jaya to carry his official identity book.

The man was a Gujarati from a well-known Durban business family. In his large shop, the businessman invited Jaya to select whatever clothing he wanted and instructed salesmen to help him to choose three complete sets of clothes from shoes and underwear up. Jaya's benefactor was well aware of the whites-only dress rule at Sri Sathya Sai Baba's ashrams, so two of the sets were white with one coloured set for street wear.

He sent another assistant to purchase an expensive make of wheeled air travel bag from a travel goods shop in the same area. Another young assistant was instructed to take Jaya to a nearby photo kiosk to have a set of passport pictures taken. The first thing they would have to do was to apply for a passport, the businessman explained. He would help Jaya, so they had to go immediately to the relevant department in the heart of the business district.

At the passport office, he paid the required fees and gave his own contact numbers, asking to be informed when the passport was ready. He was obviously well-known at the office and influential, for he was told that the document would be ready in a few days. To Jaya, he explained that he would book him onto a flight to Bangalore as soon as he was informed that the passport was ready. He would inform Jaya of the date and time of departure and come personally to take him to the airport. Meanwhile, when the passport was ready, he would send his driver to take Jaya to collect it.

Jaya need not concern himself with his family's welfare, the businessman said. He would give his family a monthly stipend which he would send to his house with an assistant at the beginning of each month, starting immediately, for it was then the end of the month. The stipend would continue even after Jaya returned in three months' time. He would give Jaya a substantial sum in cash to carry with him for expenses and a credit card in his name which he could use if necessary. He gave Jaya several business cards with his contact details and invited his wife or children to contact him should a contingency arise while Jaya was away in India. He advised Jaya not to take his son out of school as the stipend would be enough to let the family continue with their normal lives.

Jaya was speechless with amazement. Nobody had ever been so generous to him in his entire life. He began to cry and the businessman asked whether he was a Sai devotee. When Jaya shook his head, he asked whether he knew of Sai Baba at all. Jaya said yes, he had heard of him but that was all. Neither he nor others in his family knew anything about Sai Baba to be devotees. A simple working class family, they read little and had no books in the house, or contact with Sai devotees in the area where they lived. His health problems severely restricted him and his family, he explained.

The businessman said, "I am glad I responded to my dream. What you have told me about your vision during the operation confirms my belief that Sri Sathya Sai Baba is

the Avatar of this age. I have little doubt that some amazing things will happen to you in India. Do whatever Swami wants you to do while you are there. Do not worry about your family while you are away, for I am here to take care if problems should arise. Just give your wife my telephone numbers and other contact details.”

A driver took a dazed Jaya Chetty back to his home in Chatsworth where his wife tearfully listened to his amazing story. Then he prepared to leave for a three-month stay in India. He had never been outside Durban and its environs in his entire life, nor even stepped into an aeroplane. Three or four days later, the driver returned to say that his passport was ready and that he had come to take him to collect it. He reminded Jaya to carry his ID document. He said that his flight had already been booked by his employer and that Jaya would be leaving at 10 a.m. on the coming Saturday. His employer would come personally to his house to take him to the nearby airport at seven that morning.

All three of us were moved by Jaya Chetty's story. He seemed an uncomplicated, humble man. Telling his story quietly with no frills and pretensions, he seemed still awed by all that had happened to him since a complete stranger had knocked on his humble door and offered him a glimpse of a vastly different reality. He had cried the first time he set eyes on Sri Sathya Sai Baba two days earlier and continued to do so at every darshan after that. Yet he hoped to be called for an interview. There was a lot he needed to know.

Leon and I met Jaya again after darshan the following morning. We invited him to join us for tea at the canteen window. Our Australian friends came to talk with us and we introduced Jaya. Some had heard of his story through the devotee grapevine and were anxious to hear his story at first hand. Young John had told us that Jaya's story was making the rounds and that several people had approached him to arrange a talk at a convenient venue. We consulted with Jaya and he agreed to give the talk the next morning at eleven-thirty in our flat. We asked young John to inform our group and others who had inquired, reminding him that the flat could comfortably hold only about thirty-five people seated on the floor.

There were more than thirty-five people the next day but we were comfortably seated. Our guest speaker and our Australian group had come early, so we placed Jaya in the middle and asked the others to sit around him. After taking a light reading, I sat close to him with two tripods in front of me. One held a video camera and the other a 35mm SLR loaded with colour film. We waited for others to arrive and started promptly at 11.30.

I introduced Jaya briefly and said that he had recently had a heart operation in South Africa after years of declining health. During that operation he had had a Divine visitation followed by some amazing experiences. Inviting him to tell the story in his own words, I looked to my cameras.

Jaya closed his eyes and said three Oms. Saying, “Sai Ram, brothers and sisters” in his soft and gentle manner, he started to talk, still with his eyes closed. He spoke of his humble beginnings and his career as a clerk in a blanket factory, of his marriage and children, of years of suffering from his defective heart, of his failing health and almost total fatigue leading to what was a last ditch effort by cardiac specialists to save his life. He spoke of how they had made him understand that even though they were

operating, there was only a small chance that he would come out of it alive. Yet it was a chance they had to take.

Describing his operation and of being aware of six surgeons in green overalls and caps even though he was anaesthetised, he spoke of how a seventh surgeon had walked in unexpectedly. The newcomer went to stand beside the chief surgeon and seemed to be guiding his scalpel hand.

At that point, Jaya's tone changed. He said, somewhat in awe and in a voice choked with emotion, "Sisters and brothers, all of you here and I too are very blessed; the Avatar Himself has just walked in."

The room was hushed and everyone around Jaya was still. We could see nobody but all heard a distinct slapping noise and Sharon Keay, one of the Australian women, shouted, "Look everybody, there's smoke coming out of Mr Chetty's head."

My video camera was running and I took my SLR off the tripod and focused on Jaya's head. What seemed like a thin wisp of smoke was rising from his head. I took picture after picture. The smoke seemed to subside and we realised that it was not smoke at all but fine *vibhuti*. When it settled, we could clearly see the impression of five fingers of a right hand on Mr Chetty's bald pate.

Speechless, everyone strained to get a closer view of the fingerprints in holy ash. Those who had cameras took pictures. When everyone settled down again, Jaya Chetty continued to tell the story he had told us the previous day, of the generous Sai devotee who had made it possible for him to come to India which had been only an unreachable dream to him before the operation and his vision in the operating theatre of Swami as a surgeon. His eyes were still closed but tears were streaming down his face.

News of the miracle in our quiet flat spread quickly and Jaya Chetty became something of a celebrity among devotees, both foreign and local. He was in great demand as a speaker and we rarely saw him privately again. He simply had too many speaking engagements. On one occasion when we did get a chance to see him privately, he told us that many people had donated sums of money to him for his family.

Eventually, he came to us one day to say that he had been called to his first interview with Swami who had told him to build a temple when he returned to his home in South Africa. Jaya protested that he was a poor man and that it would be impossible to build a temple. He had neither the property nor money.

"You already have a property and it is large enough for a small assembly hall and shrine. Do not concern yourself about the money; it will come", Swami had said.

A week after I moved in with him, young John returned to Australia, leaving the flat to myself. I invited Leon to move in, and he came to stay for three weeks before he too decided to return home. I stayed on and booked my return flight a month hence, when I would return to Johannesburg via Arabia.

I described the regression in Whitefield to my wife in great detail when I returned home. She listened to the story but was not as disturbed by it as I was. Hers was only a mild curiosity while the vivid memory of that regression was to haunt me for many years. The answers to the puzzle would come only some sixteen years later.

Some months after I had returned home to Pretoria, Jaya Chetty telephoned me from Durban to say that the money for the temple had indeed come from well-wishers, among them the businessman who had sent him so generously to India, exactly as Swami had said it would. He had also obtained City Council permission to build the shrine and assembly hall to hold Thursday bhajans and celebrate special occasions like Guru Purnima and Swami's birthday.

One night I received another call from him in my Pretoria home to tell me that a miracle had happened in his temple while observing Shivarathri with a priest and the congregation. In the midst of the ceremony, he had felt as though he was choking, with something stuck in his gullet. He had put a handkerchief to his mouth and something had emerged, almost suffocating him in the process. Holding up his handkerchief, he and the gathering saw that it was a crystal Shiva lingam. He invited me to come to see it as well as the new temple and I promised to visit him when I was next in Durban.

I called Leon to tell him of Jaya's Shiva lingam which came on the night of Shivarathri. I also told him that I was planning to commission Mr Vaithalingam Chetty to make copy from the latex mould he had made of the magnificent Ganesha he had sculpted under trance. This I would donate to Jaya's temple. Leon asked if he could share the costs with me. Later my sister Bhoona also asked if she could donate part of the costs, so I telephoned Mr Chetty in Umhlanga Rocks, where he and his wife had moved with their son. I asked if he would accept the commission if all his costs were paid. He agreed gladly but insisted that he would accept no payment. I asked for his banking details so that I could transfer the money he required for materials, for Mr Chetty said that would be all that he would need. This was eventually done and the beautiful one metre high statue was delivered and installed in Jaya's temple by Mr Chetty and his son, a senior school teacher.

Later, Jaya telephoned to invite me to the consecration of the Ganesha statue. I was involved in media duty at the CODESA talks at the World Trade Centre in Midrand at the time could not attend. I promised instead to visit at the first opportunity. A week later, Jaya called me again to say that the morning after the consecration, when he and his wife went into the temple to clean and dust, they had found the Ganesha covered in holy ash from head to foot. The ash continued to fall continuously, so much so that it had to be constantly gathered and put into packets to be given to devotees.

One morning, my secretary brought a registered letter from Jaya with the rest of the morning mail. She reminded me that I was to have tea with the Head of the department in his office on the seventh floor at ten. When she left the office, I opened the letter to find a brief note from Jaya and a small plastic bank envelope filled with holy ash exuded from the Ganesha we had donated to his temple in Chatsworth.

It was mid-January, 1994 and the talks had ended. I had thought that the tea appointment with the head, Dave Venter, was to thank me for doing media duty at the CODESA talks. It was that but it also had another purpose. He thanked me for doing duty at the talks despite being burdened with the aftermath of my son's accident and his recuperation. Mindful of the fact that my family and I had been severely traumatised, he said that there was an important matter he needed to broach.

He said: "With you having been on duty at the talks, there is little that I can tell you of developments. You are aware of course that an Interim Independent Electoral

Commission recommended by the CODESA talks has been appointed with Justice Johann Kriegler at its head. This as you know, will oversee the first multi-racial election in the country. When the new constitution of the country is adopted, a permanent I.E.C. will be appointed.

“Last week, I had dinner with Justice Kriegler and he asked me whether I could loan him my most experienced media officer for six months, starting in the first or second week of January in the New Year. You are that most experienced officer, Viv. You have both private sector as well as government experience, both here in South Africa as well as abroad. Would you agree to a six-month secondment to the media directorate of the I.E.C. that would cover the run-up to the historic first multi-racial election in this country and perhaps a month or two afterwards?”

“If you accept, you would go as Deputy Director of the Media Directorate of the I.E.C. and would head media relations and also write and issue the official media statements before, during and after the elections. The I.E.C. has a salary scale different from ours. It is higher. They will pay you the difference between present government scales and theirs. Of course, you would continue to receive your normal salary in this department, so you can opt for a lump sum at the end of the six months. An I.E.C. motor vehicle also goes with the job, with some other perks.

“It might be a good idea for you to go home at midday today to discuss it with your wife before your children return from school. Remember that your lifestyle would change. You’ll have to drive to the World Trade Centre early every day and return at all hours of the night. Travel out of the province from time to time would also be necessary. You would have to carry a heavy responsibility, for your words would be reaching both a national and an international audience. It could place you and your family under some stress. Consider the pros and cons carefully and let me know tomorrow at ten.”

I went home just after twelve to talk with Lalitha. The extra money would be a great help but would I be able to cope with the stress? If she would volunteer to take over all household responsibilities and the children understood and co-operated for the next six months, I thought I could cope, I said.

The next morning, I told Venter that I would accept the secondment. I was prepared to become a spokesman of I.E.C in the most crucial hour in the country’s history: the hour of its “liberation” from the obscenity of apartheid. And so, in those six often hectic months, a new phase of my life began.

What I did not know at that stage was that the Brahmin Sarma’s prediction was about to eventuate, that a traumatic test was rapidly approaching, when our fortitude and spiritual mettle and our resilience as a family would be tested to the utmost. Yet at the end of it all, I started to see glimmers of the cosmic grandeur of Puttapparthi’s Being in Vermilion.

Kamal's near-fatal accident

When my son Kamal encountered difficulties with his course of study at Pretoria University, I knew of no-one in that city whom I could consult for expert advice. All our friends in academia were in Natal and my family and I were new to Pretoria and its Indian community.

When I seemed to have arrived at a dead end thought suddenly occurred which surprised me because it was so out of character. It occurred to me that I should go to a Brahmin in a new temple to consult the Panchangam, the ancient Vedic astrological almanac. I did not know where the thought came from, but I warmed to the idea. I was at a loss for what to do next, so why not? I had gone looking for the Brahmin.

Now months later, even though my wife and I had taken the advice of the priest and had done the prescribed ritual of fasting and prayer, we were mindful of his warning that the accident was bound to happen despite our prayers. The consolation, he had assured us, was that since we had performed the recommended ritual, my son though injured would not lose his life.

Both my wife and I agreed to look on the bright side and put the accident out of our minds. Our children, of course, had no inkling of the prediction. Just when we had forgotten about the dire prediction, it happened, exactly as the priest had warned us, almost to the day within ten months after I had consulted him.

On the second of January, 1994, our boy met with an accident that was so serious that thinking about it even after all these years, it is a marvel that he did not die. It happened only hours after he had celebrated the start of the New Year with friends in Cape Town. In the early hours of the next day, he had left the beautiful Mother City by car with a group of friends to return to Pretoria via Kimberley. He was to leave his friends there and take a Greyhound bus back to Pretoria.

The car in which my son was travelling with three female friends was being driven by a girl who had gone to school with my son in Pretoria. In the front passenger seat next to her was the young woman who owned the vehicle. Kamal and his girlfriend were in the back seat. As they neared the city of Kimberley, a motor vehicle approaching from the opposite direction lost a wheel as it passed the car in which my son and his friends were travelling. The crippled vehicle swerved directly into the path of the four

youngsters and collided head-on with their vehicle. It all happened very quickly and the youngsters did not know what had hit them.

Paramedics and ambulances arrived very quickly. Nobody in the vehicle and that had lost its wheel was injured but as they looked on in shock and horror, they realised that most of the young people in the other car were either seriously injured or dead.

I was visiting my elderly sister and brother-in-law who were staying with their son in Dakshina, a Johannesburg suburb. Their son, my nephew Inba, and his wife Jothi and son Niven had gone on holiday and I had arrived alone to have lunch with the old folk when my wife Lalitha telephoned. From her voice I could make out that she was very distressed.

“I have bad news”, she said.

Instinctively, I knew that one of our two children was either in serious danger or dead. “Which one”, I asked, without waiting for her to tell me what the bad news was. “Kamal or Surya?”

