

THE DANCE OF DESTINY

BY

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Dedicated

to

our

spirit guides

“May the Lord of Love, who projects himself

Into this universe of myriad forms,

From whom all beings come and to whom all return,

Grant us the grace of wisdom”

- *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*

THE DANCE OF DESTINY

Part 1 THE WHEELS FELL OFF

Endorsements

“ ... an extraordinary piece of work. ...it is unique because not only does it evoke in a rich fashion a life that has been extraordinary ... but it also deeply reflective about what it means to be human. ... an account of a journey of a soul, an account that enriches us as we continue on our individual pilgrimages through life.”

Dr. Greg Melleuish, Associate Professor, School of History and
Politics, University of Wollongong, NSW, and author

“As one might expect from a Tamil-Malayan-Australian, Raja Ratnam offers cross-grained reflections on his early life. Here is anecdote and analysis from an author who resorts to quotation despite sharpening epigrams of his own. Whether grieving or jocular, he is, by turn, percipient and puzzled, skeptical yet superstitious. The wheels have not fallen off his humanity.”

Humphrey McQueen, historian and author, Canberra

“ The witty, bittersweet reminiscences of a man travelling between cultures, observing and questioning systems and beliefs around him...This intriguing saga, packed with information on Tamil-Indian-Malay customs, offers a cosmic worldview with a twist.”

Anne-Marie Smith, President, Multicultural Writers' Association of Australia

Part 1 THE WHEELS FELL OFF

Chapter 1

THE UPHEAVAL : LIFE UNDER THE JAPANESE

“War’s a brain-spattering, windpipe-splitting art”

- Lord Byron 1788-1824

A casual contact

Youth is never wasted on the young. A chief characteristic of youth is being inquisitive. In that, they are cat-like. Who hasn’t observed a cat enter a room and carefully, and yet casually, inspect everything and everybody in that room? It is not a security check; it is simply a desire to know. So it was with two Ceylon Tamil boy-cousins, aged twelve and thirteen, who had noticed a white soldier standing guard outside his sentry-box. Normally, it would be a Malay soldier, splendidly attired, meticulously trained by British officers, who would be seen on guard duty at military installations. The sentry box was at the entrance to a school which was now a military camp. The soldiers were Australian – so Bala and I had been told by our uncle whom we were visiting during our school holidays.

It was a balmy late afternoon, with the setting sun lighting up the sky with the most glorious colours. With great curiosity we sauntered across to the sentry, and said “Hello, soldier.” His reply was somewhat incomprehensible to us. Was he speaking English, we wondered privately. Well, it had to be English, hadn’t it? Had not Australia been settled by the English? Almost simultaneously, we said, “Sorry, what did you say?” and moved a little closer; yet, with some trepidation. After all, the fellow had a rifle in his hand. As he might not want to be caught by his superior having his watch interrupted by two inquisitive boys, he might shoo us away. As a Japanese proverb has it, “A cat’s friend is its caution.”

We then began a conversation of a kind. In spite of the Australian’s drawl and dry-as-dust accent, against our boyish fast speech with a Malayan Tamil accent, we were able to introduce ourselves to one another. To Indians, and their cultural cohorts the Tamils of Sri Lanka, speedy speech is an indicator of intelligence (as is a high forehead), a reflection of a quick mind. The sentry would not have known that, not at his level of responsibility in a military hierarchy.

Anyway, the sentry seemed relaxed about talking to us. He told us that he was happy to be there. He could see no difficulty in teaching the Japanese a well-deserved lesson.

Our uncle (very much an Anglophile), having befriended a captain in the Australian contingent, had already offered some advice to us about dealing with the Australians. His advice, he said, had been influenced by the Aussie captain who had been a bank manager back home. I remember my uncle bringing the captain to an unplanned meal at my home. My mother, a most efficient cook, prepared a light meal for our unexpected guests. I also remember the Australian joining Bala and I in singing scout songs in the car on our way to our Uncle's distant home.

The initial advice given to us by our uncle was that the Australians we would meet would not be able to cope with words, in any language, longer than two syllables. Bala and I could not believe that, but we thought it prudent to be silent. Our cultural tradition was not to ever challenge senior members of the family. There was always the risk of a smack for not displaying adequate respect. Anyway, as was said by the famous Anon, "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt."

However, the captain had apparently provided two examples to Uncle of the linguistic difficulty allegedly suffered by Australians. He had explained that the word papaya had been such a problem to his countrymen that they had coined a replacement more suited to their tongue – pawpaw; and the ubiquitous brinjal or aubergine (loved by Asians and Mediterraneans alike) had, for similar reasons, been translated to egg-plant. This had led to us scratching our heads in wonderment. We both attended a school with English as the medium of teaching. Our teachers, all Asian, had been well trained in the U.K. We had, of course, never seen a purple egg; and a paw multiplied by two surely meant an animal. We guessed that the Australian captain had spoken in jest, that is, with his tongue in both cheeks.

Mindful of our manners, we introduced ourselves as Bala and Raja. Promptly, the sentry addressed us as Bal and Raj. This was not good, as our parents would probably want to kill us for having our names so debased. In our culture, a personal name is not simply a handy or useful label. It is an artefact, a composite of terms reflecting religious affirmation and tribal beliefs. Significantly, in our tribe, a given name is a joining together of two or three words, each of which has its own religious or cultural significance. That is why an Indian or Sri Lankan name is such a mouthful to Europeans, and possibly to others.

For example, in the decade of the noughties in the twenty-first century, news readers in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation continue to mangle Asian names. They have yet not received appropriate guidance in the pronunciation of these names. For example, President Hu

of China was once presented to us Mr. Hugh! In earlier times, we had the Maha-brata (the big loaf?) instead of the Mahabharatha, the famous Indian epic. What the news readers (as well as the commentators in international cricket) do to Indian names is near blasphemous. Luckily for Bala and I, the soldier said that his name was Jack. We, in turn, were then not to know that, back in his country, there were so many Johns about that some of them had to be addressed as Jack. So I was told when I arrived in Australia. But I did wonder whether whoever said that to me was not displaying that Aussie sense of humour.

When, a few years after the end of the war, Bala and I went to university in Australia, we did find that the Australian people had a great, but slightly confusing, sense of humour, especially in relation to personal names. A red-headed person was called 'blue', a bald person was 'curly', a short person was 'lanky', a tall person was 'shorty', a close friend was 'you bastard', women were 'sheilas' (whatever that was), coloured people were 'boongs' or 'black bastards', East Asians (the then feared 'yellow hordes') were 'chinks', the then unwanted European migrants were 'wogs', and their own ancestral people, the British, were most often known warmly as 'poms', 'jocks' or 'paddies', reflecting the three main ethno-cultural strands forming the British people.

The non-Anglo people in Australia were, of course, not amused by the appellations. We also found it confusing whenever a friendly Anglo-Aussie greeted us with a smile, a warm pat on the back, and words such as "How are you, you old bastard?" For, to Europeans and Asians alike, the term bastard is an insult. To us, being or producing a bastard is not a laughing matter. Nevertheless, we early Asian arrivals in the White Australia policy era soon learnt that the Anglo-Aussie was then very much a racist. This racism was an unthinking reflection of the historic white Christian coloniser values prevailing wherever less technologically advanced peoples had been over-run and exploited.

Our exposure to the peculiarities of Australian society, and the political and demographic developments which were to eventuate in that great nation, were of course way into the future. In the meanwhile, Bala and I, our two families, and the Malayan population at large, felt grateful that the Australians had arrived to offer us protection from a most probable invasion. We did not know then that Australians had a habit of rushing off to fight on behalf of the mother country, even when Australia was not at risk. Even Roman Catholics of Irish descent, who did not then like their Protestant fellow-Australians, joined in wars on the side of the British! Our concern was that, in a global war between resource-hungry industrial nations, the Malayan people were very likely to finish up as mangled mince-meat. We were not, however, warned that this intended protection by Britain and Australia was to be as ephemeral in effect as that pre-dawn mist which, almost wistfully, caresses the hilltop vegetation at the equator, but only for a moment of time.

A speedy withdrawal

The attack was sudden. British propaganda, directed at both colonial rulers and native subjects, had played down the military capability of the alleged monkey-like, short-sighted men. They were always presented as wearing spectacles and with buck teeth. Their nation was popularly known only for its capacity to copy the West's industrial and consumer goods. Surely such inferior people would not dare to launch a clearly un-winnable war against the greatest industrial and colonial nations in the known brief history of mankind.

That was an inference we local people were invited to draw. Were we aware that Japan's attack on resource-rich south east Asia might have been in response to economic and/or political constraints applied by the West, particularly the USA? Yet, the great artistic traditions of the Japanese people, especially in poetry, painting, literature and ceramics, and their quaint customs relating to tea making and the role of geisha girls, were recognized as worthy by Western peoples, but perhaps only by the more effete members of these societies.

