2. Bhadrak

My first academic job was as a lecturer in Mathematics at Bhadrak College. Bhadrak is a town in Odisha about 315 km south of Calcutta, on the Indian east coast. When I arrived there one fine morning in 1957, I found the college campus in a mess, a big mess and of many dimensions. With building materials for construction lying all over the place, making it difficult to negotiate the paths, groups of girls and boys everywhere, mostly outside under the sun, but some doing classes in rooms not yet fully ready for use, and so on.

I walked into the Principal's room. He welcomed me with a wide smile and explained to me the biggest problem he was facing, not related to that visible mess outside. The faction opposed to him in the college politics was planning to mix up the time tables to be drawn up soon for the next academic session, so that for example, the Principal feared with great anxiety, two different classes could be assigned to the same room, a lecturer scheduled to perform in two different classes at the same time, some courses allotted more than the prescribed number of lecture hours, others less than necessary, and so on. This was a threat looming large even as the campus was getting built, adding to the confusion. So, the Principal said to me: "Get me out of this time table mess soonest; that's how you begin here". Obviously, he had faith in a mathematics graduate of the ordinary sort, such as I was then, and am still, to solve big logistical problems involving the movement of many teachers and groups of large numbers of students across rooms and over allotted time periods. The Principal's faith in someone like me to do this complicated job was very flattering but as I found later based on the fact that the threat itself was coming from a mathematics lecturer in the opposing faction, who alone was then widely believed to be capable of performing the magic assignments: of students to classes with teachers, and movements without collisions. Actually, making timetables such as for these college classes – with different kinds of constraints determined by numbers of rooms and their capacities for seating, and numbers of

students for different courses, and so on – is a simple matter provided one has all the required information.

I did that on my first day (and night, lit by a kerosene lamp, electricity being very rare in Bhadrak residential houses then): tricky business for those lacking courage and initiative. But it's really simple to shuffle the teacher names, room numbers, courses taught and so on; perhaps only slightly more difficult than solving a SUDOKU puzzle you get daily these days, provided one has accurate information on all the required parameters such as the names of teachers, numbers of students they teach, and so on. Working out these timetables made me feel like a commander-in-chief at war dictating troop movements. Not bad, I thought, for Day One on the field.

I was too young then to be mean: so I refrained from making a difficult time schedule for the other mathematics lecturer, the Principal's presumed enemy number one. I had not yet met that enemy. Later, after I met him he turned out to be a friendly colleague. No surprise there, because he was not *my* enemy and in any case most enemies exist only in our imagination. I've learnt many lessons in that respect and now go by the golden principle that all are friends and everybody is a convex combination of the good and the bad, and indeed that I'm such a combination myself with weights for the good and the bad that others assign to me over which I've no control.

The next day began with another big smile from the Principal, with the new timetables all at hand, obviously acknowledging the 'mission accomplished', and then, too soon, I was sent to teach class. So, here I was within a day of my arriving in Bhadrak facing a class of 128 students. That was how I started teaching.

But the story begins much earlier. I entered the Andhra University (AU) in 1951 to study mathematics. Why Mathematics? Thereby hangs a tale I'd relate later. The course I did over a period of three years was primitive, designed decades ago, suited wholly to the acquisition and exhibition of algebraic skills to solve problems in pure and applied mathematics of the type set for the Cambridge Tripos examinations of

the 1930s or even earlier. Already in a few Indian universities in north India mathematics courses were getting modernised, but the universities in the south were lagging behind in this respect. The AU mathematics course was – apart from being outdated - quite tough, packed as it was, tightly with too many subjects, some of them such as Astronomy, quite boring. (We went through the Astronomy course without ever looking at the sky. One thing I remember is that triangles on the sphere could go in sum over the 180 degree mark defying good old Euclid's plane geometry concept in our school books.) Because of this and because the teaching department was poorly staffed (the only scholar of any worth being Professor Vommi Ramaswami who earned his Ph.D at Cambridge), passing out with any merit was extremely difficult. So, it was no surprise that only 5 in our batch of 25 students could come out with some success. I was one of them, and so I was quite cocky with hopes of getting soon a lectureship in some college.