“Kamal”, she replied.

Struggling not to sob, she told me that the car in which my son had been traveling had been in a collision and that he had been badly injured. He had been admitted to the intensive care section of the government hospital in Kimberley. She gave me the hospital’s switchboard number. I was stunned. I had no idea what my son was doing in that Northern Cape city. I realized though that this was not the time to ask.

Asking my wife to stand by the telephone, I called the government hospital in Kimberley and asked to speak with the doctor in charge of the intensive care unit. He told me that my son was in a coma but that he seemed to have stabilised after being connected to life-support machines. The boy was not in immediate danger but the doctor could not say exactly what his injuries were. He said that a team of specialists was being assembled to do a thorough examination within the hour to determine the precise extent of his injuries. Someone would call me to inform me of the results.

A relative from Pretoria who had heard of the accident from my wife called me shortly afterwards. He knew Kimberley because in his youth he had often gone on holiday to relatives there. He said that it would be advisable to have a second opinion of Kamal's condition and asked whether he could call his cousin who was a doctor in that city to contact the hospital and my son's doctors immediately.

He called us again almost immediately to inform me that another cousin would be glad to have us as her house guests should we decide to go to Kimberley. He gave me her telephone numbers and said I should call her when we arrived in the Northern Cape city. I gratefully accepted the generous offers of help.

While waiting for the doctor to call back from Kimberley, I telephoned my wife to give her an update of our son's condition. Immediately afterwards, I called to inform my elder brother who lived in the same suburb as my sister and her family in

Johannesburg. He arrived within minutes with my sister-in-law, their two daughters and their husbands.

The doctor in Kimberley had called back and I was talking with him when my brother and his family arrived. The doctor said that it was advisable to move my son from the government hospital, which had limited facilities, to a private hospital just across the road. There were more specialists and modern equipment there. He offered to arrange and oversee the transfer to the private hospital and I gratefully accepted.

By then I had decided to drive home to Pretoria immediately, pick up my wife and drive through the night to Kimberley. My brother and his family vetoed the idea; they thought it would be dangerous for me to drive at night on an unfamiliar road. All thought that it would be best for Lalitha and me to fly there the next day.

I called home to tell my wife of the new arrangement and asked her to bring my cheque book and bank cards from my desk. From then on, my nieces and their husbands took over the arrangements. They called South African Airways to book my wife and me onto the first flight to Kimberley the next morning. They also called Lalitha to tell her to meet me at Johannesburg airport at 6.30 a.m. someone informed our Pretoria relative of the latest arrangements. He called back to tell us that his cousin and a driver would come to meet us at the airport if I phoned when we landed. He gave me a telephone number.

My wife arranged with her sister Usha to take our daughter Surya to stay with her in Johannesburg and packed a suitcase of clothes for herself as well as one for me. She went to stay the night with them in Johannesburg. It was decided that I would stay another night at my nephew's house and that Norman, my niece's husband, would drive me early the next morning to Johannesburg Airport to meet my wife and take the SAA flight to Kimberley.

I could not sleep but lay awake until dawn broke. I was dressed and waiting when Norman arrived. My wife was already at the airport with her sister and our daughter when we got there. We boarded the flight to Kimberley in silence. When we landed, a tall, blonde young woman in a military uniform and a young man in civilian clothes came to meet us. They turned out to be the brother and sister of my son's girlfriend. Tearfully, they told us that their sister had died in the ambulance while being taken to hospital and that the funeral was in two days' time.

Lalitha and I felt that my son must not be told about the tragedy at any stage before he fully recovered from his injuries. We were afraid the shock would worsen his condition. Both the young man and his sister agreed. The girl said she would tell others in her family in case they should visit our son in hospital. They drove us to the hospital, from where I called our relative's cousin to tell her that Lalitha and I had been met by my son's friends at the airport. She said she would come to the hospital within the hour.

Kamal was barely alive when we arrived at the isolation ward of the hospital's intensive care unit. He was connected to a saline drip and a mass of oxygen tubes, wires and beeping monitors. A constant beeping indicated a strong heartbeat. He was

unconscious but breathing steadily. Although his face was slightly inflamed, there was no sign of injury.

A specialist orthopaedic surgeon and a general practitioner were already at his bedside. They told us that their initial examination had shown that the only discernible injury was to his liver. They assured us that his heart and other organs were functioning normally. In his unconscious state, the liver would heal rapidly. Kamal remained in a coma for eight days. Claspings our hands and filled with trepidation, we sat silently at his bedside.

Days later we were told that our boy had been found by a paramedic who had noticed movement in the tall grass on the side of the highway well outside the wrecked vehicle. How he was thrown there was a mystery, for the car had somersaulted and the entire vehicle was compacted to the height of its wheels, with the top completely squashed down. The three young women trapped inside had to be cut out with special equipment. That Kamal alone had been thrown out was in itself a miracle. The driver had died instantly while our son's girlfriend, seriously injured, had died shortly after being cut out of the compacted vehicle by the "jaws of life". The girl in the passenger seat, the owner the car, was badly injured and also had to be cut out. She was seriously hurt but survived.

Much later, while he was recovering from his operation in hospital, Kamal told his mother that shortly before the accident happened, he had been sitting behind the driver. The hot sun was shining through his window onto his arm. His girlfriend saw that he was uncomfortable and suggested that they exchange seats since she could do with a tan. Kamal was tanned enough, she had playfully said. At a refuelling stop shortly afterwards, they had exchanged seats. Our son was now behind the passenger seat nearest the verge of the road. That exchange was to save his life.

At the private hospital to which he was transferred, it was discovered that the blood vessels to his liver had been badly wrenched by the force of his impact with the ground when he was thrown out of the car. Because he was young and healthy and neither smoked nor had a drug habit, the doctors said the damage would heal quickly.

On the ninth day, he surfaced from his coma and complained of a severe headache. Other than that, he said, he felt well though stiff through lying in bed for so long. He seemed to have no recollection of what had happened to him, so we let things lie and spoke very little as his voice was very feeble. We said nothing to him of his girlfriend.

Orderlies and a nurse came to take him for X-rays. The doctor on duty came to tell us that nothing of significance had been detected other than the wrenched liver. They had already operated on him the previous night to repair the damage. He suggested that we go home to rest as there was nothing else we could do and our son needed to sleep.

The young man and his sister who had come to meet us as well as our host in Kimberly were waiting for us in the foyer. The lovely girl told us that her sister's funeral was scheduled for the following afternoon. She said that she and her brother would take us to the church after we visited Kamal the next morning. We agreed again that we

should say nothing about the funeral to Kamal in case he had a relapse through shock. He should only be told, if he should ask, that his girlfriend was also hospitalized but out of danger.

When we arrived at his bedside the next morning, Kamal was already up and had eaten breakfast. He smiled when he saw us and tried to speak although he was groggy from the medication. His girlfriend's sister and brother were also there and we left the hospital together to go to the funeral. Before we left, the doctors told me I could return to work, because our son was on the mend. They said he could fly back home with his mother a day or so later.

My wife and I went straight to the church service before the funeral. Afterwards, we walked to the nearby graveyard. With us were the girl's parents and their immediate family. Many people came to sympathise with us and inquired after our son's condition.

The next morning, my wife and I drove to the hospital. I told my son that the doctors had advised me to go home and that they had said that he would be well enough to fly home to Pretoria in a day or two with his mother. He tried to smile when I left and asked me not to worry about him, although his voice was still feeble. Shortly after I had left, however, Kamal again complained to his mother that his neck was painful. He told her that the previous day, the nurses insisted he should get out of bed and brush his teeth in the bathroom. They were concerned that he would get worse if he stayed in bed any longer. He did so and felt very dizzy as he lowered his head over the basin.

My wife told his doctors and after more X-rays, it was discovered, ten whole days after the accident, that the first two vertebrae below his skull had hairline fractures. I had just landed at Johannesburg airport when I got the news. I picked up my car which I had left there and drove home to Pretoria. The journey is still a complete blank in my mind; everything that happened after the shocking news was a blur in my memory.

When I learnt that Kamal's injury was much worse than had been suspected, I called my office to inform my director that although I was back in Pretoria, I would not be coming in. I told him of the disturbing new developments with my son. Saying that my first responsibility was with my family, he added that I could take all the leave I needed.

I started getting expert opinions. I telephoned everyone whom I thought might be able to help. Medical experts said he should be airlifted immediately to Johannesburg or Pretoria, for Kimberly is still very much a backwoods city, despite its glittering claim to fame as the place where diamonds were first discovered in South Africa.

An even bigger shock was waiting after I was first informed of the fractures. Kamal's orthopaedic surgeon called to apologise for not having detected the fractures earlier. He said that it was crucially important to get Kamal to a top hospital either in Johannesburg or Pretoria. Failure to do so within the next four days could mean that we would either lose him or worse, he could be paralysed from the neck down for the rest of his life.

My first priority was to find a way to airlift the boy to either Pretoria or Johannesburg. I called my medical aid society only to be told by a woman in the call centre that I was entitled to claim only a comparatively small amount to pay for an ambulance. An airlift would not be covered by the society. I asked her to make enquiries from her supervisor whether an exception could be made. She promised to call me back.

Meanwhile, I contacted a cigarette company's helicopter mercy service only to be told that two of their craft were grounded for repairs and that a third not suitable for long flights. The Automobile Association, which also ran a mercy helicopter service, was not able to help because their machines were grounded for servicing.

I was aware all the while that it was by then late afternoon. Despairing of finding a solution before offices shut down for the day, I began to pray silently to Sai Baba for help. I had just put the phone down when it rang. It was the consultant from my medical aid society. She said she had spoken to her supervisor who had consulted with the Chief Director who, it turned out, knew me. Could I hold while she put me through to Mr Dawson?

He sounded most pleasant and helpful when he came on. I could not recall his name but he saved me embarrassment and reminded me of our first meeting on a flight from Johannesburg to Durban some four years previously. He was sitting across the aisle from me and had recognized me from newspaper photographs. He had introduced himself and we had chatted through the flight. Landing in Durban, he invited me to call him if ever I should have the time while in Durban to join him for lunch. His head office was there and he knew that I was a member of his society.

When he came onto the line, he told me how sorry he was to hear about my son and said, "Mr Naicker, I know that you were told that all you would get is the cost of an ambulance. Yet there is no practical way other than a speedy airlift to get your son to Pretoria or Johannesburg. Do whatever you can, regardless of the cost. Contact South African Airways if you have not already done so and see what they have to say, then call me back."

He gave me his home number if I needed to call him any time after 5.30 p.m. "Enter into whatever agreement is necessary with SAA", he said. "Do not worry about the cost. I'll call a meeting of the emergency committee first thing tomorrow morning and strongly recommend that we carry all SAA costs."

Following his suggestion, I called the head office of South African Airways and asked for a senior consultant after identifying myself and stating my business. My call was put through to a most helpful official and I gave him the details. I told him the exact nature of Kamal's injuries. He said he would call me back within an hour. When he did, he explained that an airlift would be possible but that I would have to pay for the five seats that would have to be removed to accommodate my son's special airlift stretcher. I might also have to pay for seats for the doctor and nurse accompanying him. I agreed to the arrangement.

Then he asked for my son's orthopaedic surgeon's contact numbers. "You see, SAA would want an assurance from your son's main medical officer that he would not die on the flight. If he does, there could be serious consequences for SAA."

I gave him the surgeon's contact details. He promised to call back as soon as he spoke with the doctor. He was not long in coming back to me.

"I have just spoken with the doctor, sir. I am very sorry to inform you that SAA would not be able to airlift your son. His doctors cannot guarantee that he would not die on the flight or become permanently paralysed. In the circumstances, we cannot take the risk."

I thanked him for working so late on my account, for it was already well past seven p.m. I put the 'phone down and sat for a long time in stunned silence. There was no point in calling Mr Dawson; I thought I would call him in the morning. I called my wife instead and recounted the events of the day and my futile attempts to arrange an airlift. I told her not to lose hope for I intended exploring other avenues in the morning. I promised to call her with good news.

Alone in our flat for the first time, I decided to stop 'phoning frantically and do the only thing left to do. I lit the lamp at our shrine and prayed. Then the floodgates of my emotions, which I had held in check for my wife's sake while in Kimberley, burst and I wept for the first time since hearing of the accident. I was too exhausted to make myself something to eat. I went to our room and collapsed on the bed without changing into pyjamas. Opening those unaccustomed floodgates calmed me and I slept like a baby.

The next morning, I started planning a course of action while in the bathroom. First, I would call Mr Dawson at his house to reach him before he went to work. Who knows, something might still come up with his sympathetic help. At that stage I had no firm ideas about what I could do to arrange an airlift. All doors seemed to be closed. Perhaps I should shower and light the lamp at our shrine again and pray.

While in the shower, I suddenly recalled a dream I had had in the night. I usually do not remember dreams clearly or for long. This one was crystal clear. I was in a large room crowded with men and women in uniform. They were all high-ranking military officers, and it was a cocktail party. I thought I was the only one in civvies there until I saw that there was another civilian in the far side of the room. The only difference was that he was dressed in an orange robe and had an Afro hairstyle. He seemed to know me for he was smiling in my direction and waving.

I shot out of the shower, for the meaning of the dream came in a flash. I had forgotten completely that I knew some very senior people in the military. For some months over most of the previous year, I had been advising the Army on a media campaign to educate soldiers on the dangers and prevention of AIDS. In the course of that campaign, I had had weekly meetings with the Army's AIDS publicity unit consisting of both male and female senior officers. I was regarded as an ad hoc member of that committee, for I designed and wrote all their campaign literature for the troops.

Drying myself hurriedly and throwing a dressing gown over myself, I called my colleague Lorraine Fourie. Quickly, I brought her up to date on my futile attempts the previous day to secure an airlift for my son. She had kept in close touch with me while I had been in Kimberley after the accident and after I had returned. I described the gathering for cocktails at Voortrekkerhoogte military HQ. I told her about Sai Baba being in the dream and said it was clearly a message that I should talk to friends in the military.

I still had to make calls to Mr Dawson in Durban and to my wife and my son's chief orthopaedic surgeon in Kimberly, so I asked Lorraine for help because I had to act speedily but could not cope on my own. She also knew senior people at Voortrekkerhoogte, so she said that she would call a woman colonel we both knew well at Army HQ.

Lorraine obviously did not waste any time. Within minutes of putting the 'phone down, it started to ring. The colonel was the first to call. She sympathized over my son and said that Lorraine's call had come just in time to catch senior officers before the start of their weekly staff meeting. She said, "Just relax with a cup of tea or coffee, Viv, and leave everything to us. Our people will be in touch with you."

The 'phone rang again. It was a Major Walls. He said he had been ordered to co-ordinate the logistics and asked for my son's doctors' contact details. Then he requested that I should make only brief and absolutely necessary calls from my telephone to keep my line open for the military.