In the manner of a gawky teenager who had only recently metamorphosed into a well-muscled young adult, the British were said to be over-impressed with their relatively-recently achieved industrial and military prowess. They were clearly not mature enough, said my elders, to appreciate the lessons offered by their predecessors, just like a newly-developed young adult seeking to make his mark somewhere. I am reminded of the dogs wandering down my street, each claiming the same territory through the usual leg-lifting technique. My elders also said that the British were not adequately aware that power over other peoples had been shown by history to have built-in use-by dates. The conquerors of relevance were the muscular ones, such as the Mongol empires of the Great Khans, their predecessor the Huns, the truncated empire of Alexander the Macedonian (who had been sent packing by the Indians at the River Indus), and the empires of Napoleon, Rome and others. All of these were known for their descent into oblivion after vain, yet sometimes scintillating, efforts to remain viable.

The multi-ethnic peoples in Malaya had, of course, been kept informed of the destructive advance of Japan's military through north-east Asia. Presumably because that was an inter-Asian matter, the British propaganda perspective about the might of the white nations remained undefiled. It was not, however, unusual for us to see street sweepers and shop keepers assiduously reading, almost side by side, their vernacular newspapers on the footpaths about international developments. The shop keepers, especially the Chinese with their singlets rolled up to expose their midriff, sat on stools, the sweepers (Indian and Chinese) squatted at the kerb. The Chinese shopkeepers liked to sip tea from little china cups whilst fanning their mid-regions. Indian shop keepers preferred, instead, to cool their tea by pouring it from one brass tumbler into another and back again, at a goodly height. My father said that this demonstrated that the

Chinese had a better understanding of the laws of physics in relation to human-body homeostasis.

Ironically, those reading vernacular newspapers were more likely to be better informed than those who relied on newspapers in English. The Indians and Chinese, calmly confident in the knowledge that their cultural history goes back proudly and continuously for at least five thousand years (so most of them insist), were more likely to be realistic in reading the signs of international political developments, both in the movements of the planets and on Earth. Among the short-sighted English language-dependent readers were those Indians and Ceylonese who chose to mislead themselves about the Caucasian origins they felt they shared with their colonial masters, and whose manner of dress and behaviour they tended to emulate. These sycophantic 'black Englishmen' (as they were described by their more chauvinistic countrymen) were most likely to be beguiled by colonial propaganda, and therefore unprepared for Japan violating us.

The bombs began to fall whilst I was having a violin lesson. I did not hear them initially, although they were falling only about three miles away. Born into a tradition that children were to be only seen and not heard, I lacked the confidence necessary to allow any talent for musical expression to manifest itself, and then to possibly flower. Whilst I sawed away on my cheap violin, imported from England by my Goanese teacher, the explosion of the bombs on the local airfield alerted my family to the frightening reality of the beginning of a dreaded war. It was very worrying to note the apparently cumbersome British fighter planes striving unsuccessfully, with their engines roaring, to reach the Japanese bombers way above them. Whilst none of us had been anywhere close to a war, we feared what might happen to us innocent civilians. We had, of course, seen those Indian films, each about four hours long, each depicting the spectrum of all the good things as well as the terrible things that could happen to mankind. Amidst the disasters and death displayed were scenes of war, and their physical and moral destruction. We could not possibly look into the future with any peace of mind.

My young violin tutor, a member of a highly talented musical family whose teenagers were often seen playing the violin as they walked about their home, cycled off in a great panic. That an Indian family from the Portuguese enclave of Goa in India could display such an affinity for Western music had previously been explained to me by the probability that an educated expatriate, whether priest, pirate or planter, had provided the necessary seeding at the time the family had been clasped to the bosom of the Pope. As my family watched the aerial debacle in despair, they must have wondered whether the British were capable of beating off the despised attacker. The Japanese were already well known for their brutality.

The next day being a normal day, I cycled to market, about three miles away. There the fish would have been caught the day before, and brought overnight to the nation's capital. The vegetables would have been extracted from the soil around the township at dawn. Years later, as a citizen of Australia, I would buy from my air-conditioned supermarkets food that had left the ground or the sea anything from three days to three weeks before, such being the deleterious consequence of living in a highly developed nation. On route to the market, I was horribly surprised to see Japanese planes dropping their bombs. These seemed to be linked vertically by some invisible string, and visibly falling in my direction. Together with two others, I scrambled under a low concrete culvert, wondering whether this protection would be adequate; or whether we might be buried under it. One of my neighbours, a Chinese, pulled out a chain of beads and began to count them with his eyes closed. He is a Christian, I thought. The other Chinese must have been praying silently, for his lips were most active. Probably a Buddhist, I surmised.

Being a Hindu, I simply waited for what might come. Perhaps I was just a little stupid. But the bombs did not reach us. Instead, they hit their target, the railway station, not that far away. My family, true to tradition, displayed no fuss on my safe return, with the shopping complete. This was not because they were cold-blooded. We were simply a somewhat emotionally-controlled family. Much later in life, I did wonder whether the proverbial stiff upper lip of the British ruling class had been learnt from Indians cast in the mould of my family. Nevertheless, it has to be recognized that my family's behaviour was an exception to the prevailing tradition of most of the peoples of Asia. These express their emotions noisily, even in public.

My family, like the rest of the people waited in great fear about the damage the war would cause, the uncertainty of existence, and of being unable to feed ourselves. We realised that we were at the mercy of both attacker and defender. So, we waited patiently. The uncertainty was a terrible burden for the adults. If injured, who would look after us? Would there be any medication available? Where? What about transport? We had always relied on bicycles and buses, with some use of the sooty steam train for interstate travel. My predominant memory of train travel is having my eyes forever filled with some fragment of soot. That was caused by looking out of the permanently open windows, as there was no air conditioning. A major issue for the family was where our food would come from. So, my father filled our store room as quickly as possible with dry food such as rice, beans, peas, lentils and such like. Another major concern was – who would protect us from thieves and ruffians? So, the men in our cluster of houses armed themselves with staves, and agreed to work together for mutual protection. Tribal origins became more irrelevant than usual. Fear and hope bonded us all.

Recorded history shows unequivocally that the Japanese out-planned, out-manouevred, and out-fought the British, Indian and Australian defenders. They could not have heard about the guideline for war set out by their historical Queen Victoria: "We are not interested in the possibilities of defeat." It was an ignominious and, what was worse, a hasty withdrawal by our colonial masters. Obviously, they could not afford to have much regard for our plight. They

couldn't, could they? One of my uncles, a volunteer in the military, withdrew with the British forces to Singapore. When all was lost, he virtually walked back home. To his great joy, his family was safe. His son Bala and I were the only protection three young mothers and nine younger children had, whilst we hid in the coolie 'lines' of a vacated rubber estate. Each estate would normally have produced sheets of smoked rubber. The source material was a white sticky sap, which oozed from daily cuts into the trunk of a rubber tree. The collection of this sap was made at the crack of dawn. The tappers and their families, very dark south Indian immigrants, were invariably stick-thin. They were cheap exploitable indentured labour.

Avoiding the bombs

When the bombs fell over the nation's capital, my uncle Kuna had been visiting his sister, my mother, and his elder brother Ratna, Bala's father. He visited us frequently, always arriving with a bottle of expensive sweets imported from Britain. He was a kind, gentle man. Bala and I lived about a hundred yards apart, and we were constant companions. More importantly, by tribal tradition, the extended family formed a close-knit social unit. The mothers were often in each other's homes, as were the children. Whenever either mother cooked our traditional cakes or some other delicacy, a plateful would be delivered to the other family. The plate would be returned immediately, usually with a piece of fruit on it. All gifts were thus acknowledged. Perhaps only a civilized people behaved thus.

Occasionally, cousin Bala and I would trot over to his house from the field on which we played, looking for refreshments. My aunt would provide a drink and a cake. This might be accompanied - I am not sure why - by some pertinent advice about living, and codes of conduct. Perhaps we asked. Thus, after my mother, she was the most influential woman during my formative years. She must have known that I considered her wise. For, on the night she died, at a very advanced age, she appeared to me as I was falling asleep. She looked exactly the way she did in those years.

Our home was the meeting place for the brothers and their sister and her family. They would chat about all manner of things. As long as I was silent, I could serve the customary cakes and tea, and sit in and listen - and learn - about a range of issues which served me well as I grew up. I listened to talk about politics, both international and local, religion, the community, and much else. The men had very strong views, which were not always in agreement. Through these conversations, and the support and encouragement he gave me to excel in my studies and in sport, led me to see him, after my father, as the most influential man during my formative years. It was not surprising that his spirit should appear in a significant psychic experience to offer me guidance. This was after my retirement from work. His advice was in relation to my spiritual development. That did not surprise me, as there is evidence from anthropological studies that

the maternal uncle can have a significant influence in the progression of youth to manhood. In my case, the post-retirement advice was timely.