Imagine then my utter surprise and helplessness when I failed to get an academic position for close to three years (1954-57). When it was getting clear that I wouldn't be landing a lectureship, I set my sights lower for a tutorship - that paid a hundred rupees a month in those days, about one-half of a lecturer's salary. Even that didn't help. To cap it all, I couldn't secure a fifty rupee monthly stipend as a research scholar either at the Andhra University or at the Ravenshaw College in Cuttack, where Professor R.Mohanty agreed to supervise my research and did his best to get me a scholarship without luck. So I sailed with unemployment, with hopes for better times.

College education was expanding then but at only a slow rate; the rapid increase in institutions of higher education in India started much later – perhaps from the early or mid-1960s. I was unemployed and had to survive in difficult circumstances for my family as a whole (a sad story of decline I'm not recounting here – one caused by my father's incurable illness) being looked after then by my elder brother NNM – who for very good reasons was pushing me to look for a clerical job such as one of those in the Income Tax Department of the central government. Such positions lead to gradual promotions within the department and to

pensions after retirement. These jobs were much sought after then. They still do. I resisted that prospect: I decided with vehemence that I'd never be a clerk in the government under a hierarchical system, no matter how well it'd ensure my gradual upward mobility in money and status and further on lead to old-age security – objectives relentlessly pursued by the middle classes. I wanted freedom to do my own thing, whatever that was, and for which I'd no clue then.

So I got on in those tough times, with an allowance for me that paid for two cigarettes a day. My mother secretly passed this out of her own meagre allotment for feeding a big family. I carried on; doing nothing apart from reading books of no consequence I could get from different sources and running errands for my brother who had begun a promising private practice as a chartered accountant.

One evening in August 1957 I was travelling to Cuttack, by the Madras - Howrah Mail, to deliver some papers to my brother's partner at their Cuttack branch office. From Berhampur, my hometown, I got into an Inter-Class compartment. You may or may not have heard of the Inter Class, so let me explain: There were in those days the First class and the Second Class in all trains – very expensive but well provided with space and amenities. And, of course, there was the Third Class for the common people, but there was this Inter Class as well. The Inter Class was designed, under the British rule of the Indian railways, to separate the middle classes – not having enough money to travel by a higher class – from the unwashed public in the Third Class. Both the Third Class and the Inter Class were always jam-packed in all trains, with many passengers having to stand for hours, shifting limbs and changing postures for comfort.

One curious feature of this kind of classified travelling must be told: There was no reservation system in those days on the Indian Railways and the occupation of seats and berths was on a first-come-first-served basis. This meant that, for example, on the Madras - Howrah (Calcutta) train the early starters from Madras and other points in the less distant south could sit in comfort, some of them stretching themselves in full length on berths that they could (and would) cover with bedding

material to establish territoriality. The curious feature is that the Inter Class ethic dictated acceptance of this territoriality without question; true there was the occasional squabble and an aggressive standing passenger could gain a seat, but in general there was no justice for the mute 'standing' majority. Even more curious is the fact that it was wholly different in the Third Class – where nobody could travel appropriating space that others could occupy. Moreover, it was rare for Third Class passengers to fight and come to blows within the compartment. But they were no angels. The fights did take place, but were all at the entrance at every single station: those within - no matter how they managed to get in there - were all friends by virtue of a shared and established territoriality and those trying to enter (by door or unbarred window, with or without bags) were enemies to be pushed out, young or old, men or women.

I can't resist the temptation of an analogy of this 'third-class-compartment-behaviour' in railway trains with what happens in many academic institutions in India. Good and competent scholars move out with ease from place to place, to leave a third class immobile residue that acquires over time an overwhelming political power and prevents the entry of those clearly superior to its own mediocre members.