Other officers called me for various reasons, and things started to happen at lightning speed. For the next hour, the telephone did not stop ringing. Another hour later, my wife called from the hospital in Kimberley to ask me what was happening, for the doctors had told her they had been asked by the Northern Cape Army Medical Command to prepare our son for evacuation. I told her how Lorraine and I had contacted the Army for help. We were manning 'phones, she in her office and I at home, to receive progress reports as things developed but neither of us had the complete picture.

"Just sit tight and observe", I said. "Something amazing is happening."

Soon afterwards, the chief administration officer of the hospital called to say that traffic officers had arrived to close off the road in front of the hospital for a helicopter landing. My son's doctor called me, then the specialist surgeon, excited in spite of themselves. I told them that when every other channel had failed, I had approached the military.

Then the Air Force called me to apologise that they were not able to take me along as originally planned in the Puma gunship they had intended using, since my son's doctors had advised against a helicopter airlift; the vibration of the craft could snap Kamal's spinal cord. I was overwhelmed. I did not even know the Air Force was involved.

A little later an Air Force brigadier called to say that a SAAF Cessna Citation executive jet, stripped of its seats and carrying an orthopaedic surgeon and a trauma nurse

besides the pilot and co-pilot, was taking off as he spoke with me from Waterkloof, the military air base near my home, for Kimberley. He said that I would be kept informed of progress.

Shortly afterwards, my wife called again to say that an Army ambulance with military police outriders on motor cycles had arrived at the hospital to transport our boy to the airport. She said that everyone in the wards directly facing the road, patients, nurses and doctors and others, were standing at the windows and watching the spectacle. There had never been such drama in Kimberley since the first diamond was discovered, the hospital's administrative director told my wife. She said that both he as well as the chief surgeon had asked her what exactly her husband did in government to have the clout to send both the Air Force and the Western Cape Army Command to evacuate our boy.

While I was trying to comprehend what was happening, an Army officer called to say that the Surgeon General of the SADF, because of my special relationship with the Army and its AIDS awareness programme, had given permission for my son to be admitted to the world famous 1 Military Hospital a stone's throw from my home. I was overwhelmed.

I phoned my wife again to tell her that an Air Force jet would be landing at Kimberley Airport to pick up our son. I told her that she could not accompany our boy because the executive jet had been stripped of all but four seats to accommodate the cocoon. I would book her onto an SAA evening flight from Kimberley to Johannesburg and meet her at the airport.

Not long afterwards, the Brigadier called again to say that two Cheetah fighter planes had taken off from Waterkloof to intercept my son's mercy flight and escort it below busy commercial air lanes to Waterkloof. He said they were treating the whole episode as a military exercise.

He called again and suggested that I make my way to 1 (One) Military as the plane carrying Kamal was about to land. Once on the ground, he would be taken by ambulance to the nearby hospital, then considered to be the finest trauma hospital in Africa and rated by "Time" magazine as one of the top four military hospitals in the world.

Less than four hours after I had realised the meaning of the dream and asked Lorraine Fourie to 'phone our officer friend, my son, in head-and-shoulders traction and with a surgeon and trauma nurse in attendance, was admitted to One Military.

I visited him at 1 Military shortly afterwards, where he spoke to me feebly - they had sedated him for the flight. A nurse came to tell me that the surgeons wanted to talk with me privately and I followed her in a daze. The team of specialists, mostly Afrikaners, wondered aloud why he was not paralysed, let alone still alive. It was a miracle, they said: God must have been with him. In the circumstances, apparently, with the injury having gone undetected for ten days and with Kamal moving freely, he should have died or at least have been paralysed from the neck down.

By then I had stopped wondering. I knew who was responsible.

Earlier, I had called my wife to tell her to collect her flight ticket at the information counter at Kimberly airport and gave her the departure and arrival times. Our friends in Kimberley would take her to the airport there. After seeing Kamal, I drove to meet her at Johannesburg airport, where she would arrive on the early evening SAA flight.

Kamal stayed in hospital for two weeks. On his second day there, surgeons operated on him and screwed a metal ring - a "halo"- onto his scalp. To this they attached a complicated system of vertical and horizontal metal rods and bars which in turn were attached to a stiff, sheepskin-lined plastic "vest" strapped over his chest. This ensured that his head was held rigidly facing forwards, with no up-and-down or lateral movement. Where one would normally swivel one's head to look sideways, he would have to swivel his entire torso on his hip, his head held rigidly at right angles to his shoulders. In other words, his neck could not bend or twist.

Although he was discharged from hospital after two weeks, he remained in the cage-like brace for two months, during which time we took him regularly to the hospital for check-ups and adjustments to the halo. During the last two weeks, his doctors removed the halo and started to put him in different kinds of braces that became progressively softer and smaller. Eventually all he wore before his last visit to the hospital was a high foam collar, which the doctors advised him to use less and less frequently.

Within two weeks, even the foam collar became unnecessary. Except for an occasional headache, Kamal was perfectly normal afterwards, physically at least.

When we thought it was safe to do so, my wife and I decided to tell him about his girlfriend's death. Lalitha felt it would be better if she spoke to him alone before I did, so I left it to her for I had seen his girlfriend briefly just once. My wife spoke to him during the day, when I was at work. That evening I sat in his room and spoke with him quietly. He cried all the while then became very silent for days. We felt his heartbreak, for he had lost both his girlfriend as well as his school friend who had introduced them to each other.

I contacted a popular local Hindu scholar to counsel Kamal and the gentleman visited our boy every day for a week. It seemed to help, for he gradually started to come out of his shell.

The historic election of 1994 was rapidly approaching and I was soon up to my ears in work. I left home just after six each morning and returned late at night, always when the family was already asleep. The only time I spoke with Lalitha was early in the morning, when we both arose before the children. Kamal was making progress, she reported, although he often lapsed into prolonged silence. Fortunately, his sister could not do enough for him. She served him hand and foot. That seemed to cheer him up. My wife was confident that the boy would eventually come out of his moods.

Some eight weeks after the election of April, 1994, I went back to my own department from the I.E.C. I was never able to go back to the routine because the old order had changed. Many white senior officials had taken their early retirement packages and left and new personnel were coming in.

The director of my own media section was also leaving in two months' time and he started to hand over certain of his duties to me. Among these were various Parliamentary media functions and the media coverage of the President's State Visitors' Programme. This entailed flying to Cape Town frequently from my own headquarters in Pretoria and also to other parts of the country with the media team as understudy to the outgoing director.

Among the first State Visitors were Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh. The director decided to throw me into the deep end. While he and the rest of the team handled the Queen's visit to the Eastern Cape during the four-day visit, I was to handle the Duke's tour of Kimberley on the opposite side of the country on the same day and the luncheon afterwards at the City Hall.

Two weeks before the visit, I flew to Kimberly to attend a planning meeting with the Royal Reception Committee of the Kimberley City Council. The meeting was in the morning and I had time on my hands before the late afternoon flight back to Johannesburg, so I called the Administrative Director of the private hospital where my son had been treated after the accident. He invited me to join him for tea. I drove to the hospital after lunch.

He was still greatly impressed by the precision with which the Army and the Air Force had evacuated my son from the hospital to fly him to One Military. Describing the evacuation, he said that he had decided to follow the convoy in case there was a contingency en route. He felt it his duty to see our boy safely aboard the mercy aircraft from Pretoria. He told me a touching story as we sat in his office.

Everybody concerned had been caught up by the drama of Kamal's evacuation from the hospital. An army orthopaedic surgeon had supervised placing Kamal delicately in a special "cocoon" that would immobilize him for the flight to Waterkloof Air Base. The cocoon with Kamal inside had been transferred to the ambulance which had backed up into a casualty room. The orthopaedic surgeon and three paramedics stayed with my boy in the ambulance. A girl in a lieutenant's uniform sat with the driver in front.

Travelling at a snail's pace for to go faster would risk snapping the boy's spinal column, the convoy took the better part of an hour to get to the airport. Using a side entrance, it drove straight to the runway where a SAAF Cessna Citation had just landed, its engines still running. The ambulance backed up to the open door of the plane and the paramedics and surgeon transferred the cocoon into the aircraft. As soon as the surgeon and trauma nurse were aboard, the plane began to taxi onto the runway.

As the plane turned, everyone including the director stepped back to the apron. Among them was the girl lieutenant. She stood apart as the plane taxied onto the runway and started its run for the lift off. As the aircraft rose rapidly into the north eastern sky towards Pretoria, the girl stood at attention and saluted, tears streaming down her

face. The driver told him that she was the elder sister of Kamal's girlfriend who had died in the accident.

I do not think that she ever saw our son again.

TEN

After The Election

By the end of June, 1994, I had returned to my desk at Midtown, the seven-storey head office building of the South African Communication Services. Situated in the heart of Pretoria's central business area facing the north side of the glass-sheathed South African Reserve Bank, on the outside Midtown is by comparison almost modest and understated. Inside, it was light and airy and not anything like one would imagine a government office to be.

With paintings and sculptures by famous South African artists scattered throughout its foyers and office suites, the interior of the building exuded a tasteful, informal air, much like that of a successful business house. My large, plant-filled office on the fourth floor was in keeping with the ambience of Midtown as a whole. I was happy to be back in my own domain.

After months of frantic activity at the Independent Electoral Commission's Johannesburg headquarters, the first few days of coming back to Midtown seemed something of an anti-climax. The pace at SACS was always sedate if not leisurely in most sections. The work was generally routine with few if ever urgent deadlines to catch. The exception was in the media directorate in which I was the assistant director at the time.

One of the major functions of the directorate was to distribute statements from the office of the Minister for Information to the national and foreign media. All government statements went through the office of the Minister for information. It was my responsibility to do a final check of the statements before distribution. This was not exacting work and there were few urgent deadlines, if any. In meetings with my small staff after I returned, my priority was to bring myself up to date on developments during my six- month secondment to the I.E.C.

That first few days after returning to my old office with its magnificent view of the Reserve Bank across the road surrounded by its mini- forest of Highveldt trees was most welcome after the months of frenetic activity at the I.E.C. With the responsibility of issuing daily media reports to both the national and international media, sometimes twice daily, I had been under sustained pressure for almost the entire six months that I had been there.

Back in the comparatively sedate pace of my own office, I recalled leaving my home in Laudium at sunrise each morning for the long drive to Johannesburg, I could never be certain when exactly I would return each day. As it turned out, this was usually late at night, often well after midnight.

Our family life suffered tremendously for I hardly had time to spend with my wife and two children. To make matters worse, my son had switched from the arts course for which he had enrolled at university to Information Technology, a completely new subject. Trussed up for three months in a head brace consisting of a “halo” – a steel ring out of which protruded a complicated series of adjustable steel rods embedded in a rigid shoulder- pad cushioned by a fleece-lined leather shoulder and chest harness, he was nevertheless healing rapidly after his spinal operation following the accident in January. By March, Army orthopaedic surgeons at One Military had started to reduce the brace and harness to lighter and lighter versions. By June, the surgeons had removed the halo and Kamal was wearing only a high plastic neck brace which he removed when sleeping.

It was important that I discussed his switch from Fine Arts to Science in his university course with him. This was almost impossible because of the odd hours I had to work. To complicate matters, I also had to work at weekends. At the I.E.C. in that first multi-racial election, there were no fixed office hours. Everything was top priority and had to be ready yesterday, as it were.

Invariably the youngsters would be sleeping both in the morning when I left and at night when I returned. In the morning, my wife and I hurriedly discussed current family issues. I constantly told her how frustrated I felt that I could not find the time to counsel our son properly. I was torn between concern for my child and my responsibilities to the State. My wife assuaged my anxieties. She was mindful of our son’s needs and she was coping with the help of the Army psychiatrists, she assured me. With my being away almost permanently, I had no choice but to let my wife take over as head of the family.

It was a situation fraught with danger. It was crucially important for me to spend time with my son and indeed the whole family after his terrible accident, for we were all traumatised. Yet it seemed as though my life was not my own. I had grown away from the family in those six months and this was painful because we had always been very close. I knew that my son particularly needed me to help him cope with both his physical and mental healing after the great loss of his girlfriend in the accident. Yet there was little I could do. As the head of Media Relations at the IEC, I was in a pivotal position that required my total commitment at a crucial time in the country’s history.

So I welcomed the more sedate pace when I returned to the SACS. After months of high-pressure involvement with the historic “liberation election” of April, 1994, I felt the sudden lull yet I revelled in the calm after the storm. It turned out to be only a brief respite.

My reverie was broken by the ringing of the internal intercom one morning a day or two after I had returned. It was the section secretary to inform me of a meeting in the director's office in thirty minutes.

Walking into director Schalk van der Westhuizen's office, I picked up a chair from his reception area and carried it into his office. This was the usual practice when staff meetings were held, because there were fewer visitors' chairs in the director's office than there were members of media staff.

"That won't be necessary, Viv", Schalk said as I entered. "This meeting is only between the two of us."

Naturally, I was curious. If it was not a staff meeting, why was I specifically called?

Schalk said: "First off, let me repeat how glad we are to have you back with us. I want to thank you for the way in which you carried the department's flag at the IEC. We have received most favourable reports of your performance in the media directorate there. We also read with pride your daily inter-departmental progress reports on preparations for the elections. These were particularly appreciated by our section because we know so well your attention to detail and accuracy.

"I would suggest that you prepare a full report of your role at the IEC in the usual format. This can be incorporated into your annual assessment. You could be in line for a merit award at the end of the year, you know."

Thanking him for the advice, I made a note in my diary to prepare the assessment report. The thought ran through my head that if I were successful and won the "A" category award, I could use the money to make up to my family for the six months of neglect while I was at the IEC.

"There is another matter of immediate importance that I need to discuss with you. In fact this is the real purpose of this private meeting this morning. Please treat this as confidential and keep things under your hat for a while. Otherwise rumours could start flying around."

He went on to explain that early retirement packages were being offered by the Government to the officials over the age of fifty or close to that age in all departments. I had already known about the packages for some months. It seemed that older, mostly white officials were being encouraged to retire to make way for incoming black staff. However in my isolation at the IEC, I was not aware of the great flurry of activity that rumours of the imminent dispensation had caused within government departments. Many middle-aged officials were excited at the prospect of early retirement and a great deal of discussion was going on between colleagues. Ours was the first department to know simply because our Minister was privy to the discussions.

Some felt that the packages would give them a second chance in life. The packages were rumoured to be so generous that officials with entrepreneurial skills were considering forming consortiums with colleagues to go into business. At that stage, although the early retirement package had been announced, the details were still to

be published. Others planned to invest their packages so as to ensure a comfortable income to supplement their civil service pensions for the rest of their lives. Although he did not say what his intentions were, I felt that Schalk might also be considering taking the package. He was young enough to start his own business and make a go of it.

“This is why I thought we should have this chat”, Schalk said. “ It will help both of us to consider the facts of the situation so that we can plan for the future. I know that you had your hands full at the IEC, but have you had a chance to consider the early retirement offer?”

In the few days since coming back I had learned enough from colleagues to know that there was a considerable buzz over the early retirement offer. To older officials, it was a heaven-sent opportunity to start enjoying the last years of their lives at an earlier stage than the normal retirement age of sixty-five. To many younger men and women, it opened up new vistas and presented attractive opportunities, at least in theory. Yet as always in these matters, there was the fear of the unknown.