As a metaphysical Hindu, a church-going Christian, and a freethinker who believes that all the major religions are equal in their potential, I had become attracted, post-retirement, to a specific vision of the future. Having completed my family responsibilities, and whilst I continued to work for the betterment of my community (even as a marginal member), I wanted to understand the Cosmos, and my place in it. I also wanted to understand why I had been 'dumped' into a strange land with no extended family or tribal community support. More importantly, family history having suggested an early demise, I was particularly interested in the nature of Reality, and the 'Way Station' which I expected to join soon. But all that was to come later.

Listening to my elders, I also learnt a lot about ethnic community relations. This was a country in which Chinese, Indian and Ceylonese immigrants had over-run the indigenous Malays in government administration and other employment, as well as commerce and trade. The immigrants brought in a great variety of languages, and were thereby unable to communicate readily with anyone outside their language group, without the shared language of Malay or English. These we learnt as best as we could. Some grouches about work and other personal problems would surface during some of the conversations. These brought to me another level of reality. The strange names of British colonial rulers, such as Duff Cooper or Shenton Thomas, amongst others, raised my further interest in the kind of people who would leave their homes to govern others in strange and generally unwelcoming places.

Unlike those who had moved homes in order to either rule (for the benefit of their mother country) or to exploit (for personal reasons), the three young mothers in the extended family and their eleven children were soon moved into Kuna Uncle's home (in our community's tradition, the person's name precedes the identifier of relationship). This move had been precipitated by Kuna Uncle because he had panicked at the sight of his beloved British being clearly beaten in aerial combat. With the consent of the men folk, the two families in the capital were initially rushed to his home for safety.

I remember the little car we travelled in. It had two doors. The four windows were canvas screens which were clipped onto the frames of the doors in front, and the body of the car at the back. Each screen had a celluloid insert which allowed vision. Long before this intended escape from Japanese bombs, I had once punched my fist through one of the screens, whilst wrestling with my cousin. We had obviously been bored. Our uncle, being a kind man, had merely chastised us. Kuna Uncle's house was very familiar to Bala and I. Once a year, we would spend a week or so there. It was there that I attempted frequently to parachute from the roof of his garage (about eight feet high), using a towel! There was also a mango tree next door, whose

fruit-laden branches overhung the dividing fence. We used to knock down the occasional green mango by throwing stones. We ameliorated the sharp bite of the taste by first dipping the flesh into crushed salt. What we did not like about our holiday visits was the required polishing of Kuna Uncle's vast collection of brass objects. His intention might have been to reduce our time for getting into trouble.

A few days after our arrival in the small township on the road south to Singapore, Japanese planes bombed the railway station, presumably to deny any retreat of the defenders by rail. The station was a very short distance away, as the crow flies, from Kuna Uncle's home. We took refuge in a large concrete pipe set up as an air raid shelter in the back yard, in which we sat with our feet in about three inches of water. There, we felt the blast of the bombs very vibrantly. When we re-entered the house, it looked as if it had been well shaken. Everything above floor height, especially the brass collection, was now on the floor. From out of the frying pan into the fire, I thought, with all the wisdom of a teenager. The three young mothers must have been terrified.

Such proximity to the war led to Kuna Uncle moving the three families into a rubber estate. Whilst we were now away from the bombing, we were fairly close to the trunk road to Singapore. There, the constant retreat of the defenders was clearly visible to us. What if there was fighting along this road? What if the Japanese continued to encircle the defenders by charging through the rubber estate, in the same way they were reportedly working their way through the jungles adjacent to the trunk roads from north to south, and cutting off the path of retreat of the defenders? The mothers worried about these matters fruitlessly, as I overheard. Worse still, we were all exposed to any robbers or ruffians who might venture our way. It was a very unsafe hideaway from war. Hindsight said that we should have stayed at home. Yet, what could one expect from youngish men, in their late thirties, with young families to protect, to do?

In this context, I do remember the three mothers asking one another why the British, Indians and Australians were retreating instead of fighting. "If you're not going to use your army, may I borrow it?" as said by President Lincoln during the American civil war comes to mind. In their collective wisdom, the mothers subsequently agreed that, if the British could not beat off the Japanese, it was better for us that they ran. Otherwise, there would be destruction but without benefit. But, they did wonder at the strategy of the British to retreat to the island of Singapore, where all that the Japanese had to do was to cut off the water supply from the mainland. Obviously, there had been some discussion earlier within each family about military strategies. Of course, we were all aware that the British had defensive guns facing out to sea on Singapore Island. As was shown by later wars, such as the Vietnam war, successful Asian attackers thought outside the square! The military strategies of the Mongol warriors in eastern Europe comes to mind.

Our life in the rubber estate was fairly harsh. Each mother and her children slept on straw mats placed on a bare timber platform. This took up half of a pokey room. Outside this room was an open verandah which had a raised block to hold a grinding stone for spices. For both the rubber tappers and our families, this equipment was essential to the preparation of meals. We could not possibly conceive of food unspiced. A fireplace had also been provided for cooking. Water was available from a communal tap serving a few housing blocks of about six rooms each. Washing clothes required the women to walk a fair distance down a slope to a babbling creek. Toilets were open pits, which the little ones were afraid to use. When we went to sleep, the front and back doors were firmly locked in each of the family rooms. There were no windows. Security over-rode ventilation.

All food had to be brought in by Kuna Uncle in his little car. The three mothers, whose ages ranged from the mid-twenties to early thirties, had grown up in fairly harsh rural environs in north Ceylon. This area had apparently been settled by Hindu Tamils from south-east and central India more than a thousand years before. They were therefore not unused to a life of hard work and hardship; yet their life in the rubber estate was a descent into a more harsh and insecure life. Worse still, we had also to become accustomed to the unpleasant odour of smoked rubber sheets, which over-hung everything. What had prevented this odour from being dissipated in time?

This life in smelly but silent surroundings was enlivened by the urgent buzzing of mosquitoes at night, and the chatter by day of the younger children. I think that we, the children, thoroughly enjoyed being together. Naturally, the older ones helped to look after the young ones. One day, whilst the younger children were playing in a circle in the dust outside, I noticed a python, thick and many feet long, pass languidly through the circle. By the time the little ones had panicked, the snake had moved on. It could not have been hungry. Bala and I were, of course, required to accompany the women to the creek, which produced a lovely sound and looked terrific in the sunlight, to help with the washing. There is something in the sight and sound of moving water which satisfies the human soul.

Was our original home in the waters of Earth or elsewhere? Indeed, late in life, I do wonder if the yearning in some of us for travel in space – in whatever dimension – reflects a distant memory of origins, as well as homes elsewhere. That is, we might be intuitively aware that Earth is only a place for a short sojourn. Or, are such speculations merely the musings of a ‘dragon’, that is, of one born in the (Chinese) Year of the Dragon, and thus with an instinctive urge to explore sky and sea?

Bala and I also helped with the grinding of the spices and, generally, to behave as responsible males. We had to look after the little ones. By inference, we had to protect our mothers and aunt.

Maturity was thrust upon us prematurely, at thirteen and twelve, respectively. We did not realise it then but, in effect, we both lost the simple pleasures of boyhood after that. For, life was never the same on our return to our homes.

Then, one of my youngest cousins, aged about two, fell seriously ill. Soon it was clear that she was dying. My mother, who had carefully secured a few antibiotic (sulfonamide) tablets from somewhere, saved her niece by feeding her the medication. She would have realised that there would be no possible replenishment of this life-saving drug. After all, her own daughter was of the same age. It did not help that there was no milk, fish, eggs or meat to sustain the growing children. There was no one around to take the child for treatment; there was no one, no place, to take the child to. This set the pattern of our life for the next few years, when we would grow taller but leaner, with the risk of an untreatable severe illness or mishap our constant companion.

On one occasion, a sole looter somehow found us, and sold us much-needed straw hats and some top quality handkerchiefs. I remember that the handkerchiefs were of Egyptian cotton. The brand name was 'Pyramid'. I fumed for months when Kuna Uncle purloined my new hat, after he had misplaced his.

When it was clear that the British were on the run, Kuna Uncle joined the three families. One night, my uncle and I decided to take a walk – into a pitch-black night. Were we mad? But, a break from confined quarters was obviously necessary for him. A short distance away, however, we saw a pair of greenish eyes looking us over from an embankment. There must have been a smidgen of light in the sky available to be reflected from the animal's eyes. Our unspoken about-turn and rapid withdrawal was indeed very, very silent. No one else was told about this. We subsequently agreed that the eyes had been too far apart to belong to an ordinary cat. After that night, we kept a very close watch on the little ones as they played outside.