Anyway, here I was on the Madras-Howrah Mail in an Inter Class compartment on a journey of about three and a half hours to Cuttack. There was no vacant seat; nor did I expect one. I moved among the press of bodies and settled to stand between two lower berths occupied fully by an old couple – Bengalis, as I could see from their clothing and general appearance. The lady, fat and wearing a white sari with a resplendent wide red border, was asleep although it was only 6.30 in the evening. The man was pretending to be asleep, opening a slant eye now and then to make sure that his dominion was not threatened. An hour passed and I was fidgeting, shuffling about on my feet. The old man finally opened his eyes in full, pulled his body up a bit to a reclining posture with knees drawn up close to his chest and gestured to the space released at his feet, obviously offering me a seat. So I sat next to him with relief. Then he began by asking me personal details - of the

kind all travellers ask other passengers on Indian trains. Relating my life story, including my 'qualifications' such as they were and current unemployment status, hardly took 5 minutes. I did that fast because I knew it would all be ferreted out anyway as we travelled. After all, I got a seat and so there's no reason why I shouldn't part with useless information with good cheer.

My encapsulated life history didn't seem to interest him - and I don't blame him for that reaction. What interested him was my name. He asked: What does the N. in your name stand for? I said 'Nidadavolu'. He shook his head a couple of times, and after a minute or two asked me: Are you related to Nidadavolu Venkata Rao? That Venkata Rao was a reader of Telugu literature in the Madras University, in fact the first one to head a Telugu department therein, and he was a first cousin of my father. (He later moved to Hyderabad as a professor under a UGC scheme.) The old Bengali gentleman on that train to Calcutta shook his head a few times once again and asked me: What about Nidadavolu Jagannatha Rao? I was absolutely stunned – not having a clue about how this old Bengali wizard could divine these different names. Nidadavolu Jagannadha Rao was my father's elder brother: he retired (during the 1940s) as the head master of the well-known Annie Besant Memorial School in Adyar, a Madras suburb.

So I asked him: Sir, how do you know all these names? That question was enough to launch the old man on to a speech I never could expect. He began telling me in reply bits of his own life story. Benoy Bhushan Rakshit (BBR), with a master's degree in English literature, looking for jobs in the early 1920s landed in Kakinada, then known as Coconada in the Madras Presidency and stayed on there for over three decades, teaching English at the Pithapuram Rajah's (PR) College in that town. (That solves one mystery. Nidadavolu Venkata Rao worked in the same college for a few years. Rakshit must have known him then and got the news about my uncle Jagannadha Rao as well.) He learnt and spoke Telugu well, and so did his wife (now reclining in bliss on this train). His daughter, not present on this journey, was practically an Andhra person, having grown up in Kakinada. Rakshit babu, having retired from the PR

College (as Vice-Principal) there, was appointed as Principal of the newly set up college in Bhadrak in Orissa, where he now lived. He went to Kakinada on a short trip and was now returning to Bhadrak on that – for me – fateful Howrah mail.

As we were nearing Cuttack, my destination, Rakshit babu asked me more questions: about persons and families I knew or was expected to know by his vast knowledge of Andhra families; he knew how to guess caste from surnames, and easily so in the case of brahmins (being a Brahmo convert presumably retaining ordained brahminical wisdom as ever). So he asked me about the Marella family in Berhampur, and specifically about Marella Radhakrishna (MR), already recruited by him in the Bhadrak College as a lecturer in English. No, I didn't know Radhakrishna but I knew some others of the Marella family. And so on, it continued. As we neared Cuttack, and I was about to get off the train Rakshit babu called me back and said "Come next Monday to Bhadrak to start as a lecturer in mathematics".

I was stunned. Sir, I said, I didn't apply for the job. Never mind, BBR said, come next week to Bhadrak to begin your work.

When I went back home to Berhampur the next day and told my brother about what happened on the train, he laughed and said, "That old man was simply pulling your leg".