I told Schalk that I was up to speed with developments and that I’d given it some thought. My son still had some way to go before completing his higher education. In the circumstances I did not think that it would be advisable for me to retire, especially since I was not too sure of what I would do if I decided to take the package. I was far too young to think of retirement and I did not particularly care to risk a large sum of money in a venture such as business, for which I had little aptitude.

“Then do I take and then that you would prefer to stay on in the Department?”

“Yes. I think I’ll hang in here for a while and see how things pan out. I’ll make a decision when I have a clearer idea of how things are shaping in the new South Africa. I think it would be foolhardy for me to rush a decision.”

“In that case, Viv, I think we need to be practical and consider certain facts carefully. I do not know at this stage how many people would be leaving. Some of our colleagues have announced their intentions while others are still considering the alternatives. Nobody has yet actually taken a package here at head office and so it would not be sensible to speculate. Yet taking personal circumstances into consideration, it would seem that a certain number at the top would be leaving.

“If that should happen you would be among the most senior officials and certainly the most experienced media specialist left here at head office. Keeping this in mind, I think we should in all reasonableness plan to expand your areas of expertise. I needed to know where you stand with the early retirement issue before I took certain steps in future planning.

“Now that I know that you are not planning to take the package, we shall have to consider certain operational changes and perhaps set down a plan of action for consideration by the head of the Department. Naturally, your name will come up in the plan simply because of your considerable experience and expertise. This would mean, of course, that your work would not be confined to head office as much as it was

previously. You would have to become involved in the Parliamentary side of things and this would mean operating both from here in Pretoria and in Parliament in Cape Town.

“With Mr Mandela now the President of the country, a new aspect of the functions of the media directorate has emerged. As you know, the Heads of State of several countries have signalled their intention to pay courtesy calls on our President. This will mean national and international media interest and so an added responsibility for our section. We will have to oversee and control the coverage of those visits by both the national and foreign media. Naturally, as our most experienced communications official, you will have to be involved.”

He explained that our parliamentary offices were in the same building in which Cabinet Ministers were housed within the precincts of parliament. It would be necessary for me to go to Cape Town in the course of the next few weeks to familiarise myself with procedures there. The second of the twice-annual media briefings by Ministers would take place in the second week of September. This was still months away but planning would start by the middle of June. The director said that it would be expedient for me to join the planning team.

“I’ll prepare a memo to the Head to this effect. I take it from our discussion that you would be agreeable to joining the planning team, keeping in mind that it would mean extended periods away from home again. Would you have any objection if I went ahead and did this?”

It dawned on me that once again, it seemed that things were pretty well cut out as far as my future was concerned. As always, there seemed to be little that I actually had to do to get things moving in the right direction. This was being done for me by the mysterious forces that seem to have taken over my life. I had known for some time that I seemed to have become a spectator of events in my own life. In that frame of mind, I said that he should go ahead and do what was necessary in line with our discussion.

Although I did not realise it then, that meeting with van der Westhuizen marked the end of one phase of my life and heralded the dawn of another. I was both excited at the prospect of yet another change though apprehensive for the effect it would have on my already strained family life.

In the ensuing weeks, I joined the head office planning team. Both the director as well as his deputy briefed me comprehensively on protocol and procedures relating to our Cape Town offices. They went over every detail meticulously. I even found that there was no need for me to take notes at our meetings for Schalk and the deputy, most thoughtfully, had prepared a portfolio of protocols and procedures to guide me.

There was still some two months left for the media briefings in Parliament by the Ministers. Schalk and his deputy agreed that it would be a good idea for the three of us to fly to Cape Town to do a dry run. I could familiarise myself with the Cape Town

offices and also meet key people that I would have to deal with in Parliament. While there, we could also rehearse arrangements for the opening of Parliament, which is in the first week in February each year.

We flew to Cape Town some weeks later. The director's office had booked me into the same hotel where he and the deputy director stayed on their visits. It was a quaint, famous establishment popular with parliamentarians and journalists for generations, It was a stone's throw from our offices in Parliament. I was to get to know that hotel and its precincts well in the ensuing years. Its management contrived to give me the same delightful suite on my visits at regular times throughout the ensuing years. It became my home away from home in what turned out to be the most painful phase of my life.

In the months after my return to Pretoria from Cape Town events happened very rapidly. The terms of the retirement packages had been announced in detail. A large number of officials at both head office and the regional offices throughout the country opted for the package and had left. This involved only white officials and a handful of elderly blacks. Despite this however, there were still some senior officials with a large number of medium-rankers, all white. I was among the most senior people left.

I had wondered about the painstaking way in which Schalk had shown me the ropes to the department's Parliamentary functions. He was meticulous in covering every possible aspect and even advised me on dealing with contingencies. It seemed to me at the time that he might have been planning to take the package too, but I was wrong. He seemed to have no immediate plan to do so. Later, when he and the deputy eventually left, I was to appreciate his thoroughness in briefing me when I found myself completely in charge of the media section's Parliamentary functions.

In those early months after my assignment to Parliamentary duty, I usually went to Cape Town with the group. There were regular projects such as the opening of Parliament in the first week of February after the Christmas recess, the twice-annual media briefings by Ministers and the President's State Visitors' Programme. The director and his deputy were always part of our team.

Every aspect of each and every project that had to be completed was itemised in the Media Section manual. It was my duty to update and edit the manual. The team followed the manual to the letter and everything generally went like clockwork. With increasing frequency, I was left to supervise and coordinate the team while the director and the deputy merely observed.

After working on the opening of Parliament with the entire team early in 1995, I started travelling to Cape Town on my own in connection with the President's State Visitors Programme. On my first solo trip, I had to obtain my permanent Parliamentary pass. Hitherto, I had used, like the others with the exception of the director and the deputy, a temporary team pass that had to be obtained for every separate occasion on which we went on duty.

The Media Directorate had, for practical reasons, two sets of offices at 420 Plein. There was an office suite on the ground floor close to the two auditoriums which we used for media briefings. The ground floor offices gave us easy access to both when

they were in use. There was another suite on the 10th floor which presented the public image of the South African Communication Services. We received our visitors including politicians, media representatives and members of the public there.

On occasions when I travel to Cape Town to complete arrangements for the various state visits, I would have to use the 10th floor offices and not the operational ones on the ground floor because the 10th floor also housed the office suites of the Ministers strict security protocols had to be followed.

On that first solo tour of Parliamentary duty, I had to present myself at the ground floor reception manned by the South African police to obtain my permanent Parliamentary pass. That was when I discovered, much to my amazement, that the series coincidences that had been so prominent in my affairs in recent years had followed me to Cape Town.

When I arrived at the block of offices known as 420 Plein within Parliamentary precincts to take office in January, 1995, young Afrikaner policewoman met me at reception to process my Parliamentary ID card. As I filled the forms after my photograph had been taken, she remarked that my name was the same as that of her commanding officer. I was intrigued by the coincidence.

She was stationed at the Parliamentary Police Station, which looks after security within the environs of Parliament. When she came to my office later to hand me my Parliamentary Pass, she said that her commander Brigadier V Naicker (exactly the same as my name) would like me to join him to tea that morning at ten. She offered to fetch me at 9.45 a.m. to guide me to his office.

She came to my offices promptly at the agreed time and we walked through the famous Parliamentary Gardens and between the various buildings in the security area around Parliament. The Parliamentary Police Station is one of the oldest buildings in Cape Town. It is a quaint, Dutch-style cottage built during the time of Jan van Riebeeck, the first Governor of the old Cape Colony which grew over the centuries into South Africa. It is now classified as an historical building.

Dressed in an immaculate civilian suit, the Brigadier was talking on the telephone when I was led into his office by the policewoman. With the handset to his left ear, he returned her salute and gestured to me to sit down as she left the office. As he rounded off his conversation on the phone, I noticed the ring with Sai Baba's portrait on his right hand. After he put down the phone and shook my hand, I held up my own right hand so that he could see my own ring which was exactly the same as his and is common in the shops outside the gates of Prashanti Nilayam. He promptly put his palms together and exclaimed, "Sai Ram, brother!"

Although we had the same first name initial and surname, his first name was Vadi. We became friends and the following week, he invited me to a vegetarian dinner at his home on a Thursday evening to meet his wife and children. Afterwards we went to a

service at a Sai centre in Rylands, where he introduced me to the assembled devotees and invited me to talk to them of my first interview with Swami in February, 1993. The audience listened in rapt silence as I described that first meeting and my amazing experience afterwards..

Another surprise awaited me the following day when I went to meet the President's personal staff. I was told beforehand that his Private Secretary was the most important in the President's Office. As his Girl Friday, she made and monitored all his appointments. If one were not on her right side, it was almost impossible to see the President, I was told.

She had been referred to only as Priscilla by my guide and so I had no idea what to expect. When we arrived at the President's suite and I was introduced to her, I was somewhat surprised to see that she was Indian, Priscilla Naidoo. I was even more intrigued when I was told later that she was a Sai devotee. I was to interact often with Priscilla over the years of President Mandela's term of office.

So President Mandela's Private Secretary Priscilla Naidoo, his Chief Parliamentary Security Officer Brigadier Vadi Naicker and I, then in charge of media affairs for the President's State Visitors' Programme, were not only Indian South Africans, but also all Sai devotees.

Later, towards the latter part of President Mandela's term, when I left the SA Communication Service to join the Independent Electoral Commission to help prepare the country for the first election in a democratic South Africa in 1999, I handed over in Cape Town to a young Foreign Affairs officer who was to take over my media duties in Parliament. He was also Indian, and also, as it turned out, a Sai devotee.

It was that experience that gave me the first inkling of the possibility of a cosmic plan being in action, that all this synchronicity was clear indication that all in existence was unfolding in accordance with a minutely-conceived, numinous blueprint.

In those months soon after the election, everything in the SACS was in a state of flux. Nobody seemed to know exactly what was going on. Several key section heads had taken the package and left, so there were fewer decision-makers. Among those that were left, there was uncertainty and indecision. The big surprise came when it was announced that the Head, Dave Venter, was leaving. This was followed by a rash of other senior retirements.

Within days of Venter's departure, his replacement arrived. He was black, the first black man I had ever worked under. It was a new experience. For those of us among the old hands still left at head office, the new South Africa had arrived: he was the department's first ever black official, and he had little or no experience in the field of communications. It was rumoured that he had once worked as a correspondent for a regional newspaper. That seemed to be his only connection to the science of communication.

Everyone settled down after those first few spurts of retirements. The top ranks were depleted but most sections still had appreciable numbers of senior white staff who

busied themselves with accommodating and training an influx of in-coming young black junior officers. One of these was allocated to my media section. Siphon was a pleasant, rather shy young man but friendly and affable once he overcame his initial inhibitions. English had been one of his degree majors, so in his first weeks there, I set him to reading and analysing official press statements to learn the style as well as something of the varied subject matter of official statements.

The new black head of the office was almost invisible. He stayed in his office for most of the day and rarely moved about the building after his first, conducted orientation tour after he had arrived. Other than attending the weekly staff meetings on Monday mornings and listening to reports-back by section heads, he did and said little. We thought he was assessing developments and feeling his way. The various sections virtually ran themselves, like a well-oiled machine. It seemed that for the time being at least, the new head preferred to let it continue that way.

The activities of the media directorate changed dramatically after my first excursion to Parliament in Cape Town. The media section's main responsibility became media relations for the President's State Visitors' Programme. Heads of State of most major countries in the world were scheduled to come to South Africa to meet its new President and the schedule of State Visits seemed endless. The comparatively small media section was already starting to work at full steam within a short while of my return to Pretoria from Cape Town with the other two senior officers.

Few lay people realise the amount of planning that goes into every visit to the country by a foreign head of state. There is a bewildering array of details to be taken into account in the planning. For each scheduled visit, three of the most senior officials of the media directorate and I had to meet with the President's VIP protection unit, senior officers of all the arms of the military, national intelligence, municipal traffic police, representatives of the Department of Health and emergency services such as casualty wards and ambulances, doctors and other medical experts, diplomats and other officials representing the government of the visiting Head of State, our own diplomats and even the housekeeping and catering section of the President's House. Our meetings were held in the hallowed chambers of Herbert Baker's magnificent Union Buildings on Meinjie's Kop, the Hill overlooking the colourful "Jacaranda City" – Pretoria, South Africa's administrative capital. I was the first official of colour to have had an office there, even before Mandela became President.

All of us had our specialised duties in the programme. Mine was a production of news alerts for both the national and international media stationed in the country. It was also my responsibility to oversee the authentication of applications from foreign journalists to work in South Africa. This was an exacting and tedious process because of the security aspect and took up much time because it involved consulting with national and international security agencies.

In addition to my office duties, I also had to help supervise the national and foreign media corps on the arrival of Heads of State at the Air Force Base in Waterkloof, Pretoria and later at the State President's House near the famous Union Buildings. As a senior member of the planning team, I had to be involved in every aspect of the

process. Although it was not mentioned in so many words, it was obvious that I was the director's understudy in the event of his taking the early retirement package.

With the coming of the new, post-election order, the leisurely pace of work in the media directorate had ended forever. We were now immersed in a frenzy of activity. In my own case, this proved to be a blessing in disguise. My busy schedule did not allow me the luxury of brooding over my own fragile family situation. I left home early in the morning and returned exhausted in the evenings.

By then, communication with my son had all but ended. Even on those rare occasions when we happened to be at home at the same time, he remained in the study with his books and communicated with me only through his mother. Naturally, she covered for him and insisted that he should not be troubled at a time when he had to cope with the major switch in his study courses as well his recent trauma. I was acutely aware that he was hurting from the loss of his girlfriend as well as his closest school friend, but there was nothing I could do. The pressure of work coupled with anxiety over my boy had driven me close to breaking point.

All I could gather from my discussions with my wife in the all too rare moments that we had together in between my disastrously irregular hours, was that my son seemed upset by what he thought was my indifference to the death of his girlfriend. What he did not know was that I was too afraid to take his mind back to the accident and the enormous tragedy it entailed. I felt that he needed more time to heal both physically and mentally before I could have any in-depth discussions with him.

My wife also felt that the boy would be further traumatised if I should bring the subject up at that stage. I was carrying an enormous responsibility in my official capacity, over and above the enormous tragedy of the accident that had so frighteningly shaken all our little family.

As a public servant, I was acutely aware of my official responsibilities. To make matters worse, I had no understudy to help carry the load if something should go wrong or if my commitments in the writing, cross-checking and distribution of media statements became too heavy. In that respect, I was virtually a one-man band. It was altogether a nightmare of the worst kind. All I could do was to pray that it would end.

The strain was also beginning to tell on my wife and I recognised the signs with some alarm. She was caught up in a difficult situation that was not of her making. She had tried her best to keep the peace between our son and me. She insisted that I should do nothing to attempt to remedy the unhappy situation, that she was capable of bringing it under control on her own.