With the fall of Singapore, Ratna Uncle, the former army volunteer, also joined us. He had retreated with the British, and then somehow got himself back, travelling against the tide of the traffic. Never known for being unnecessarily subtle, what he had to say about our British overlords on his return was apparently very colourful. To my great surprise, any mention by me over the nearly sixty years I have lived in Australia about the retreat by the Australians in Malaya was not generally well received. Was it a sense of national shame or an indication that the reputation of those of their relatives involved had to be protected? The return of Ratna Uncle introduced an added concern to the three young mothers. He had brought back his privately-owned revolver, which he then hid carefully between the supports for the grinding stone. If the Japanese had found it, ...!

Before that, one morning, the younger children waved, as always, at an army truck going south. There were never any such trucks going north. That morning, the soldiers who returned their waves were seen to be wearing soft caps. We suddenly realized that they were Japanese. The panic that followed our sighting of the feared Japanese was not easily assuaged. For, the advancing troops had been described as kamikaze, on their way to a willing and glorious death. They seemed cheerful enough to us. Perhaps the sight of young children playing (and waving to them) lifted their spirits.

When it was clear that the Japanese military occupation had begun, we returned to our respective homes. Kuna Uncle's car was a great boon. He was fortunate that the advancing troops had not sighted it. For, the troops were in such a hurry that they commandeered every vehicle and bicycle they came across. When they did this, they amazingly gave the reluctant donor to their war effort a signed receipt! They were indeed courteous, according to a 'donor' who was a near neighbour of ours.

Back home, my father had been on night patrol, together with our neighbours, to protect our homes (and the store rooms). They then began to worry about their new life under a Japanese military occupation, wondering how they would fare. The good news was that, whilst our British overlords had not been able to protect us, they had not contributed to a scorched-earth policy. My father, a quietly perceptive man, thought that they did not have enough fire-sticks either. Anyway, they were in a great hurry. The battleship defence of Malaya promised by their government back home had been recently drowned most effectively by Japanese planes. And the Japanese ground troops kept out-pacing them.

As immigrants, who are the true adventurers of mankind, my elders could cope with the insecurity of employment or occupation, and the broader uncertainty of existence in a foreign land. They were aware too that the traditional owners of the land, the Malays, might not be pleased about the massive incursion of a wide range of immigrant opportunists with foreign cultures. This would be in spite of the fact that much of Malay culture and the traditions of Malay royalty, especially on the west coast, had been influenced substantially over hundreds of years by Hindu Indians.

The rulers and cultures of Annam (now in East Vietnam), Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, Java, Sumatra and Bali had been similarly influenced. Until being overlaid by the teachings and practices of Islam, again through the Indians, the people of south east Asia had been deeply acculturated by Hindu culture. The displays of culture in modern Thailand and Indonesia continue to reflect the Ramayana, the religion-impregnated love story of Rama and his wife Sita.

The garments, headgear and armlets worn by Malay royalty, especially in west Malaya, are also Indian in origin. However, in an administration by a military known for its brutality in China, all the residents, whether immigrant or local born, were in the same boat. Our future was never so uncertain.

Although my parents said nothing in my hearing, I sensed their fear as they waited for the Japanese military administration to show its hand. Hopefully, the Japanese would need a speedy return to normality. They would need to revive a government administration first. They also needed to feed their troops. Because the old order had been extinguished and a new order had not been put in place, we remained in a cold crevasse of anxiety and uncertainty.

Life under the Japanese military

The early days

For nine months after the sudden and unexpected end of British rule, my father remained unemployed. We lived, more frugally than ever, on our stored food, with fresh vegetables sold to us by enterprising Chinese farmers. These illegally occupied land on the fringe of the township. There was, naturally, no meat, fish or milk. The town people made an indirect contribution to the success of the vegetable farms through the night-soil (so-called) collected from our houses unofficially at dawn each day. It was not a good idea to be sitting on the family 'throne' when the collection was being made, or to be on the wind side of the huge buckets slung on both sides of a farmer's bicycle. I felt that no one worked as hard as these farmers. We were grateful for that, perhaps realising that their lives were of quiet desperation whereas ours was of subdued optimism. The money needed by my family for the food had been securely hidden, and was spent most carefully.

Saving for a rainy day or for the education of the children is an unavoidable practice for immigrants striving to survive in a strange land. Saving is also a cultural tradition for our tribal people. Respecting learning, they sought, generation after generation, to have their children educated – in any language, in any culture, in any endeavour, so long as economic (and later, social) betterment was in the offing. But they will hang on to as many of their cultural practices as possible, wherever in the world they lived. The savings would be well spent. To our people, survival is not enough; success is the ultimate goal, primarily through education. Borrowing from Diogenes (300 BC), the future of a people is in the education of their young.

Such a drive would take us into all corners of the world, where many or most would find our natural place in academe, and in the professions, but rarely in trade, politics or the public service. Were these seen to be demeaning occupations, or simply not financially rewarding, or just lacking in social status? Our cultural distaste of trade is a view shared by many other civilizations, in spite of the wealth potentially available to the fortunate. Our rejection of politics and the public service in countries into which we migrate reflects our understanding of human behaviour. Equal opportunity in occupying the sacred sites of power in our new homes could not be expected for at least two generations. This does not prevent the practice of excellence in the private sector, in the professions, and in academe.

Life under a military occupation can be hazardous. The Japanese ensured full compliance with their requirement of good behaviour, by collecting, very early in their governance, all the community leaders (how did they know who these men were?), and locking them into the small yard of each township's jails for a whole day, with no water, food, shelter from the sun, or use of toilets. At dusk, they were released, and warned to be good, co-operative citizens. They had been released from their British masters, hadn't they? They were now to become part of a great co-prosperity sphere of Asian nations established by Japan. Fear is a good inducement to co-operation, even if future co-prosperity might not be. Looters, whether Japanese or local residents, as well as any one who made clear their dislike of the Japanese, had their heads chopped off, and mounted on posts on street corners. 'One seeing is better than a hundred times telling about', as an ancient Chinese adage would have it. It was a most effective way of ensuring good behaviour, right from the beginning.

An on-going sensitivity to the power of the Japanese military was finally inculcated in our minds by requiring each person cycling or walking (our normal means of transport) to stop at any sentry post, to face the sentry, and then to bow deeply to him. As a Chinese proverb says, 'If you bow at all, bow low.' I found it difficult to bow from the waist over a bicycle, but made sure that it looked right. Any slackness perceived or sensed, any seemingly inadequate respect, would result in the offender being beckoned to the sentry. I have observed a coarse-featured sentry require an offender to stand near him, whilst he scrutinized us as we made our obeisance with due and visible respect. Suddenly, the sentry turned and whacked the offender by his side on the face with the butt of his rifle. The accompanying shout was in that guttural tone which seemed to be the hallmark of discourse by all the Japanese military. Indeed, the voice adopted by a senior officer in what seemed to me to be an ordinary transaction sounded threatening.

Some years later, I heard a wealthy Japanese business man address his son of about fifty years of age in that same tone. Was a potential for brutality built into the psyche of successful or powerful Japanese? In contrast, the Japanese dentist who looked after our teeth prewar was so courteous as to appear deferential. In any event, whilst our Japanese occupiers were not unnecessarily brutal, we were careful to walk and talk with surface respect in their presence.

The Japanese then sent teams of two armed soldiers to inspect each household. Pictures of the king in far-off England, and the British flag (the Union Jack), often hung by Christianised Indians or those Eurasians who saw themselves as Europeans (commonly on the basis of a distant, single white male ancestor), were hurriedly taken down and burned. The only houses not inspected were those occupied by someone with a receipt for that bicycle or vehicle acquired by the hurrying advancing troops. My family home was also exempt from that inspection when a Christian Indian neighbour two houses away, having displayed his receipt, apparently showed the Japanese (by a combination of signs and words) that my family were close friends. This neighbour must have learnt the Japanese word for friend. On arrival at my house, when the door was opened by a very frightened young mother, both Japanese clicked their heels, bowed, smiled, said something in Japanese, and left.

As the Japanese foot soldier wore a soft boot, with the big toe encased separately, the click of heels was not as attention-grabbing as with leather boots. Officers, of course, wore leather boots, and also carried a sort of satchel. I now have one of the latter as a souvenir. A year or so into the Japanese Occupation, when I needed new shoes, I was able to buy a pair of the boots worn by the foot soldiers. I do not know why this structure was adopted. Perhaps this replicated the placement of the big toe when wearing thongs or sandals.