But I took the chance and went to Bhadrak.

Remembering Bhadrak

Life in Bhadrak was simple and easygoing. With dictatorial powers over timetables, I scheduled all my classes to begin early from 8 in the morning so that I could get back home before noon at the latest. I then cooked a meal for myself: rice, dal, and vegetables on a Primus kerosene-based stove. My mother taught me how to cook that sort of a simple meal. It's absolutely amazing that a standard meal in my family continues to be the same: with pappu annam (a mixture of rice and dal), and perugu annam (rice and curds) at the two ends, with some vegetables (fried or cooked with onions etc) in between as a course or as

a relish. I love seeing my two granddaughters, Ananya and Inara, enjoying this traditional family meal even as they go global in all respects – eating pork and beef ignoring their brahminical roots, as indeed I do.

The Bhadrak college library, poor as it was like others in such colleges all over India, had nevertheless a few collections of books such as those of Shakespeare, Dickens and Freud. So I had plenty to read – behind a mosquito net at night by lamplight.

I had to send half of my monthly salary of 200 rupees to my sister in the medical college in Cuttack. What remained was enough but not quite so as I looked at the way I wanted to go – with some extra cash for books, and so on. I took on a dull Sardar boy for private coaching for 50 rupees a month, a very substantial sum in those days – and he regularly gave me the bonus of a tin of Kerosene that was enough to provide light in the house and fuel for the primus stove for cooking. (The Sardar's father controlled petrol and kerosene supplies in the town.)

The most intriguing part of this tale is this: I sent dozens of 'applications' for employment without success during my unemployment phase. As a friend (R.Gopalan) later described it referring to other similar experiences, it was a case of apply-apply-and–no-reply (a cliché of social relevance I heard for the first time then). It's absolutely amazing that after that Bhadrak appointment that came my way without a formal application I've never had to apply for a job – as I moved from place to place and was finally, surprisingly nominated for a National Fellowship of the ICSSR in 2007 at the age of 72, years after I was compulsorily retired at 60 in 1995 to be put then on the shelf forever.

My correspondence about this Bhadrak episode with T.Krishna Kumar, a friend of long standing, led to another equally amazing tale, told by an old relative of his: Rakshit did his MA in English in Calcutta around 1920 and couldn't get a job as a lecturer (under a largely whites-only field) in Bengal. So he then went south in search of job. In the Andhra region there were only 4 or 5 colleges, all with local Maharajas as patrons. The Pithapuram Raja's college in Kakinada was one such. (The college in Berhampur in Orissa I studied in was Khallikote Raja's college.) The

dewan - or some other official in the Pithapuram zamindari - heard about this wandering Bengali and gave him a lecturer's job in the PRCollege. My friend Krishna Kumar says that when Rakshit heard my unemployment story on that Madras-Howrah train he was probably reminded of his own plight in 1920 - and readily gave me a job. My friend says: “quite often behind every kind gesture of someone lays a similar gesture made towards him/her by someone else. This is a contagious phenomenon”.

A piece of luck: A colleague at Bhadrak College told me that the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) holds a competitive entrance test for their postgraduate statistics training courses. This was news to me because earlier the admissions to these courses were based on marks scored at the master’s level in mathematics: reason why I hadn’t hitherto applied for admission, having scored only modestly in the qualifying examination. So I sat for the competitive test in 1959 and got admitted into the ISI statistics progamme. The tests, as I discovered later, were designed by Debabrata Basu (who later taught us probability theory, creating a lasting interest in the subject for many of us, his students). They were of the objective type for picking up the right answer usually among four specified alternatives, and intriguingly framed so that they required both analytical ability in mathematics and speed to navigate them with success. In other words, marks scored in earlier university examinations were of no relevance to these tests of knowledge and aptitude. Many years later, I participated in the design of the entrance tests for admission into the Indian Institutes of Management, contributing a few items to a ‘question bank’ for possible inclusion in the final tests.