Not wishing to exacerbate an already painful situation for all of us in the family, I acquiesced. With my inordinately heavy work responsibilities at a crucial time in the country's history, I had little alternative but to leave everything on the home front to my wife. As subsequent events proved, that was my greatest mistake. Sadly, we learn some of our most important lessons only with hindsight.

ELEVEN

Divorce

The tempo of work at SACS changed dramatically after Mandela took office as the first black President of South Africa. The relaxed, almost sedate pace of former days was gone forever. Although among the smallest sections of the Department, Media had always had the perfect staff complement for the tasks we had to perform on a day-to-day basis. That had changed after the election.

Because of the nature of our work, meetings were held on an ad hoc basis, usually after the director was alerted by the Minister's office of a statement to be published. Our meetings in the director's office were brief and to the point. Everyone there knew exactly what he or she had to do and left the meeting to proceed with their individual tasks with practised ease.

In the months and years after the "liberation" election, the volume as well as frequency of work had increased phenomenally. This was mostly because of the intense international media interest in South Africa but also because of certain organisational changes.

There was a sharp increase in the number of applications for work permits by foreign journalists. Every international news agency had bumped up its South African representation in the months preceding the election. After the election, many of the major agencies like Reuters and Associated Press actually expanded their offices rather than reduce them. This meant that my assistants and I had to work that much harder to verify the bona fides of applications for journalists' work permits. Being the responsible officer, I had to sign off each recommendation to Home Affairs.

In most cases, especially with the bigger internationally-known agencies, this was pretty straightforward. After the election however we were inundated with applications from freelance journalists and agencies based in countries that previously had shown no or little interest in South African developments. These were mostly in Africa or Eastern Europe. We found that people with objectives other than news coverage were trying to take the accredited journalists' route to sneak into the country for their own devious purposes. This was an irritation and an added strain on our resources.

It was the responsibility of the Media Directorate to advise the Department of Home Affairs on whether or not a work permit application should be granted. For the first time in my experience, we were detecting applications from people with questionable bona fides. These were usually from African countries, with the bulk of fraudulent applications coming from one particular major West African country. Through my work

with the SADC, I knew that many people in neighbouring African countries would give an arm and a leg to be able to sneak into South Africa which was the El Dorado of most African dreams. The West Africans, it turned out later, had higher ambitions.

Despite this, it was the President's State Visitors' Program that really kept us on our toes. This was an entirely new responsibility and we were tackling it without an appreciable increase in staff. The only new addition to our section was one young black man fresh out of university and with no work experience. It would be some time before he would come into stream, so we had no alternative but to share the added responsibilities among existing old hands. This meant considerably more work on my desk.

The State Visitors' Program also meant that I had to be away from Pretoria for extended periods. This was mostly to go to Cape Town, for the President usually met his guests in Pretoria or, when Parliament was in session, in Cape Town. I was often away from home for three or four days at a time. This added to the already inordinate strain on my family life. My family had grown visibly away from me but as much as it broke my heart there was nothing I could do short of resigning from my job. That, at my age, would have been suicidal.

Yet things could not go on as they did; something had to give, the storm had to break. It did not take long in coming. The storm broke and pent-up frustrations and turbulent emotions took their sad course. One December evening almost exactly a year after Kamal had met with his accident, I left the family home for the last time. Only later did I realise that I had left on the 13th of December; the next day, the 14th, was our 30th wedding anniversary.

I stayed at first in a residential hotel until a friend, a bachelor, offered to share his house on the slope below the Union Buildings with me. I had known him for some years. We belonged to the same spiritual discussion group. There was no point at that stage in looking for a flat. Although my wife and I had separated, reconciliation was very likely, or so I thought, and so I accepted my friend's invitation.

I spoke to my wife as often as I could on the telephone and it was obvious that our son's accident and the emotional upheaval to which we had all been subjected, coupled with my prolonged absence from the family had taken a devastating toll. Sadly, the two most crucial events ever to affect me, my son's near-fatal accident and the dramatic political change in the country, had taken place almost simultaneously. While he was recuperating after his operation, I was up to my ears in one of the most crucially important elections in world history, for South Africa was in the world's spotlights. In the months afterwards, I was completely immersed in a new work schedule that left hardly any free time.

The forces at work in our lives as a family were much greater than I could manage in my stressed condition. I had known my wife for five years before we married. We had moved around in the same social circle in Durban and became good friends over the years. One magical day we realised that we were in love and decided to marry. It was my personal fairy tale and I could not let it go easily. Yet the cards were stacked against our survival as a family and what I had feared most was about to happen.

I had just ended a meeting with my assistant late one afternoon when the intercom on my desk buzzed as she was walking out. It was the new black lady receptionist to tell me that there was a gentleman to see me. I reacted in the usual way and asked her to direct him to our group secretary but she said she had already done that but he had asked her to let him use the intercom to talk to me.

“Certainly”, I said, “give the phone to him.”

A man’s voice said: “Mr Naicker, I am sorry to disturb you but I am the sheriff of the court and unfortunately I have to serve summons on you. I do not want to draw the attention of your work colleagues.” He was keeping his voice down so that the receptionist would not hear. I asked him to give the phone back to the receptionist and told her to send him up to my office with the usual security.

I heard the lift in the foyer before the knock on my door and the man walked in. The security guard stood in the foyer outside my door. The sheriff looked around my large, pleasantly appointed office. He must have realised my senior rank.

“What is the summons for? I don’t owe anybody money”, I said

“I am afraid it’s much worse than that, sir. It’s for divorce.”

His words were like a thunderclap and he must have seen the utter shock on my face as he held out the papers to me.

“I am very sorry, sir. It’s times like this that I hate my job.” He held out a paper for me to sign on receipt of the documents. I appended my signature. The man wordlessly touched the visor of his cap and walked to the door. He was visibly upset. The security man was waiting in the foyer outside to accompany him downstairs.

I do not know how long I sat holding the papers in my hand. I could not read the document, for everything was a blur while confused scenes flashed through my head, a kaleidoscope of thoughts and images floating out of the recesses of my memory. In that jumble of confused thoughts and images, one stood out: today was 13th of February, my son’s 25th birthday. The thought brought me to the edge of collapse.

Eventually I got up and walked to the washroom in the foyer. I splashed cold water on my face, dabbed it with a paper towel and combed my hair. Walking back to my office I put on my jacket and went down the corridor to the director’s outer office and told his secretary that I wanted to see him. She spoke to him on the intercom and led me to his door.

Seated in the chair that he had offered me in front of his desk, I said: “I’m sorry to barge in on you but I’ve just had a visitor and I thought I should let you know first.” I told him about the visit of the sheriff of the court and the divorce summons. A married man himself, the poor man’s face went beet red as I spoke. He was obviously almost as distressed as I was. No man likes to see another confronted by the calamity of a divorce.

He rose from his chair and walked around his desk. Putting his arm around my shoulder, he said: “Forgive me Viv, but I just don’t know what to say.” He shook his head and gazed into my eyes. Then he walked across the room to put on his jacket.

“It’s almost closing time. Let’s go to the upstairs lounge. I think both of us can do with a drink.”

We took the lift to the penthouse lounge that we used for entertaining special guests and for private meetings of senior staff members. There were washrooms, a small but well-equipped kitchen, a dining room with a table to seat sixteen and a cocktail bar against one wall of the lounge.

Going to the bar, the director removed a bottle of Scotch and two glasses into which he poured two drinks without measuring and handed one to me.

Raising his glass, he said: “I don’t know in what specific way I can offer to help you, Viv. But this is just to assure you that whatever you may need at this very sad time, we are here to help you. Even though I know you would naturally want to be discreet about this at least until things are finalised. A court summons does not necessarily mean that a divorce would happen. The situation could change and there could be an amicable settlement.

At the same time, it would be prudent to let the Chief know. It would make things easier at the operational level. But that decision has to be yours entirely. If you do not wish to tell him yourself I can perhaps do it for you. Just let me know.”

He was referring to the Head of the department.

“Meanwhile, I should think you would need time to attend to the legal side of things. You have more than enough leave to your credit, so take all the time that you need. Just pop in to see me if and when you come to the office in the next few days.”

He raised his glass towards me and we drank in silence.

Strangely, the sheriff’s visit was something of an anti-climax. All the pent-up emotions and tensions within me seemed to drain away after that visit and I could see clearly again. Even then, I sensed that a phase of my life had irrevocably ended.

Perhaps because this is essentially a benign universe, I found myself deeply immersed in the dramatically transformed responsibilities of the media directorate. Both the President’s State Visitors Programme and my SADC responsibilities left me little time to spare to attend to private matters.

Nevertheless I had to find time to consult with lawyers on the issue of the divorce. I was advised not to contest the application yet the matter dragged on. As is common practice with lawyers, my wife’s legal representative used a variety of ploys to cause delays so as to extract the maximum amount in fees from both my wife and me. Eventually, when he could no longer think of any legally-acceptable excuses for delays perhaps, a divorce order was granted some six months after I had received the summons.

On the day of the hearing, I was not in court. I was represented by my legal counsel who accepted the divorce decree on my behalf. At the exact time of the hearing, I was on board a South African Airways airliner headed for Gabarone in Botswana to attend an SADC media planning meeting.

Later I was told by my lawyer how shocked my wife had been to discover that I would not be in court. She had stood alone and confused in front of the judge as the decree was handed down. My heart went out to her when my lawyer described the scene in court. Throughout our thirty-five years together, I would never have dreamt of letting her face any adversity alone.

It was only when I returned to Pretoria four days later that the full import of recent events in my life struck me. Thirty-five precious years of my life had evaporated without trace. After being surrounded by family particularly in the past thirty years, I was completely alone. It was then that I learnt what utter desolation meant.

Yet I knew that I could not give up. Despite all that had happened, I had to keep going for the sake of my children, if nothing else. I did not allow myself the luxury of self-pity and depression. I started immediately to make enquiries with estate agents about a townhouse in Centurion, Pretoria's satellite city. An agent eventually came up with one to my liking. I moved in some weeks after the divorce and soon settled down to an unaccustomed life as a bachelor. I was painfully aware that a chapter of my life had closed forever but in time, I adjusted to the new reality.

TWELVE

A MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE AND A BLONDE

The pile of folders in my in tray looked intimidating. I had gone to work some two hours earlier than usual that Friday morning with the intention of clearing the backlog but the pile seemed to grow more formidable whenever I glanced in that direction. It looked daunting simply because I had to clear them before leaving the office that evening.

I would be flying to my Parliamentary office in Cape Town the following day and would be away for some two weeks. There was no question of delegating the work for it related to matters for which I preferred to assume full responsibility. What worried me most was that I would have to interrupt my work on the files to attend a diplomatic function in Johannesburg at midday, then drive back through heavy traffic to the office afterwards to finish them.

The function was at a prestigious hotel in Rosebank, an up-market Johannesburg suburb. I had to leave my office in Pretoria by at least eleven-thirty that morning if I were to get there on time. I put my head down and worked through the folders with a vengeance. Time was flying and soon I would have to go down to my car in the basement to drive to Rosebank. I decided to make only a token appearance at the function and make my escape as soon as I could after speaking with the Deputy High Commissioner for India. As these things tend to happen, it did not work out quite so smoothly.

Because it was a diplomatic function, there was no question of not attending. To make matters worse, it was known to the Indian High Commission that I was the only official of Indian descent in my department. Someone might notice my absence if I should not go.

It was not only the Indians I had to worry about. The function that morning was of international importance, for the Government of India was presenting a major Indian award, the prestigious Padma Vibhushan, to Walter Sisulu, one of the ANC's leading lights in the freedom struggle. Because of ill-health, he had been unable to travel to India to accept the award, so the Indian President had come to South Africa to make the presentation instead. The function would be heavily attended by South African officials, to many of whom I was known.

My fate was sealed. I worked through the folders in grim determination until the timer-intercom on my desk buzzed to remind me to leave for my appointment. I called the section secretary on the intercom to tell her that I was leaving for Johannesburg and took the lift down to my car in the basement.

The hotel in Rosebank was surrounded by traffic and other police and dozens of plain-clothes security men and women. A long line of expensive limousines was moving slowly towards the entrance to the underground parking. When my turn came, a security guard peered at the number on my windscreen sticker and checked against the clipboard in his hand before waving me through. Exiting the lift from the basement, I walked into the elegant foyer, following the arrows to the function room. My heart sank when I entered, for I realised that I would never be able to sneak away early without being noticed. It was plain that I would have no choice but to sit through it all.

Everyone who was anybody in fashionable South African society was there, a sea of dark-suited men and elegantly dressed women of all colours, shapes and sizes. Among the faces that I recognised was the Indian South African actress Usha Khan, tall and beautiful in an elegant sari. The President surrounded by the most senior ranks of the ANC was on the stage.

An usher glanced at my invitation and guided me to the diplomatic section at the very front of the room close to the stage. I made my way to the Indian deputy High Commissioner and other senior officers of his staff whom I knew, to present my compliments. Then I took my seat in quiet resignation, the spectre of the unfinished folders on my desk hanging over my head.

After the speeches by President Mandela, the Indian High Commissioner and Walter Sisulu there was a great flurry of media activity under floodlights and television cameras. People had left their seats to surge towards the President and Walter Sisulu and his wife. It was the appropriate moment for me to slip away. I fled towards the basement and my car.

With visions of the unfinished folders on my in-tray and the limited time I had to dispose of them floating through my mind, I pointed the car towards the highway to Pretoria. Hard pressed to keep within the speed limit, I was driving at the maximum permissible speed and reaching the northern suburbs when I was surprised by a voice that seemed to fill the car. It distinctly ordered me to turn off the freeway into a glide-off on the left.

“Turn left *now* and cross over the freeway. Head for Melrose temple”, the voice distinctly said.

I was stunned. Instinctively, I glanced towards the radio on the dashboard but all the lights were off. I wondered whether it was my imagination for my mind had been filled with a riot of thoughts, but the sound of the voice seemed to ring in my ears and I could not be sure.

Puzzled by what was happening, I continued resolutely along the freeway but as I approached the glide-off on the left, the car seemed to acquire a will of its own. It gently slid to the left and I found myself approaching the traffic lights at the flyover. I

had no choice but to turn left into the flyover over the freeway and drive into the leafy suburb of Melrose. Turning left at the top of the hill, I drove towards Second Avenue and turned right to go down the road to the old Shivan temple there.

My mind was churning as I drove down that pretty road. Something unnatural was happening, but what was it? Nothing like this had ever happened to me before and I am not easily shaken. Yet I was trembling but also intensely curious. A spate of strange coincidences in recent months was one thing; a disembodied voice in my car was something else.

As I drove down the slope towards the entrance to the temple, I noticed a little blue car under the trees on the left. The road verge was wider there, so I parked behind it, got out and locked the door. As I passed the blue car, I thought I saw a face and blonde hair but I could not be certain. Parked in the dappled shade of the trees, the car's windows were difficult to see through because of the reflections.

I walked on towards the entrance, wondering which way to turn. On the left of the driveway was the temple and on the right the building housing a hall with the priest's living quarters on the floor above. I knocked on the first door that I reached. No matter how loudly I knocked, there was no response. Then I heard a window opening on the floor above. A woman poked her head out. It was the priest's wife whom I knew.