Dear God, said my mother to her little brood when the Japanese had departed, what a relief. What good friends these neighbours are. And they were. Indeed, as immigrants all, irrespective of origins, language differences, and diverse paths to God, all of us knew that we had to stand by one another. We were already contributing to a nation in the making. We would survive these harsh and insecure times and, later, get rid of the British. So spoke my elders. To traditional Asians, time is expandable, is it not? We would recover our independence, and our cultures would flourish unhindered by European bible-bashers, their military cohorts, colonial administrators, and exploitative commercial operators. The future must, as ever, be left to look after itself. There is, after all, cosmic justice infusing and overlaying the multiple and inter-connected channels of Destiny covering all the individuals of mankind. The need now for us was to survive, hopefully with assistance from the gods.

The latter days

My father got back his public service job eventually. That indicated that the Japanese had re-established the necessary modicum of government administrative services. The private sector had, of course, kick-started itself as soon as the Japanese had taken control. Trading in goods and services has a momentum of its own, driven by the ubiquitous human need to survive, and

its ancillary, the drive to make a profit. As said by Benjamin Franklin, “No nation was ruined by trade.” The basic staples of rice and vegetables are, of course, readily grown in the tropics. Protein food was, however, more scarce than usual. That is why, even in normal times, the people, irrespective of cuisine, were inclined to be lean.

For a little while, the military government enabled a supply of meat, through rationing. Queuing for ninety or more minutes on one day a month, enabled the purchase of a piece of meat the size of a man’s palm. Inching my way to the head of the queue along a market roadside in the heat of the tropics was not something that I would ever forget. The availability of rationed meat did not last. Fish was more readily available in the markets, but at a horrific price. Profiteering is a very human attribute. Obviously, those in business, especially the middlemen, had no time for the teachings of any of the great, or even lesser, religions and faiths in the circumstances of shortage. The nature of mankind being what it is, I was not surprised to find, when I arrived in Australia a few years after the end of the war, that rationing in wartime (and for a little later) had led to the Australian people also being cheated in petty ways by their traders and retailers. The dislike by my clan of trade as an occupation (a view shared strongly by my Italian mother-in-law) might reflect similar experiences.

The Japanese in Occupied Malaya allowed primary schools to be re-opened, but high schools remained closed. Yet, the technical college in the capital, producing ‘technical assistants’ in the fields of engineering, was promptly re-opened. Graduates from the college were to contribute to building or maintaining necessary infrastructure. European colonial governments too had focused on infrastructure services being provided by the native peoples, with positions for managers, administrators and policy advisers being filled by expatriates of their own kind. Often, relatively unskilled white people had allegedly managed more highly skilled local people trained in the UK. The Japanese military took no different an approach.

Yet, at no time, and at all levels of intercourse, was there any evidence that the Japanese were racist. That is, there was none of that arrogance displayed by British colonials. The latter disparaged our cultures, including our religions, and our traditions. The sign “No Chinamen and dogs”, prominently displayed at the entrance to the prestigious Selangor Club in Kuala Lumpur, the capital, said it all. In return, the men in my extended family referred to their British overlords as upstarts. They recognised in that intuitive manner of mature men that most of the white people they dealt with were acting way above their ‘station.’ Perhaps, as said by Voltaire, ‘They are like their own beer: froth on top, dregs at the bottom, the middle excellent.’

The use of such phrases by my elders also indicated clearly that these ‘natives’ had a good command of the English language. It was also to be expected that any Asian trained in the UK (commonly as teachers, engineers, aircraft controllers, and similar infrastructure workers)

would have learnt to relate speech accents to levels of education, and thus to social class – with its implications for social conduct. Being treated as inferior does not, of course, make one feel inferior or subservient. Indeed, the resentment engendered in the local people might have made us more perceptive of the weaknesses of our rulers.

The Japanese, in their day-to-day dealings with us, had to use sign language, or raise their voices to a shout, as if this improved our understanding of what seemed a harsh language. The Chinese amongst us, however, had a singular advantage. They could converse with the Japanese through their writing, as the Japanese used the same hieroglyphics.

With the stability of a regular income, a new life routine commenced. Although I have, like the proverbial cat, a tendency to observe and a need to know about all manner of things, and admit to a compulsive tendency to analyse everything I either observe or hear of, I was obviously too young to know how others, especially those without a regular income, fared. The basal position is that, even during normal times, poverty reigns everywhere. Vast differences in security and personal income reflected, as ever, the reality that most people scrambled to survive, and scratched a living with a heavy blanket of economic insecurity stifling them; the relatively secure or well-to-do were plain fortunate. Wartime worsened everyone's woes; yet, my family was relative secure. I did note that my father's wage was paid partly in cigarettes, and that it seemed to be expected that the fags would be sold on the black market. This he did each month. There were always ready buyers. Were they smokers or traders?

Whether or not there was a regular income, all of us dug up every bit of land around us, including a small playground in front of my home, and planted tapioca. The plant is fast-growing, producing an edible root. When the thick skin has been removed, one could even eat it raw – in small quantities of course. It is very starchy and filling. It was one of the normal staples of the poorer people, even when rice was cheap. That was because it can be grown so readily on the smallest plot of land. In normal times, the tapioca may not even be harvested, where it grew by the roadside and on other public land.

A couple of years into the Japanese occupation, I was so hungry that I dug up a piece of tapioca in a plot developed by me and my fellow students at the Technical College, peeled it, and began to eat it. Although the college seemed to be deserted, a Malay instructor caught me, gave me an almighty slap, and warned me not to steal again. He then left me to finish off the piece of tapioca. The instructor must have realised that the fifteen year old was starving. That was the end of the matter, much to my gratitude. No one else knew about my shameful experience. I would, in future, ignore the lesson from a Greek proverb that 'You cannot reason with a hungry belly, since it has no ears.' My wartime hunger did leave some interesting consequences. I have since been unable to throw away any food (unless it is rotten, of course). At age forty I realised

that I was ingesting eighteen teaspoonsful of refined sugar daily. I cannot go to sleep on an empty stomach now, when then I did.

Since rice was scarce during wartime, tapioca was eaten as a staple. It was boiled in chunks, or grated and steamed, and eaten with vegetable gravy. When the tapioca was sliced thinly, dried, and then pounded into flour, it could be made into a sweet and eaten with a small amount of unrefined sticky, dark brown, palm sugar known as *gula melaka*. There was, of course, no refined sugar available. Another root product, also grown and eaten as a staple, was the sweet potato. It was prepared in the same way as tapioca. After the end of the war, throughout the rest of my life, I could not eat either root, no matter how wonderfully it was prepared.

It would seem that the Japanese and Korean foot soldiers might also have had a lean time gastronomically. I was told that they liked to add a lot of sugar to their rice and vegetables. Where did they get the sugar? Was this for energy, or a reflection of deprivation during their normal life back home? I know too that they used to sing when not on duty. Their songs sounded very sad! In fact, their national anthem, which we were required to sing at college, sounded like a dirge! Japanese officers may, however, have been better looked after. I have seen some of them traveling by rickshaw with women, some of whom were Japanese. My elders referred to the women as 'comfort' girls, some of whom the army had transported to Malaya. The others would have been recruited locally.

Six months after re-gaining employment, my father was transferred to a tiny village which straddled a coastal road, with a river working its way languidly to the sea through the village. Small subsistence rice farms occupied by Malays surrounded the village. My father ran the post office, with the family living behind this office. What was surprising was the evident need for a post office with telephone service attached in such an out-of-the-way place during the doldrums of a military occupation. Being transferred was good for the family. They could barter a few scarce pieces of used clothing for a bag of *padi* (un-husked rice) from the ever-friendly Malay farmers.

The *padi* was pounded by us in a cylindrical mortar of scooped out timber, about a foot wide and about two feet high in total, the receptacle being a foot in depth. The pestle was tall, about three feet in length, with a metal cap at its base. Using each hand in turn, the pestle would be lifted, and then guided to its task using mainly gravity. A rhythmic pattern of lifting, and dropping with a little push, enabled one to pound away for quite awhile. Bending one's back was carefully avoided. I became quite good at it. After de-husking, a square body-wide flat tray of woven cane was used to waft away the husk. By shaking the tray in a flapping motion (again I speak from experience), and aided by a little blowing, the debris would be discarded. The mortar and pestle were also used for pounding coffee beans, other dried vegetable beans, and anything

else which was to be converted to flour. Prewar, we had servants or casual labour to do this work.

The Malays always kept their homes and their surrounds in pristine, yet attractive, condition. Like the Indians, they loved colour in their homes, as well in their clothing. They were so remarkably civilised in their tolerance of so many foreigners in their land. They were always friendly and helpful, whilst living the most simple of lives. They were devout Muslims. I find them a very likeable people. Their spoken language is so mellifluous, especially as uttered by little children.

From time to time, up the river sneaked the occasional fisherman, avoiding the authorized watchdogs who were to purchase their catch. They sold some of this catch to families in the village. That is, my family had more protein than would have been available to them in the capital. My mother kept a goat, ducks, fowls and geese (not all at the same time), which had to be locked securely at night. The family protein intake was thus improved.

What was so amazing to all and sundry was the sight of my mother sitting on a step with very young chicks struggling to jump up a number of steps to get onto her lap. Once they reached her lap, they would fall asleep. To this day, I carry the image of my youngest sister sitting on one of our mother's knees, with the other knee taken up by our cousin of the same age who had recently lost her mother. The little feathered chicks took centre stage in the sari-cradled lap. That was one of life's heart-warming mysteries.

Another memory retained by me was of the most beautiful rooster one could ever meet. Its feathers had almost all of the colours of the rainbow. It was gorgeous, and the way it strutted suggested that it knew it. It had been allowed to live only because of its beauty, whereas any bird deemed not necessary for breeding was eaten. One day, said rooster decided to cross the road. This is not a story for those little children, especially my little granddaughter Zoe, who like jokes as to why the chicken crossed the road. As 'Gorgeous' crossed the road, it was killed by the only vehicle seen on the road for days; the rooster had never seen a car. Indeed, the road was often used by the rice farmers to dry the small fish they had caught or bought illegally. The fish were never stolen. My family had chicken curry the night 'Gorgeous' departed. Indeed, any member of the feathered family which seemed to be sick was promptly and sensibly curried.

There was, naturally, no medication of any kind available. When the eldest of my sisters developed a huge boil on the back of her neck, a close family friend, a pharmacy assistant, accompanied by a scalpel he had borrowed, was brought in from the capital to help. He cut into the boil, with no anaesthetic, antiseptic, cotton wool, or other dressing available. The poor girl,

who at the age of twelve, had had to learn to cook and look after her younger sisters whenever our mother was unwell, screamed in terrible pain whilst the pus was squeezed out and the wound covered with a clean cloth. I am not sure how she survived. Perhaps she was destined to survive in order to carry out her role in mature age. This was to hold together, and with style, the extended family, in the manner of a made-to-measure matriarch, such was her competence in that role.

When my family was transferred to the country-side, I was left in the capital. I was fourteen. That was the first of my wheels-falling-off experiences. This is not lightly said. When I had a young family, I did have the rear right-hand wheel of my car roll past the car – an interesting experience. My very ambitious mother (and compliant father) had arranged for me to board with a distant relative and two other men (and a Chinese cook/ housekeeper who had nowhere to go). Before I could move in, I had to obtain selection to the Technical College. How was a fourteen-year old boy, who had only completed primary school, to achieve that? To my mother, it was all so simple. Her son had topped his class, often by a great margin of marks, every term (bar one), every year. Proof was evident in the annual reward by Ratna Uncle of a soccer ball.

That my mother was inordinately ambitious for me had been demonstrated a few years back, when she had taken my father on a long walk one evening to the home of my primary school principal. There, she had asked for a double promotion for that genius she had produced. She was to be the agent of my downfall within a decade. But, where had she learnt about ‘double promotions’? The principal naturally refused, explaining why. My mother, in wartime, now arranged for a brilliant young relative, remarkably knowledgeable in maths and the physical sciences, to coach me. In the two months available, I was to be made ready for selection to the College. (Who said that Asian women were subservient?)

In that short period, I had to memorise all manner of equations and other relationships in these subjects. Without understanding the true significance of much of what was packaged into my memory bank, I passed the oral examination for entry to the college. I was the youngest student in the college. The others were about three years older, and obviously more mature. They labeled me ‘Bochan’, meaning baby in Japanese, and tolerated my presence; but they had no basis for any conversation with me. I was just a ‘brilliant’ but naive kid. As said by Charles Lamb (in the nineteenth century), “Boys are capital fellows in their own way, among their mates.” I had no mates. I realized some years later that I had learnt very little through my studies. I simply remembered everything I read or had been told. I had no real knowledge, which involves understanding.

So, the ‘kid’ grew up in semi-isolation, with neither family nor friends. It was a lonely life. Being effectively alone amidst company was a strange feeling. There was no scope for any meaningful

conversation with my guardian or the other men. I spoke when I was spoken to. The Chinese cook had a similar life of isolation, I noticed. To know that no company is better than bad company was no solace. I was, however, exceedingly fortunate in coming across an extensive private library in the possession of a family of school teachers trained in the UK. The core of the collection included many of the English classics (Austen, Dickens, Shakespeare and others), lightened by a few books on adventure and discoveries in 'darkest Africa' and other similar areas (eg. Alaska), books on the Wild West of the USA, and a couple I remember with gratitude, on matters sexual (eg. Marie Stopes).

Did not this isolation affect me, as a young nephew was later affected, by being sent away also at fourteen? Did not boys dispatched to boarding schools in Western nations develop certain undesirable personality traits? Or to display the effects of a hidden or unsighted trauma? I have often wondered why some parents produce children, when the latter are thrown out of the nest long before they are ready to fly or to stand on their own feet. When I was struggling to establish myself in Australia, a very distant relative asked me to take over his young son and educate him in Australia. Did he consider the immigration issue, and my financial position? He had never been in touch with me before! When I explained that I was not in a position to help him with his responsibilities, I heard no more!

From my extensive wartime reading, I garnered a most valuable knowledge and understanding of the beauty, subtlety and complexity of the English language, as well as its usage, but without the benefit of a dictionary. I could not find one. By the end of the war, I could, to my surprise, write either in a most concise and clear fashion, or in a complex (often archaic) manner. How did I manage to do that? Further, because of my photographic memory, for the rest of my life, I could spell correctly every word that I had in my memory bank.

During my career in Australia where I subsequently settled, I found that I could guide the younger generations of Anglo-Aussies in such esoteric matters as punctuation. I would also win a few dollars from those of my colleagues who challenged my spelling. Best of all, just for the hell of it, I once coined a word, and brazenly slipped it past a sloppy senior public servant in the Treasury, as well as an insufferably pompous chairman of an official advisory board, and the Minister of the day! That was fun. They may have accepted that, whilst I am not infallible (like the pontifical gentleman on the Mediterranean), I seemed to be rarely wrong.

To maintain contact with my family, I would, once a month, travel by bus part of the way, and then hop on to my three-quarter sized bicycle. This would take up half a day. The buses had been converted by enterprising Chinese to run on wood or coal. The burner was at the back of the bus, near the ladder leading to the roof rack. Cycling from home to the bus station, I would then try to find a bus going in the right direction. Once, I took a wrong bus and finished up where I did

not want to be, and without the necessary fare to get home. With the help of my father's colleague, the post master of that village, I finally got home. My normal travel involved catching the correct bus going west, with my cycle tied on top of the bus. On arrival at our destination, I had to cross most carefully a narrow rickety bridge across a wide and normally raging river.

The centre of the bridge was constructed of timber slats, as the bridge had been blown up by the retreating British troops. The timber pieces were inevitably slippery, and sloped towards the water. Many of the slats were often lapped by the water rushing past full of debris. Whilst crossing the river was obviously hazardous, what was I to do? I would hang onto the bike with one hand, and onto the waist-high guide wire with the other, as I sought a stable footing, slat by slat. Looking into the water was not a good idea.

Once on the other side, I would cycle north for an hour along a normally empty road in the heat and humidity of the midday tropical sun. It would have been scorching except for the protection by the rubber trees which leaned over the narrow road. Coming from a hardy stock, my parents seemed to accept (as I did) that such travel was not worthy of comment. On my return, my guardian was equally laconic about any difficulties I might have had on my journey. So, was I being stoic in their apparent indifference? Or, were we simply pragmatic Hindus, in accepting during difficult times that what must be will be? Does not one's karma, like a shadow, follow one everywhere?

The Final Days

In the last year of the war – not that anyone, other than those who took their lives in their hands by listening to short-wave radio, was aware of that – the relative stability of life for my family in their village was shattered. Every household received a demand for a donation of a specified amount, by a specified date, to the People's Anti-Japanese Army. The donation required was substantial. Who were these people?

Gossip had established in the capital that communist Chinese had overcome the Kuo-Min-Tang (or Chiang Kai Shek's) anti-Japanese underground. Their underlying motive was the takeover of Malaya once the Japanese had been driven away. Needing all the help they could get, the Allied forces based in India had apparently supplied arms to all insurgents. I had heard that some of the arms-drops were to a place just out of the capital and could be sighted on their way down; and that Japanese troops would move into the jungle in search of these arms and, reportedly, never return. On one rare occasion, when I had accompanied a family friend to a village near the arms-drops, I had been advised not to look at anyone, or to speak, whilst my friend carried out

his transaction (whatever that was). It was a very strange experience indeed. It was as if we were in enemy territory. I was very apprehensive, unlike a month-old pup which fears not a tiger.