She greeted me and said that her husband was away in Benoni, a town some 60 km away, and that he would back only late that evening. She asked if I had come to check on auspicious dates in the astrological almanac. Her husband, I knew, had taught her to do this. Hindus go to a priest to check in the almanac for auspicious times to do important things like special prayers or sign business agreements, for instance.

By then I was feeling thoroughly uncomfortable. I did not know why I was there and I was both intrigued and puzzled by the events of the past few minutes. If anything, I was confused. Not wishing to appear silly, I shouted up to her.

"No, thank you. I do not want to check for dates. I just happened to be passing and I thought I'd stop to say hello to you and your husband. I haven't seen you for some time and I thought this would be a good opportunity."

It was a white lie of course, but I could hardly tell her that I was there because of a strange voice in the car. That, if anything, would have set her wondering about the state of my mind. Assuring her that mine was simply a casual visit, I wished her a good day and walked back to my car.

As I approached the little blue car, the driver's side window started to go down and I saw that it was a pretty blonde lady inside. I noticed a sticker on the windscreen. It had a picture of Sri Sathya Sai Baba of India. Surprised, I wondered why a pretty white woman would have that particular picture in her car.

"Hello", she said pleasantly, "Could you tell me the time please?"

It was obvious that she was English, an immigrant most probably.

I looked down at my watch and said, “Good day. It’s just gone five minutes to one – it’s now four minutes, to be exact.” She stared hard at me and was quiet for a moment.

Then she said: “Thank you so much. Then her eyes shifted to my tie.

“Oo! That’s a lovely tie!”

She leaned out to get a closer look. A favourite that I had bought in India, it was covered in dozens of jolly-looking dancing baby elephants.

“Little Ganesa’s!” she smiled.

Surprised, I said: “You know about Ganesa?”

“Of course. He’s my favourite and I have a statue of him in my house.”

“I see you seem to know Sai Baba too”. I pointed to the sticker on the windscreen.

“Yes, and I’ve known him for a long time. In fact I’ve been to India to see him several times. Do you know him?”

“Yes. I went to see him in Puttaparthi in 1993 and I’m hoping to go again as soon as I can get away.”

She put her hands together and, smiling broadly, said, “Sai Ram. I am Sue Kelly-Christie.

“And I am Viv Naicker”, I said, also putting my hands together. I proffered my business card. She glanced at it and seemed very amused, as though she was trying to suppress laughing out loud.

“Do you often come here to the temple?” she asked, still smiling.

“Not often, but I sometimes pop in to consult the priest, Nadarajan Sarma.”

“Do you know him well?” she asked.

“Reasonably well”, I said. “He used to live in the same suburb of Pretoria where I also lived, Laudium.”

“I suppose you attend Sai bhajans there?” she asked.

“I went only once but never had the chance to go again simply because I moved out of the suburb.” I replied.

“Then if I invite you to one of ours in Johannesburg, would you be able to come? She asked.

I replied in the affirmative and she asked if she could call me at one of the numbers on my card.

“Certainly, try me on my mobile number first because I tend to move around a great deal”, I replied, “but I might mention that I’d be leaving for Cape Town tomorrow and would only return in three weeks’ time. I would not be able to attend anything in Johannesburg before then.” She nodded her pretty head.

I said: “It was nice meeting you and I look forward to hearing from you. Now you must please excuse me. I have to run. I have to get back to my office in Pretoria like yesterday.” I put my hands together in a namaskar and she did the same. I walked to my car.

I glanced at my watch and wondered at what time I would be able to leave my office that evening. It was already mid-afternoon. Starting my car, I turned it and headed back to the freeway. Entering the Pretoria suburb of Arcadia below the Union Buildings, I drove into a shopping complex near Pretoria University. At a students’ cafe there, I bought a packet of sandwiches and a carton of guava juice. I had left the function at Rosebank without eating. There was a lot of work to be done on the files and I did not want to be hungry into the bargain.

When Susan Kelly-Christie called me, I was still in my Cape Town office. She had called to ask whether I would be in Johannesburg on the weekend of 17th of July, 1998. I replied in the affirmative.

“In that case, I’d like to invite you to a function at the same place where we met, Melrose Hindu Temple. I hope you would be able to come”, she said.

I asked what the function was and she said it was a private one. She and her husband Roy had decided to mark their 25th wedding anniversary by re-affirming their marriage vows among friends. Our mutual friend, Nadarajan Sarma, would be the officiating priest. Afterwards, there would be a reception at her friend’s house in Sandton.

Naturally, I said I would be honoured to attend. Privately, I thought it would be a welcome change from the official and diplomatic functions I had to attend somewhat frequently. One tends to meet the same people and say and hear the same innocuous things, then rush back to the office to make up for lost time and attend to the nitty-gritty of one’s work. She asked to where she could post the invitation and I advised her to use my office address which was on my business card.

It was waiting in my in-tray when I returned to Midtown a few days later. The function was on Saturday, two days hence. I looked forward to a somewhat different weekend, and so it turned out to be.

The cars in the parking area when I arrived indicated that it would be a sizeable and somewhat affluent gathering in the temple. Although I had arrived exactly on time, everyone seemed to be already there when I stepped out of my shoes and walked into the temple. Sue spotted me immediately and waved. She was dressed magnificently in what appeared to be a Western interpretation of an Indian sari. Roy by her side was elegant in a dark suit with an oversized buttonhole. Sue greeted me effusively and introduced me to her husband Roy and sons Robin and Casey.

It was an elegant and most interesting gathering. With a few minutes left for the ceremony to start, Sue took me by the hand and led me through the crowd milling about. Everyone seemed to have a most unusual occupation. There were artists and sculptors and writers, businessmen and diplomats, printers, journalists and building contractors. Even the gardener and the maid were there.

Someone beckoned to Susan and she dashed off. I caught sight of her having a quick discussion with her husband and the priest. She spotted me looking at her and dashed across to me. She led me to a group of women and introduced me to Antoinette Olivier, a travel expert, and her friend Julie.

“Vivek’s a diplomat”, Sue said to Antoinette and the others. “He spent many years in London. He has been to Sai Baba and had some amazing experiences. You must ask him. Antoinette, please introduce him to everybody.” Then she rushed off to take her place with her husband in front of the priest who began to chant in Sanskrit. Sue was radiant as were her husband and their boys.

After the ceremony we all joined a convoy of cars and were led to Sue’s friend’s house in Sandton. It was a most unusual evening, unlike anything I’d ever been to since leaving London. Sue was everywhere at that reception. She attended personally to every single one of her guests, ensuring that everyone was well fed and irrigated.

That happy function turned out to be among the most out-of-the ordinary I’d ever attended. I met a cross-section of Johannesburg society, people of every race and of a great variety of backgrounds and occupations. Sue made sure that she introduced me to just about everybody. Antoinette asked me when I planned to return to Puttaparthi in India. I replied that I hoped to go in December. She asked if she could contact me and I gave her my business card. I left the happy gathering somewhat reluctantly, because of the long drive back home. It was as lively as ever as I left.

That ceremony at the temple and the reception afterwards was an indication of what the new South Africa could turn out to be with patience, mutual respect and co-operation. Combined with a singularity of purpose and a determination to succeed, these could lead the new South Africa to great heights. Human nature, unfortunately, is unpredictable and at that early stage of the country’s new political direction, the future was still uncertain.

The political turnabout had resulted in diametrical changes in the civil service. In our own department there were many staffing changes, particularly in the higher ranks. Surprisingly, younger people took the transformation in their stride but those of us older ones who had remained in our positions walked a delicate balance to re-gain our equilibrium after the tidal changes that it swept over us.

It was only months afterwards, when Sue and I knew each other fairly well, that she told me how and why she had come to be at the entrance to the Melrose temple the day we first met. She had been on the way to Killarney Mall to meet her friend Julie for lunch. Before she reached the turnoff to the mall, she received an intuitive message to turn off and take the flyover to Melrose temple, exactly as I did a few minutes later. She had mentally protested that she would be late for her appointment at one fifteen,

but the thought had come that she would meet a man before that whom she would get to know very well over the years. If he did not come before one, she could leave. She would then have more than enough time to go to her lunch date with Julie. This is why she had asked me

When Sue arrived at the temple a few minutes before I turned up, she had put on a Sai Baba cassette and was listening to it when I parked my car and walked past. Nobody else came after that and she had assumed that it had been mysteriously arranged for us to meet. Being psychic, she took these strange events in her stride. One day, laughing delightedly, she told me why she had been grinning broadly the first time we met at the temple. She knew that she would be meeting a strange man, she said, but she did not think he would go to the priest's quarters and knock on the downstairs public toilet door.

I found myself busier than ever in the ensuing months. With people taking early retirement, some routine processes in the Department slowed down because of breaks in the chain of command. The nature of my responsibilities began to change and cover a wider range of activities. This meant that I had to carry greater responsibility.

After he took office, President Mandela expressed concern for those countries which the media was wont to refer to as the "Frontline states". These were the countries that were closest to the borders of apartheid South Africa. It was argued that their own development, economic and otherwise, had suffered as a result of South Africa's racist policies. Moreover many South African dissidents had found political refuge in those countries when they had fled South Africa's apartheid policies to live in exile. The new President felt that it was the new democratic South Africa's moral responsibility to help those countries in various ways now that apartheid had been removed.

In line with this thinking, a loose federation of neighbouring countries was formed with the aim of promoting and developing areas of common interest. The new body was called the Southern African Development Community (SADC). On the instructions of the President, all South African Government departments colluded to identify areas in which South African expertise could help develop infrastructure in those neighbouring countries.

At one such meeting at the offices of the Department of Trade in Hamilton Street near Union Buildings, I was unanimously appointed to take charge of planning South African inputs into official programs for communications development in those countries. This meant that I would have to advise information departments in the SADC countries on matters relating to communications generally and media infrastructure and development in particular. With only the most basic infrastructure in most of the countries involved, it was an ambitious undertaking.

With the oldest and most sophisticated communications infrastructure on the African continent, we were well placed to offer constructive advice and even training in the media field. I was soon contacted by the head offices of the SADC in Gabarone, Swaziland. Soon afterwards I invited the chief executive officer of SADC, Kosi Moesi,

to come to South Africa for an orientation tour of the country. I offered to act as his guide in Pretoria, Johannesburg and Cape Town. I would arrange for the regional offices of SACS to host him in the smaller centres.

Kosi Moesi was urbane, charming and most capable. A member of the Swazi Royal family, he had tremendous energy which he directed most admirably in the execution of his mandate. He knew everyone who was anyone in his small, prosperous country. We got on very well together from our first meeting. It led to a happy and successful relationship until I was head-hunted by an international personnel recruiting company to join the Independent Electoral Commission.

Within weeks of Moesi's official tour of South Africa, I started to receive invitations from the information departments of the various SADC countries. Soon I was flying regularly not only to Swaziland but also to Namibia, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Uganda, Tanzania and Zanzibar. I ran workshops and discussion groups and arranged for South African experts to run courses in technical colleges and universities in those countries.

My SADC responsibilities could not have come at a better time. It was a year since the tragedy of my divorce, but the pain had not abated. The only antidote to sudden loneliness after years of happy family life was to keep busy and it seemed to me that a sentient universe was mindful of my needs. Time, mercifully, began to fly.

I had met Sue a year after the divorce. With hindsight, I realised that she had played a crucial role in helping me to heal after the worst tragedy of my life. I thought at the time that it was strange that Sue would often call me exactly when I was having an off moment. I am not given to brooding and depression by nature but there were times when I floundered in the quicksand of regret and remorse. I realised one day that Sue would phone exactly at those moments. Even after all these years, I am convinced that she was sensitive to my thought processes and was responding to them.

It is difficult to feel moribund after talking with Susan- Kelly Christie. Nobody else I know has such a gift of spreading love and happiness to all and sundry. As I got to know her over the years, I saw that her love for others and indeed all creatures – the weaker and vulnerable the better – was almost limitless. In Johannesburg, she treated her maid and her two children almost as family. Years later in Puttaparthi, India, she adopted every street child, stray dog and lonely old person in sight. I have never known anyone with a greater reservoir of love and goodwill. If anyone lived the teachings of Sri Sathya Sai Baba, himself the most remarkable soul to have passed this way since Lord Krishna, it was Sue.

She came into my life at a most crucial moment, when I sometimes felt that I would not be able to cope with not only my inordinate responsibilities in the workplace but also the emotional storm that was raging across my shaken psyche. Divorce, especially late in life, is the most cruelly devastating of all human tragedies. It is difficult to restore confidence and faith in oneself and the world afterwards.

I had decided not to take the early retirement package that was offered to older civil servants. I had stayed on at the SACS and spent most of my working time between Pretoria and Cape Town. Fortunately, both the director and his deputy decided to stay on even though most of the senior white officials had already gone. For me it was a blessing in disguise for I would have had to take over full responsibility for media coverage of both Parliamentary affairs as well as the guest program. Fortunately my role in the SADC had levelled off to one or two conferences and workshops a year.

Towards the middle of 1998, I was head-hunted by an international executive headhunting company for the Independent Electoral Commission which had achieved permanent status after the adoption of the new South African constitution. Because I qualified for the retirement package, I took it and joined the IEC on a three-year contract. As deputy director of the IEC's media directorate, I was head of media relations and was responsible for issuing press statements after every meeting of the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff. I also produced an information backgrounder for government departments. I joined the IEC as the run-up to the historic election of 1999 was starting.

It was a first election in a democratic South Africa after the fall of apartheid in 1994. Pres Mandela's term of office marked the peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy. By then he had become one of the world's most popular heads of state. As could be expected, there were teething problems but people of all races were determined to make the new apartheid-free society work and the "Rainbow Nation" took its place proudly among the nations of the world. By 1998, Pres Mandela had announced that he would not be available for re-election as president in 1999. Political figures began to actively. Before long, I was in the thick of the run-up to the election.

My contract with the IEC ended in 2002. I was asked to stay on for another three years but I thought I should be getting on with certain pursuits that I dreamed of for most of my adult life. I wanted to paint more and start to document my experiences in the final years of apartheid South Africa. More than anything I wanted the time to attempt to reconcile with my wife and children. No matter how much I tried, however, that reconciliation never eventuated.

Because of the nature of my work against a background of diametrical personal, political and social transformation, I did not meet Sue and Roy very often. In fact, our meetings were few and far between. Yet never a week passed without my receiving a call from her. She would call if she saw a statement that I had issued to the media or something else relating to me. Sometimes, she would just call to say that she was praying for me. Often, I felt the need to call her for advice relating to a personal issue. With her bottomless reservoir of vision and kindness, she became a pillar of strength. With a person like Sue on call, it was difficult to give up on life.