So, it was in my family's village. The people did necessary shopping, neither looking at nor talking to anyone on the way. The streets and shops were quite empty. And silent! With eyes kept down, ears and mouths closed, the people lived in fear. The fear was palpable. No one knew who represented that key link with the extortionists – for that is all these thugs were. Proof of that came swiftly. A distant relative (the brother of my guardian), who lived near by, ran a cartage business based on a bullock cart with two bullocks. He had to sell his cart and bullocks to pay his levy, which took up only half of his sale receipt. A few weeks later, his naked body was found by the roadside, with his throat cut. The rest of his money disappeared. A short distance away, the body of a young schoolteacher, who had been heard to complain about the levy, was also found by the roadside on the same morning. He too had his throat cut and his body was unclothed.

This experience, apart from Hinduism, turned me into a staunch anti-communist for life. My hackles would rise whenever I read or heard about any group whose name began with “The People's ...” Whilst communitarianism is consistent with my understanding of Hinduism, communism is not. It was already bad enough for us to be subjugated sequentially by European colonials and the Japanese military. The enemy of our enemy was not our friend.

Fortunately for my family, my mother had an expensive sari hidden away. I took it to the capital and, with the help of a member of the *chettiar* class (Indian money lenders), sold it for more than the levy. On the way out of the coffee shop where the transaction had been carried out, I found that the local military police office was on the floor above. Wasn't the deal legal? I did not know. The buyer was exchanging money which would be worthless at the end of the war for a tradeable commodity. On my way home, on the packed bus, a clever pickpocket removed the money that was exactly surplus to the levy payment. Was this some sort of a cosmic joke? My father said nothing about the mishap, my great folly. The levy was paid, and I learnt a very painful lesson of many parts. I would have preferred to be berated for my carelessness.

My problem was – where was I to hide a thick wad of folded money? The clever thief, who must have taken a lot of time to slide out two packets from my pocket, had extracted money on one effort, and a folded sheet of paper with my calculations on the other. If he had taken out any more money, my family would have been in trouble with the extortionists. I was very conscious of that. I had to live with that knowledge for many a year.

The potential for another sharp lesson occurred when one of the men in my guardian's home and I were listening to the short-wave radio one afternoon. It was the only time, ever, that we had done that. We were normally very sensible people. In the middle of a BBC news program, the face of a Japanese soldier appeared at the main window! What a shock that was. By the time the soldier got to the front door, the radio had been turned off. We had never seen a Japanese on our street for months. Fortunately for us, the soldier was lost, and was happy to be pointed the right way back to base. In any event, he was unarmed, and had merely gone on a stroll. Our fear of being caught listening to the BBC was based on knowledge on what had happened to some of those who had been found passing short-wave messages to the anti-Japanese movement. One of these men had reportedly been strung up by his thumbs, another by his ankles.

The anti-Japanese forces also displayed a flair for payback killing. In the interregnum between Japan's surrender and the arrival of the British, there were reports of the disappearance of certain Japanese and their local collaborators. There was some evidence of this in the bodies floating down rivers. In the midst of all the burials and cremations, there were, strangely, also marriages. In the midst of so much uncertainty, were families seeking to perpetuate their bloodlines? I wondered too how some people were able to afford such luxuries.

To raise some money, I then tried to be a player in the black market, in the manner of some of my fellow students. They seemed to be middlemen dealing with other middlemen, seeking much needed goods such as bike or other equipment parts. I was sprung by my guardian on my sole effort, by a fool of a fellow student passing a message to me through said guardian! That was the end of that effort at commerce by a most naïve teenager.

The trouble was that this teenager was forever hungry. He was getting taller and leaner, with no protein, calcium or fat in his diet. It was little wonder that by my mid thirties, my spine showed so much wear. It would seem that my backbone had not been firmed properly because of the substantial lack of suitable sustenance during my teenage years. Yet, I denied myself some extra protein on one occasion. During one of my visits to my family, when both mother and senior sister were unwell, and waiting, in the absence of any medication, for nature to allow recovery, I took over the kitchen. On opening a large tin of stored dried fish, I found an equivalent quantity of well-fed maggots. Each was as big as the dried fish. I emptied the tin onto a hotplate, pushed the dying maggots into the fire and, having heat-cleansed the fish, cooked it into a curry. No one in the family knew about the maggots. No one suffered from food poisoning.

When, in Australia, I discovered that the Aborigines swallowed maggots alive, I wondered why, in spite of my on-going hunger, I had thrown away the maggots I found. Were Hindu cultural

emphasis on cleanliness, and the association of maggots with contamination and therefore filth, responsible for my rejection of an unexpected food supply? I believe so.

Then, a major tragedy struck. Kuna Uncle's wife died during surgery, leaving five children under eight. My mother promptly took off to look after her brother and his children, although he had a male Indian cook (who, like my guardian's Chinese cook had nowhere to go). After two months, my father ordered his wife back, to be replaced by his sixteen year old son. Whose brilliant idea was that, I wondered. My only experience at looking after children was rocking my younger sisters to sleep, and playing with them. Arriving at my uncle's home, I found my eighteen-month old boy-cousin suffering from diarrhoea, the three-year old boy withdrawn but ravenous, the five-year old girl sweet and placid, her six and a half year-old brother hiding behind a bedroom door quietly weeping almost all day, the eldest, at eight, somewhat recalcitrant but calm, and the cook in bed, very ill. My uncle went to work each day. Where were the female members of the tribal community, I wondered. Did anyone care? Obviously not!

Since babies in the tropics do not wear nappies, there was a continuous cleansing of floors and furniture until my young cousin recovered. The dear little fellow went around clutching an item of his mother's clothing, which he would not let go even in his sleep. Otherwise, he was no trouble, like his three and five year-old siblings. Little could be done with the eldest two boys, although I tried and tried. In the meantime, everyone had to be fed thrice a day. How, I wondered, since the only cooking I had ever done was with the maggot-contaminated fish. How did my parents reach the conclusion that I could manage to look after and feed my cousins, uncle and the sick cook?

With advice from the bed-bound cook, who did not recover during the two months I was being broken in as cook, laundryman, child-carer and housekeeper, I managed to carry out all these duties, presumably to acceptable standards. I learnt to prepare Indian-style breakfasts and other meals, thus preparing my way mentally for a future life of comparable culinary competence in Australia. For a sixteen year-old, it surely was a fantastic achievement; but no one said anything. Later in life, whenever I achieve something equally unexpected, I tend to say 'I am not just a pretty face, you know!' The looks on my audience is reward enough.

To make matters worse, a middle-aged couple I had never heard of came to stay for a few days, in order to attend a wedding. They treated me as a servant, and offered no help whatsoever. I was glad to see the back of them, whilst wondering about the morality of tribal compatriots who took everything and acknowledged nothing. My connection with the imperatives of tribalism was already beginning to be frayed. It would continue to be eroded by the behaviour of fellow 'countrymen' in a Western environment over the years.

After two months, it was agreed that my five-year old girl cousin and the boy-baby would live with my family. I would have a little brother at last, I hoped. It was an informal adoption, the traditional way in our culture. The remaining three would stay with their father and the cook. The baby brought with him a dark green sari (all six yards of it), and would never let it go. I have seen him feel for it in sleep. And he would drag it behind him as he walked, until both children returned to their father. Before their return, which was instigated by a trouble-making close relative, these two delightful children brought a lot of joy to my family. My youngest sister had a playmate of her own age, and I enjoyed carrying the little boy around on my bike. Decades later, it was warming for me to hear him speak with fond memories about our time together. Their premature departure was triggered by the trouble-maker informing the father of the children that they were addressing my father as Papa, as we did! We had a mongrel in the clan!

I returned to the capital, for some reason travelling (illegally) on top of road metal in an open railway truck. In tropical heat, that was another memorable experience. I remember that I wore a straw hat. What does a teenager think about such extra-ordinary events? Apparently nothing of significance, for I remember no strong feeling associated with what happened. Indeed, throughout my life, whatever happens, I do tend to say "What is, is!" Sometimes, it did take a little while to be so accepting.