After I left the IEC, I had opportunities to meet Sue and Roy more frequently than I had done in the past. We met at diplomatic functions and also at Sai Baba prayer meetings in Johannesburg. Whether it was another coincidence like the many that had beset my life or cosmic design, I would never know, but Sue and Roy decided to move to India not long after I did. Comparing notes later, I discovered that Sue had felt the

overwhelming need to be close to Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Finally retired by then, Roy thought it would be a rewarding, new experience. Whatever it was, they arrived to live in India not long after I did and our paths crossed constantly. We met once in the most amazing way some time before they came to live indefinitely in India. The story of that mysterious meeting is recounted elsewhere in this book.

At first I lived in Whitefield and Roy Sue and I met only when I went occasionally to Puttaparthi before they moved there. Later I went to live in Puttaparthi where they also lived and we met frequently. It is understandable therefore that Sue and Roy became almost permanent residents in the pages of my journal. As could be expected this had an enormous influence on my life.

THIRTEEN

MY INDIAN ADVENTURE

As difficult as it was to believe, the mysterious message had come back again after nine years. Plain to see in the pages of the Vedic almanac on the table in front of us, it stated clearly in black and white that I should go without delay to my guru who was waiting for me. As in the previous message nine years earlier, it did not indicate the name of my so-called guru or where I would find him or her.

It was September, 2002, and I was with the Brahmin Nadarajan Sarma in the lounge of his house at Melrose temple. He was paging through an annual update of the Panchangam, the Vedic astrological almanac. I had telephoned him earlier in the week to ask if I could come for an update of my horoscope. It had been a momentous phase of my life. I had gone into retirement and a week earlier, had turned sixty-three. I had come because I have known for many years that every ninth year of my life since I was born was always a watershed year. Life-changing events invariably happened to me.

As on that first occasion nine years previously, the message was in Tamil which I cannot read. Yet I could see it as the astonished Brahmin ran his finger along the lines of type, mumbling the words in a soft baritone before translating them into English for my benefit.

It turned out after we saw that first message in January, 1993, that it was – incredulously – from Sri Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi, India. Impossible though it had seemed at the time, I had responded to the message and, after a series of incredible events, had gone to the isolated peasant village in a remote corner of almost wild Andhra Pradesh, a rural fastness then almost unknown even in India outside of its immediate environs.

Now here again, a similar message had appeared in the almanac. It was as if my life was being closely monitored.

“I can’t believe it”, the priest kept muttering, shaking his head, “in all my years, I have never seen anything like this. This message is exactly the same as the one that appeared when you came in 1993.

“Of course, you do realise that this message cannot be ignored”, he said, turning to face me. “You must make arrangements to go without delay.”

In January, 2003, I terminated the lease on my townhouse in Centurion, Pretoria, stored my book collection, paints, brushes and household goods, sold my car and trailer, obtained a five-year visa from the Indian High Commission in Johannesburg and bought a return ticket valid for one year to travel to India. All this was the culmination of a long-cherished dream, to go when the opportunity arose to India, to travel, observe, meditate, reflect and write. As it turned out, the opportunity arose in what were the strangest if not sad circumstances and the dream materialised in the most unexpected ways.

Although friends and family remarked on my determination and singularity of purpose, in actual fact I had received amazing help in my decision to make what more than a few in my circle thought was a foolhardy move. In mid- January, I had gone to the Brahmin who was now the official priest a Johannesburg Shivan temple to consult the Panchangam for the latest reading of my horoscope. Despite being considered old fashioned by family and friends, I had found the annually- updated almanac a useful guide in my day to day affairs.

The priest was surprised to find a personal message for me in my horoscope, all the more so for the reason that it had happened once before. The unlikely message stated that I should go without delay to my guru who was waiting for me. This was the second time the Brahmin and I had experienced the phenomenon. The first had been in January, 1993, when the mysterious message had been translated for me by the same priest.

He said: “The message states that you should not delay and that you should not worry about your situation once you arrive at the feet of your guru. Sell, give away or store your possessions but leave without delay. Arrangements have been made for you on the other side.”

As he had done when it happened the first time in 1993, the priest insisted that he had never read personal messages in the Panchangam in his forty years as a priest. As a matter of interest and for the record, he told me years later that both special messages had disappeared from his copy of the almanac within days or weeks of his first seeing them.

“You’re a fortunate man”, he said. “Take the advice and go, for it seems that the gods themselves are guiding your welfare.”

I had retired by then and had been divorced for some six years. As much as I had tried to reconcile with my wife, my persistent attempts had ended in failure. To make matters worse, I had no access to my two children.

I left South Africa some three months later, planning to stay in India for six months at the most before returning. The planned six-month visit turned out to be closer to three years.

Although I had been to India twice before, that turned out to be my longest sojourn. I had did not go to find my roots, however much some relatives and friends thought that my reason. Despite an absence of more than five generations in South Africa, Indians in that country are acutely aware of their Indian ancestry. Of Andhra and Tamil

descent. I grew up in a family that is now a mixture of Telugu, Tamil, Bengali, Gujarati, Irish, German, Swedish and Malayali, and, from the point of view of religious affiliations, of Hindu, Christian and Muslim belief and no doubt an agnostic or two, of people of Indian and European descent.

In the years that I was growing into manhood, I was never allowed to forget my Hindu – and Indian - origins. Temples, Brahmins and pujas were as integral to my upbringing as they are to most Hindus in India. My father, however, encouraged my free thinking tendencies on religious and spiritual matters.

From him, I acquired a great love for Indian philosophy, mythology and history. I was encouraged to read and delve into the misty past of the phenomenon collectively referred to as the Hindu civilisation.

As I grew older, I discovered Paul Brunton and Heinrich von Max Muller and later devoured the expositions of Sir Mortimer Wheeler and other Englishmen on Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa of the Indus Valley civilization and on Ellora and Elephanta and Mahabalipuram and other landmarks of India's past greatness. Years earlier, I had discovered Madame Blavatsky and her Secret Doctrine and Annie Besant of the Theosophical Society.

Strangely, it took several Englishmen and a German naturalised as British – Heinrich von Max Muller - to alert me to the profundity of my racial heritage. Indians do not record history in the manner that people in the west do, perhaps for reasons born out of their belief in reincarnation and the deathlessness of the soul. Others, Chinese, Greeks, Arabs, the Portuguese and Englishmen, had to do that.

The tragedy of this is that many misconceptions and pure deception, especially those given currency by certain Englishmen and the much-vaunted Max Muller, persist to this day and have become, to the everlasting shame of Indian academics and scholars who should know otherwise, integral to what is generally being taught as authentic Indian history. The truth is that much of it, like the alleged invasion of India by “civilizing Aryan races carrying the Vedas” is unmitigated and typically racist Anglo Saxon poppycock.

Through the years of apartheid and institutionalised racial discrimination in South Africa and in contrast to my Western education there, the backdrop of my Indian ancestry stretched endlessly, fading away into a past lost in the mists of time. Throughout my life, I have delved into that past, sketchy as it was, in Africa, Europe and the UK, South East Asia, Australia and India, with great relish, acquiring in the process an acuity that would otherwise have been impossible.

Even though I grew up in the shadow of *apartheid*, South Africa's racist ideology, I experienced no sense of inferiority. On the contrary, probing constantly in the history of my race and basking in the glory of its achievements, I often had to try hard not to feel superior, especially to those shallow white people who had imposed their racist attitudes on my ancient motherland.

Then, after two brief visits, though one lasted just over three months, I came to India in February this year for an extended visit. I came, as I have said, to observe, reflect and write.

Having had a career in journalism and communications, on arriving in India I monitored the English language media assiduously. I read a cross-section of newspapers and news magazines. Soon I had a fair picture of media trends in India. I realised that, in the same way that I had had a ringside seat to the events leading to the demise of apartheid and the advent of democracy in South Africa, I now enjoyed a vantage point of another, equally significant, kind.

I was observing the marvel of this hoary giant as it shook off the dust and the dross of the ages to emergence as a technological, scientific, economic and military colossus of the new millennium. This new India, I sense, could help lead mankind and this degenerate world out of its present chronic malaise of confusion and conflict with itself.

Before that, it was plain to see, its highly intelligent people would first have to address certain pressing issues confronting their nation and the subcontinent that has been their home since the dawn of time. Yet the longer I stayed in India the plainer it became that the will to find solutions to ancient scourges would come not from the older generation but from its youth, who in the next decade or two would make India among the youngest populations in the world, given the average age of its citizenry.

Throughout these months, I did not lose sight of my original purpose. I had come to write, and so I started a journal of events and impressions, following a fairly disciplined regimen. I wrote regularly but as mood and circumstances dictated, knowing that whatever came out of my efforts could later be put together as one or more separate works.

One of these, I imagined, could emerge as a largely biographical work, for I have lead, in terms of the emancipation of South Africa from the yoke of apartheid, a momentous life. Why create fiction when my own life experiences were so unusual and varied? I had not decided on the final shape of this work; I thought that there is still time for that. I felt that I could well end up writing a typical first novel, based mostly on personal experience.

The other theme of my writings dwells mostly on the synchronistic events that I have experienced, starting some ten years or so before my retirement. These, understandably, tend towards the mystical and esoteric. No matter what our degree of "modern sophistication", we will remain beings of mystery and spirit.

Ever since I started to notice the strange coincidences in my life, it occurred that the lives of all beings on this planet are being played out according to some mysterious cosmic blueprint. A casual coincidence or two could be dismissed as, well, coincidence. I had become aware of the mysterious synchronicity some ten years previously, so I was acutely aware when it happened.

It became clear after years of conscious observation that there was an underlying pattern to our lives, that there seemed to be a cosmic script in which we were all acting

out fleeting but significant parts. After coming to India, it became increasingly clear that there was not only a cosmic script or blueprint in place, but also a Divine Architect or Conductor presiding over the unfurling of that blueprint and thus the tenor of our lives.

In the months after my arrival, in my little flat among the market gardens in Whitefield, I wrote constantly, content in the belief that two potential books were in the pipeline. All went well until India got in the way of my simple objectives.

India pounded on my intuitive door. No matter how much I tried, I could not step around the obstacle. India became too intrusive, too insistent. I could not ignore the immediacy of this profound presence; it was, all at the same time, both alluring and disturbing. And so, I contemplated the India around me: I observed its peculiarities; I pondered its idiosyncrasies. I hated what I saw.

I hated the noise and the pollution, I hated the filth. I hated the chaotic traffic and I hated selfish and callous Indian drivers, I hated the insane noise. I hated the open gutters filled with green slime stinking to high heaven. I hated the parochialism and appalling ignorance of the vast majority of its populace, I hated what seemed to me, living in rural Whitefield as I did then, to be the national pastime of spitting. Indians there seemed to squirt out streams of spit just for the sake of spitting. Little children, barely out of their napkins and on their way to kindergarten, practised it. They had seen adults do it, so they probably thought it was a sign of being grown up. Schoolboys during breaks spat all over their playing fields; they spat while playing cricket, seeming to roll two national pastimes into one.

I thought of all the diseases that spread in that orgy of expectoration and I shuddered. Meanwhile, I drank gallons of liquid colloidal silver to build up my immunity against the ubiquitous germ-laden dung and dirt and what I imagined to be invisible clouds of airborne bacteria. It was not easy to remain healthy in India with all the germs floating about in that spit-laden atmosphere.

Through monitoring the media, and through my limited communication with the locals, I became acutely aware of the corruption that permeates this society through the entire fabric of its existence. Bribery is a way of life but even more disgusting than the corrupt civil servant is what seems to be the national attitude that nothing can be achieved without a bribe. It was almost institutionalised corruption.

Throughout my thirty-five-year career as a civil servant, I never once demanded or accepted a bribe, so to me this is unthinkable if not obnoxious and demeaning. I have had personal experience of this grievous malady here in India, but this is not the place to recount those degrading encounters.

I winced at the callousness of people, their seeming indifference to not only the discomforts of others, but also to their dignity as human beings. I could not reconcile, in my mind, this lack of concern for one's fellow man with the apparent piousness of the ash-smeared and garland-toting supplicants amidst the multitudes. If they could associate godliness with a stone statue that they would garland in all seriousness, surely they could not be blind to the Divine Spirit within all beings and all things? Yet,

in the behaviour that I had observed in the years I lived in India, it seemed to me that many are.

Even after all these years, I will say nothing of Indian politicians or even public servants, but I will pray that God saves India from the more rapacious and selfish of these species. Neither will I comment on the police nor the judiciary, except to say that I have observed much that would have moved me to strenuous protest had I witnessed similar travesties of law and order in my own country.

My family was never what we in South Africa would consider stinking rich, but neither was it poor. We are perhaps somewhat above middle- of- the- way comfortable. Consequently, we are used to a reasonably good western standard of living, good homes and one or two motor vehicles in each nuclear family and some money in the bank. We send our children to good universities and occasionally travel overseas.

Through the years, my family has spread far beyond the borders of South Africa. Today its members live in many countries in the western world even though to date, it would seem that I am the only member of the family who has come in the opposite direction. We enjoy what I would regard as a reasonably good quality of life. Most of us accept this with equanimity and are, by and large, grateful that we have been so blessed.

If one of us within the greater family comes into wealth, it is taken in its stride, and with good grace. To flaunt that wealth would be unacceptable. Often, it would even pass unnoticed.

This is why, perhaps, I am acutely aware of the pretensions of those newly into money in India, noticeable with the economic upsurge sweeping through the country. There are few things as crude or as vulgar as the posturing of the *nouveau riche*. They often behave, as in that old Tamil saying, like monkeys with garlands in their hands.

I have never seen anybody treat fellow Indians on a lower social level as appallingly as the *nouveau riche* do here in India. For that matter, those with old money are often little better in their treatment of the downtrodden. Does one have to demonstrate that one is no longer abjectly poor?

Austerity arising out of poverty is an age-old condition on this subcontinent, an affliction that resides almost unnoticed beside most people here, in its primitive villages and in its grossly overcrowded cities. Indians, more than most others, should be able to receive good fortune with grace when it flows. Yet there is a vulgarity that often comes with new money, an unrefined brashness that only new money can bring.

Thankfully, the shock and disgust at seeing India from my semi-rural viewpoint on the outskirts of the once-gracious city of Bangalore quickly passed. In the years afterwards, it began to dawn that there is more to India than just dust and flies and open gutters, obese policemen and shameless politicians. I realised, too, that I was seeing India through my essentially fourth generation, western sensibilities.

In these contemplative years, I have walked among the artefacts of India's past greatness. I have wandered among its ancient temples and marvelled at the exquisite ways in which my early ancestors had translated a spiritual attitude, an esoteric ethos, into stone. That glue that binds all life together – love – glows through India's ancient architecture and its sculptures. No other race has been able to translate love into stone as deftly as the Indian sculptor has done.

That cultural ethos sparkles in its classical dance forms and in its music: varied, profound, exquisite. When I learnt that Kathakali, the ancient Malayali art form of Kerala that depicts the Mahabharata through dance was a rapidly dying art because of the inroads made into the Indian way of life by western influences, I was deeply saddened. I recalled performances by our own Malayali and Tamil communities in Natal during my boyhood.

I contemplate with awe that endlessly-copied, ancient South Indian wonder, the dancing Nadaraja, that primordial sculptural representation of the atomic dance of life, the unending swirl of protons, neutrons and electrons in all matter. I never cease to marvel at the towering intellectual stature of the ancient genius-sculptor who translated the profound scientific truth of the atomic oneness of all creation into an image that could be understood by the simplest of men.

It gradually dawned on me that India is different from anything I have known in a lifetime spent in the west. While the civilizations of Europe, of Greece, Rome and Crete erupted and quickly subsided, India was already well seasoned. Its civilization, old and mature even then, was contemporaneous with those of Egypt and Mesopotamia - and Atlantis even before that, although it preceded all by far. While all other civilizations with the exception of China wilted and died, with some like Atlantis vanishing without trace, India, eternal font of all civilization, continued alone – old and tired perhaps, but sparkling and vital notwithstanding her travails.

To have survived the rigours of the centuries, India must possess some mysterious inner quality, a mettle unknown in other lands and among other peoples. In my years of solitude I have realised that to understand the ethos of India, I had to discard my western notions. To achieve this, I had to identify and root out the prejudices imbedded deep within my psyche by my Christian English education in South Africa.

I had grown up with English literature. In my youth and even later, I had devoured what are regarded as the English classics. I knew the English poets and writers from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Donne, Dickens and Kipling. For his mastery of the English language, I admired Churchill enormously. Fortunately that admiration of English writers led to my deep interest in history. I began to delve into the lives of those writers that I so admired. It was only then that I began to realise that my thought processes and attitudes could be influenced appreciably by my reading habits, that not all writers were people that I would admire and emulate.

As a youth and well into my manhood, I had the tendency to accept the written word as gospel. When I began to read history and learn more of the Kiplings and Churchills of the world, I began to learn of politics and political manipulation and the manipulation

of readers' minds through the written word. I began to understand that not everything in print was gospel, that much of what I read was slanted for one reason or the other and that often what appeared in print had to be taken with more than just a pinch of salt. It was then, when that realisation came, that I started to become discerning in the choice of my reading material.

When I was a little boy growing up in Dundee, a rural town in the foothills of the Drakensberg Mountains in Northern Natal in South Africa, I thought that my school teachers were somehow related to white people and other Christians even though they had Indian names and looked like us.

While we spoke a variety of Indian languages with Tamil and Telugu, Malayali, Hindi, Gujarati and Urdu as our home languages, they seemed to speak only English, the language of instruction in schools for Indian children.

In those early days before the advent of the hated apartheid ideology, the strict colour bar imposed by the British then in power instituted separate schools for the main ethnic groups. While we went to the local Shivan temple every week, our teachers came only on special occasions like the Mariamman festival or for *kavady*, when some men and women with needles piercing their tongues danced across red-hot embers in the temple grounds.

On those occasions, our teachers would stand apart and watch proceedings like alien spectators. I never saw any of them turning a camphor or putting his palms together. In school the next day, they never made reference to their temple visit. In my infantile mind's eye, they were alien people. Yet in every other respect, our teachers seemed to be comfortable among us. Many of them even boarded with Indian families, ate Indian food and married our girls.

It was only years later that I realised why our teachers had seemed like alien visitors among us when we were children. They had been educated in Christian mission schools in Durban where a deep-seated inferiority complex had been insidiously implanted in their minds by Christian teachers.

One of them, a Sinhalese, had been sent to Natal at the turn of the century by the London Missionary Society for just such a purpose. In a small country town, he had taught infants in the local school for generations and surreptitiously and steadily passed on his slanted views. He was thought of by his former pupils and many parents as a harmless old man as infantile as his charges, but he had served his hidden purpose. He had a special contempt for people who "prayed to sticks and stones", and others who "smeared ash and paint" on their faces and "burnt smelly things" when they prayed.

We thought of the little statuettes of gods in our prayer places, the holy ash our fathers sometimes wore on their foreheads after prayer and the dot of vermilion or crimson powder our mothers placed between their eyes to signify the third, inner eye, and the camphor and incense that was burnt in our temples and we dared not mention them

in class or in public.. Those were “superstitious” things that backward people did. To speak of those shameful things publically would be to admit to our “backwardness”. We started to feel ashamed, young as we were.

Although we went through the motions of worship with our parents in our prayer places at home and in the temple by the river, we were secretly humiliated. That seemingly innocuous old man served his sponsors in London well. He sowed the seeds of an inferiority complex that many of us would carry throughout our lives and often, question the age-old tenets of our own ancient, time-tested cultural milieu.

When laws against slavery were passed in England in the nineteenth century, the cynical English lost no time in conceiving the system of indentured labour. In terms of the system, simple, often unlettered Indian labourers and others were sent to British colonies across the seas from India to toil in foreign sugar-cane plantations. Sugar cane, first cultivated by the peoples of the Indian subcontinent, was found by the British to be the magic tropical cash crop of the nineteenth century. In terms of their contract, the indentured labourers had to sweat for seven years under the most inhuman conditions for a fixed pittance on British-owned plantations throughout the tropical lands of their empire. It was slavery behind a facade.

Thanks to Wilberforce and his ilk, slavery was clothed in new guise and missionaries quickly followed the labourers into their distant, tropical cane plantations, in Fiji in the Pacific, Reunion and Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, Natal in South Africa, the scattered islands of the West Indies, Trinidad and British Guyana.

Irate British overseers in those remote plantations soon saw that, wretchedly poor though the Hindu labourers were, they evinced a beastly tendency: they proved to be impervious to the most strenuous efforts of the missionaries to convert them to the “civilizing” Christian faith. No matter how assiduously they tried, missionary efforts at conversion came, with few exceptions, to almost naught. To the British, it seemed that the wretched labourers were perversely intent on remaining uncivilized.

The thought that these simple labourers were heir to an ethos that might be at the root of even their own Christian beliefs never occurred to the British missionary, much less the planter.

The frustrated missionaries were not slow in coming up with a solution to the impasse. With typical English cynicism, they established mission schools wherever there were sugar plantations in British colonies. In a move widely-publicised as generosity born out of a sense of Christian charity, they threw open the mission schools to even the children of die-hard Hindu labourers. They would educate Hindu and Moslem children at no cost to the parents and expect nothing in return, they crowed. Publicists, many of them converted lower class former Hindus, extolled the virtues of this obvious Christian magnanimity in the face of what they subtly implied was Hindu intransigence.

The first teachers in the schools that were established by the poor communities themselves and later the government were for the most part mission-school-educated. The most prominent early schools for Indian children in Natal were mission operations, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. White teachers were specially sent from Britain by missionary societies. Later came Thomas Christians from Kerala and other converts, like the old man in Dundee, from Ceylon and elsewhere in the east. They made no overt attempt to convert; they did not proselytise. They subtly indoctrinated. Many of those schools carry the names of a variety of Christian saints to this day.

The Hindu and Muslim pupils of those first “imported” teachers became the first teachers in the growing number of government and government-aided Indian schools in Natal. These were the teachers I had thought of as alien when I was still a young boy. They were to turn out, quite unconsciously, thousands of pupils with a deep-seated inferiority complex exactly like theirs. Many in later years would even be reluctant to publicly declare their Hindu faith, yet happily practise it in the privacy of their homes and temple.

The sophistication of steadily growing numbers of younger Indians increased in direct proportion to the numbers of labourers’ children in mission schools. It was not long before even those unlettered men and women realised that their children were subject to subversive religious influences and started to establish their own community schools which later evolved into government-aided schools. Indians were averse to the indoctrination of their children. As soon as they were in a position to resist, they did so strenuously.

It was fortunate that among those early immigrants of mainly peasant stock, there were traders, priests, artisans, artists, actors, educated professionals and sundry others of a higher social order who came to South Africa of their own accord. Many young people, influenced by dishonest local touts working for British recruiting agents in larger towns in India, ran away from good, higher class homes or otherwise found their way to the new colony in Natal. These people grew into sizeable numbers and later became the guiding lights of the community.

In the early years of the colony in Natal, the Indian immigrants coalesced into several linguistic, social and educational levels, very much as societies did in India, Britain or anywhere else in the world. Exactly the same happened among other racial groups, particularly the British with their English, Irish, Welsh and Scottish groupings. It is human nature everywhere in the world for immigrant communities to find their own levels. Among Indians, it was no different. Immigrants with similar backgrounds and interests soon joined together and started to promote their cultural pursuits. Intense cultural activity soon became the hallmark of Indian communities not only in Natal but also in the Transvaal and other parts of the country.

Coming from this background, it was something of a shock to discover during my first decade in India, that Christian missionaries had been and still are no less insidious in

India than they had been in South Africa and elsewhere in the far-flung British sugar colonies. What surprised me was that the missionaries and evangelists seemed to enjoy carte blanche despite obvious signs of covert cultural subversion.

Living in Bangalore for the first three years of my Indian decade, I was astounded to discover that middle and upper-class Indians competed to send their children to “prestige” mission schools throughout that city. Many of those parents proudly proclaimed their Hindu faith, yet seemed blissfully unaware that the “Christian charity” under which mission schools were established in India was in fact undermining the age-old tenets of their own profound cultural traditions.

I thought it incongruous if not highly suspect that Christian missionaries should still be trawling among remote hill tribes and forest-dwelling people in India’s more remote regions while the church has been losing currency in their own western homelands for generations. Successive Indian governments are still to grasp the fact that there is a correlation between political unrest among remote hill people in the north-east and Christian missionary activity.

I thought of the churches that had been used as bingo halls and later warehouses in my early years in England, of the young men and women with whom I had associated there who were more pagan in their beliefs and attitudes than Christian. They hardly if ever went to church, except at Christmas and perhaps Easter, when they were caught up in the intense commercialising of these festivals in the mass media. If they prayed for anything at Christmas, it was most likely to be snow.

My Indian sojourn gave me the opportunity, among other things, to observe the fact that many outstanding young men and women who were making a mark in their professions in both India and as expatriates in the west had had their early education in either traditional or ordinary government schools. They were every bit as successful as, if not better than, their mission-educated counterparts. Yet brain-washed middle-class Indians fondly believed that their children in mission schools were receiving a “prestige” education.

The greater shock in India came when I discovered the snobbery associated with the way in which one spoke English. Admittedly, English proved to be an invaluable lingua franca in a subcontinent awash with a cacophony of tongues. Without English, many Indians would not be able to communicate with one another. Admittedly too, many Indians mangle the English language into the most unlikely linguistic contortions. Yet the simple truth is that however it is distorted, an attempt is being made to communicate one’s thoughts in what is essentially an alien tongue.

As a teenager in South Africa, one of the most hurtful things I read about was a sign in a British club in Delhi which read: “Dogs and Indians not allowed”. Young though I was, that example of British racism made me smart whenever I thought of it through the years. Much later in India, when I encountered Indian snobbishness over the manner in which they spoke English, I wondered how facetious and forgetful people

could become. The elite seem oblivious to the fact that English was the language of the worst despoilers of India's ageless Vedic ethos and cultural mores ever to land on its shores.

In the ensuing years since reading of that uncouth sign, I have delved into my fascinating Hindu past. I simply had to discover for myself why the people among whom I was born and raised with such love and gentle care, whose folklore and mythology revealed such an astute understanding of not only human and animal nature but of nature itself, should be held in such contempt by Christians and others.

I emerged from that delving with the firm belief that the first known vestiges of civilized society on this planet emerged among those of my own race, that its classical Sanskrit language is at the root of almost all spoken tongues, that its Vedic thought is the bedrock of all known religions, that its Vedic scriptures are mankind's most extensive and oldest known records of the elevated thought of ancient man, the first attempt in a far-off past at trying to establish a moral and ethical existence in a world teeming with myriad life forms, that my own "Hindu" race might be the root race of most others in existence.

Yet my Indian decade taught me to accept all these truths with equanimity, for on the spiritual path that I followed in that hallowed land, I learnt that humility could be the greatest of one's strengths. I learnt too, that as diverse as mankind might seem to be, it is in truth the manifestation of aspects of what is in reality One Cosmic Soul.

Years before coming to live in India in 2003, I had started to read classical Indian writings. I discovered the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita. I discovered Kalidas, Tagore and Aurobindo. I revelled in Swami Yogananda whose major works were my real introduction to the mystical side of India. I even discovered the eccentric Nirad Choudhury. A new balance came into my life. I realised that there was more to the world than just conquest, Empire and consumerism, that there was infinitely more to life than just material things.

I must thank Providence that this realisation came while still in my youth. It was triggered by a statement that I read which was attributed to Swami Yogananda, who has influenced more people around the world than many realise.

The exact words written by this genius now escape me but the gist of it was that "novels are the vomiting's of other men's minds." It was only after I came to live in India that I really began to understand the power not only of words but also of thoughts and actions. It was only in India that I began to understand why Sri Sathya Sai Baba constantly reminded his devotees to carefully watch their every thought, word and deed.

It was only doing the course of my Indian sojourn that I started to understand the full import of Swami's often-repeated words. One's thoughts and words – not to mention deeds – can determine the course of one's life. Most of my first three years in India were spent in silence. I lived after my arrival in India, on the rural outskirts of Bangalore

in Whitefield. Because of the location of my flat amidst market gardens in a secluded corner about half a mile from Sai Baba's ashram, I was left very much alone. There was the problem of language, for few people spoke English. Coupled with the fact that I was obviously a foreigner, it meant that I sometimes went for days without talking to anybody.

Although at first I regretted the lack of conversational contact with others, I came to realise in time that the silence was beneficial. Not long afterwards, not only did I start to isolate myself for prolonged periods to avoid conversation, but I also started to control the riot of thoughts in my mind. To still the pandemonium in one's mind is a most difficult exercise but I found that it had tremendous benefits. It is only when the mind is still that the voice of Divinity can be heard.

I had often wondered, in those days of silence, why Sri Sathya Sai Baba had called me to India if I were to live largely in isolation and in silence. It was only later, as my experiences in India grew that it began to dawn that everything that was happening to me had profound meaning. After all these years, I realise that in the silence and stillness that I experienced, I made the most significant discovery possible: for the first time I started to discover my *Self*.

In my first months and years in India, I was overwhelmed by the enormity of the puzzle that is this enigmatic land. It was, all at once, backward and primitive, age-worn and exhausted, parochial and dismally ignorant. It was at the same time vibrant, enormously promising, original and progressive. It was the greatest paradox I could imagine, a puzzle that I had to solve. After my initial shocks in semi-rural India, it dawned on me that to feel the pulse of this eternal land and its peoples, I had to re-invent myself.

I had to shed my Western prejudices and sensibilities acquired through my years of reading Western literature and otherwise simply living in the West. I had to broaden my horizons to acquire a more comprehensive world-view. Within months I started to see that there was considerably more to life than simply the single-minded pursuit of material things. I began to understand things that had puzzled me before.

The writings that follow tell the story of that personal re-invention and of how I was led, in this amazing land, across an ever-rising consciousness to my innermost being, to the discovery of the cosmic energies that pulse through all of creation – so exquisitely depicted by some long - forgotten Tamil sculptor as Nadaraja, Lord of Dance – swirling through time and space, and of the realisation of my oneness with all things and all beings within the immutable reality of the One Eternal Soul that we call God.