Back in the capital, another experience or two awaited. In the normality of events, whenever the Japanese needed a work gang to repair a road or suchlike, they would gather all the able-bodied men and youths at a road block and take them away. By carrying a book with me and my identification as a student, I had always been exempted from such hard labour. My weedy appearance might also have helped. However, now the college administration had agreed that all the students would become a work gang, in order to repair the local airfield. We worked in teams of three on a couple of afternoons per week. One student dug out an embankment and the other two carried the soil in a wicker basket quite a distance, in order to fill the holes on the runway caused by their own bombing a few years back. Neither water nor rest was available in that terrible afternoon heat. Fortunately for us, the war soon ended, and our unwilling contribution to the intended defence of Malaya by the Japanese military was needed no longer. It was a good lesson for those who would not be using their bodies to earn a living, to appreciate the hardships of the less skilled.

Before Japan surrendered, Allied planes use to appear at a great height, and we students would saunter at leisure into the air raid shelters we had prepared when the alarm was sounded. On the first occasion that a plane flew low over us, we spontaneously jumped out of our shelters, held up our arms, and cheered. This performance was seen by the military police at their headquarters across the street a couple of blocks away. The next day, the college principal warned us that, although he held the second highest rank in the state, he could not protect us

from severe punishment by the *Kempeitai*, the military police, were we to misbehave again. He said that he personally understood our feeling, and asked that we respect his position. He was first and foremost an educator, a former school principal.

I remember vividly how he would poke his swagger stick into my midriff whenever I asked to be excused from the morning's calisthenics because of a pain in my stomach. Looking back, I wonder now how we understood his daily speeches. Although I do not remember any Japanese words now, I must have learned enough to cope with his instructions. Fortunately, our lecturers were Asian, and their lectures were in English. Most importantly, the protection our principal afforded us from the *Kempeitei* showed that he was a good man.

Not all the planes flying out of India flew low enough to spy out the land and enthrall the locals. Other planes, said to be piloted by Americans, flew very high, whilst seeking to bomb important targets such as the capital's railway station. Few of the bombs caused the damage they were supposed to achieve; instead, in my town, they destroyed homes, shops, and public buildings of no relevance to the war effort. I was amused to hear one of my fellow students tell the story that, whatever building he ran into for protection during one air raid, it was bombed. Finally, he felt that he should try the railway station itself, for that was not hit. It was obviously the intended target.

Many years later in Australia, I read that American pilots in each of the recent spheres of war involving the USA (I wondered if there were any that did not) had been accused of being too frightened to fly low enough to see their targets clearly, even killing Allied troops by mistake. In the decades following my experience, 'collateral damage', even by 'friendly fire', did become commonplace, and apparently unexceptionable. Should such unintended or casual butchery be more acceptable in human terms, than intended brutality, even in war?

Within twenty four hours of Japan's surrender, everyone somehow seemed to know. Immediately, there were pillages in public places. For example, as I watched, sacks of rice were stolen from a stationary railway carriage in broad daylight. There were neither police nor Japanese soldiers to interfere with this looting. I did not dare join them. The few Japanese military in public places were seen to smile, whilst they maintained effective law and order. Remarkable! Some of the Chinese who expected to take over the country were known to snarl when the first Indian troops arrived armed with only shovels. I was there to observe this strange scene. Those Chinese who were then silly enough to attack the Indian troops found their homes and shops destroyed at night. So I heard.

Why the shovels? There must have been some significance in that. Why Indian troops? That was the way of the European coloniser, to use 'natives' to quell other natives in the greater glory of Empire. The people of India who had demonstrated for independence from the British would know all about this practice. The Maoris of New Zealand hate the Gurkhas for doing Britain's dirty work in subduing them. However, the Kaiser of India was to disappear soon, and native peoples everywhere would be free to govern themselves. That was what my people were waiting for. That many pompous colonial rulers would return to a more simple (and possibly frugal) life was of no concern to us. A few ostriches would also be allowed to retain their plumage.

In this context, I recall watching a public assembly on the field outside my home. It was being addressed by the well-known Subhas Chandra Bose, who had been agitating, with the support of the Japanese government, for a free India. He had called for Britain's Indian troops to defect. In occupied Malaya, he was seeking moral and financial support. Whilst he did not seem to me to be persuasive, he certainly received a good hearing. The mood for freedom was percolating the people. It would pervade the postwar policy arena.

As said by my father, who extolled the virtue of freedom, no one has the right to enter another man's home, and seek to control his lifestyle and family, and to denigrate his cultural values. I have remained anti-colonial and anti-racist all my life, without apology to the role of Destiny in bringing onto our shoulders racist Europeans. My role during most of my adult life has been to demonstrate to European society that we Asians have a proud history, with most durable cultures; and that we are second to none.

Whilst the 'White man's burden' had served the European buccaneers well, partly at the expense of the poor taxpayers back in the colonisers' home, God-fearing coloured peoples who had previously governed themselves freely had been oppressed and exploited for far too long. The 'benevolent rule' of colonial subjects, the boast of racists such as Winston Churchill, was simple spin-doctoring!

A retrospect

Certain aspects of human behaviour during this wartime period made the greatest impact on me. The interruption to my studies and the associated delay in completing school; the isolation from family and the related absence of on-going guidance for living during those sensitive teenage years; the never-ending rumbling in my stomach; and the uncertainties of life under a military occupation, whilst significant in the short term, were overcast by observing the plight of those literally starving on the streets; and the brutality of the military police.

Day by day, I saw increasing numbers of pitifully thin people, virtual skeletal cadavers, lying on footpaths near the shops, with a few rags on them and some under them. The passers-by had nothing to give these poor people; perhaps the shopkeepers made a small contribution of food. The pathos of the starving was heightened by the sight of the odd male masturbating – quite openly! How strong is the sex drive, I marveled in my youth. Little wonder, I thought, that the poor in underdeveloped countries multiplied faster than the better fed. Had nature gone mad, I wondered. Decades later, after many years of reading widely, I reached the sad conclusion that all the experts in economics, politics and other social sciences had no substantive operational and achievable solution to the problem of prolonged poverty, even in those countries recording strong economic growth or deemed to be developed first-world nations. There had to be something wrong with the collective human soul.

Thus, from the time I finally obtained secure employment, a small fraction of my fortnightly income was directed straight into an overseas aid organization related to Oxfam, the reputable British foreign aid organization. We did not set out to feed the impoverished. Instead, we sought to provide individuals and small groups with equipment or facilities to enable them to become more productive. – from a water tap, to sewing machines, etc. Administrative costs were minimal – a rare achievement.

The brutal behaviour of the military police, whilst not visible until after the event, was certainly audible. Day by day, people passing their headquarters could hear the cries of those being beaten or given the water treatment. The latter involved forcing water into the gut, and then stomping on it – so we were told. From time to time, bodies were deposited by wheelbarrow onto the road to be collected. The sight of the bodies, the sounds of beating, the pitiful cries, and the stories about the water treatment should have made most people behave correctly. Why the brutal treatment? For anti-Japanese conduct.

When the British returned, the *Kempeitai* were locked up in their own cells. Each morning, the British sergeant in charge of these prisoners would (according to gossip) enter the cell of the chief of the *Kempeitai*, and give him a work-over with his rubber truncheon. This was pleasing news to us, disregarding the teachings of our respective faiths. These ask us to leave it to the Cosmos to punish the guilty. Instant punishment seemed quite fair to us.

I hated the Japanese, although I had not suffered directly under them. My dislike of these people lasted well into the early 1970s. Then, I had to deal with certain Japanese investors in Australia, in my role as an Australian public servant. A legally clever but immoral acquisition of an Australian enterprise by a well-known Japanese conglomerate brought out my prejudice. That

had to go. I was so successful in unloading this prejudice that, following my involvement, lasting more than two years, in a major planned investment by a prominent Japanese, a Japanese diplomat was known to describe me as 'hard but fair'! This Japanese investor and I finished up respecting each other. And Japan, which had failed to conquer Australia, continued to acquire large chunks of it and its enterprises. Thus, war could become obsolete were it not needed to support profitable armament industries.

However, although I matured in security in a civilized developed nation, I was continually made aware of the acquisitive venality of some in the West. In the mode of the former Christian commercial coloniser, these need to control the lands and other resources of fellow human beings, behaving casuistically or with casual brutality in the process. And I came to despise governments (including my own) for instigating, or encouraging, or colluding in or facilitating such corrupt practices. The euphemism of 'imposing democracy', when the objective is to replace collective rights with theoretical individual rights; that of 'globalization', whose objective is control of resources everywhere; that of 'introducing human rights', with the objective of destroying tribal allegiances; are these not the weapons of the neo-colonial?

How does one respect those who talk of Christian fellowship, with their tongues in both cheeks, even as they cause great societal damage wherever resource need or power beckons? It would seem logical for my adopted home to become part of the USA, since our elected leaders remain fearful of our coloured neighbours. This fear remains even after more than two centuries of being amongst them. Residual colonial superiority, and fear of foreigners – what a conundrum!

Foreign control over others does not now involve the kind of upheaval experienced by my people under the Japanese!