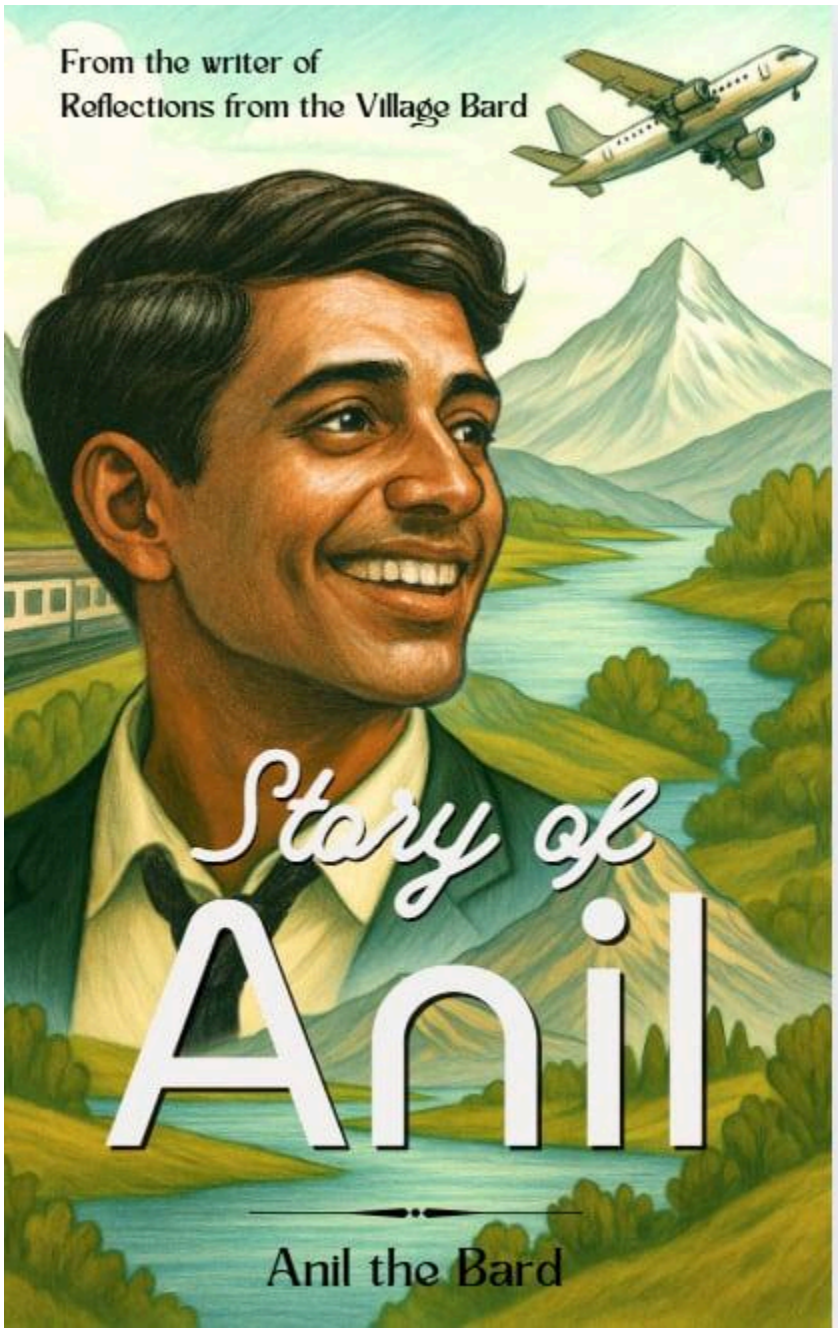


Dedication

I have been inspired and motivated to write my story because it is a story of love and deception. I have overcome many challenges in my life but thanks to my lovely wife Jasmine and our lovely children , I was able to overcome them all . It was their cooperation and trust in me that made me take the decisions that

changed our lives. It was the sacrifice and the hurts suffered by Jasmine that made me take bold decisions to bring us all out of India and start a new and bright future for all of us.
Therefore I dedicate my writings to Jasmine who is an angel and who put her faith in me to do what was right . I also acknowledge the contribution made by our children in this process .

Anil the bard
June 2026

Introduction

The process

Here you will read my biography, published in 6 languages: English, French, Spanish, German, Japanese (in Romani) and, finally, in Russian. It is a complete biography of 17 chapters that vividly describes my life experiences, from my childhood to my education and work experience, starting in Vietnam during the war and ending in the Philippines, when I retired from Sudan in 1994.

It has been a long road, full of challenges and achievements. They will read about the dangers I faced in Vietnam, where the war broke out, and in Haiti, where I had to live through the violent revolution. Other countries where I lived and worked, such as Burundi and the Philippines, also suffered very violent revolutions that had a great impact on me and my family.

My biography will take you through my experiences in all the countries where I lived, worked and studied, such as the United States and, later, the Philippines.

I faced many challenges in India and other countries, but somehow I managed to overcome them and get my wife and children out of there so that we could all live a better, safe and peaceful life in the Philippines, where I retired and raised my family. Our two children were educated here and then moved to other countries such as the United States and Australia.

Finally, I must acknowledge the extraordinary effort made by our daughter Kim to make the biography suitable for publication on Amazon. He has spent countless days and nights formatting every chapter to make it acceptable for Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP).

I am very grateful to you for your contribution to the publication of my biography as an e-book. We really appreciate her and her helpful nature.

Amazon will create e-books for you, no matter where you live in the world.

The reason for my biography

It's very tempting to write something to share with everyone online, because it seems like the whole world is connected these days. Even so, I feel that it is an overwhelming task given the enormous responsibility that comes with writing and opening my soul to unknown people who I will never meet, but who might read what I write and form their own opinions.

But I also feel that I must do it, even if it's just to say that I do it for our children, who have the right to know their parents better. I wish my father had done the same, because I know practically nothing about him, except that he was a very intelligent and peaceful person. I also don't know anything about my mother, except that she was a loving mother who sacrificed a lot to raise us all. I think we all owe it to our children to understand us better and perhaps learn from our mistakes and successes.

So one day I started writing. This is not just a biography, but a look at the complex relationships that develop over time between the people in our lives and the consequences of those

relationships. It is true that I have gone through difficult times and I have met very bad people who have disappointed me enormously, but I have also met wonderful people in different countries who are still my friends after all these years.

So the path of life has been very exciting for me, because I was lucky to live it the way I did and I learned many lessons. I have written extensively about these experiences, some good and some bad, but equally interesting. I have mentioned the good people in detail and the bad ones only in passing, because it is better to remember the good ones who cheer you up than the ones who disappoint you. My opinions are mine, but I understand that others may have different opinions. If my opinions offend those who disagree, I must say that my story was not intended to be so and should be read with an open mind, free of prejudice.

I thank all those who have helped me during my long journey through life, but above all I thank my parents, who raised me, gave me an adequate education and taught me values that last and have been very useful to me.

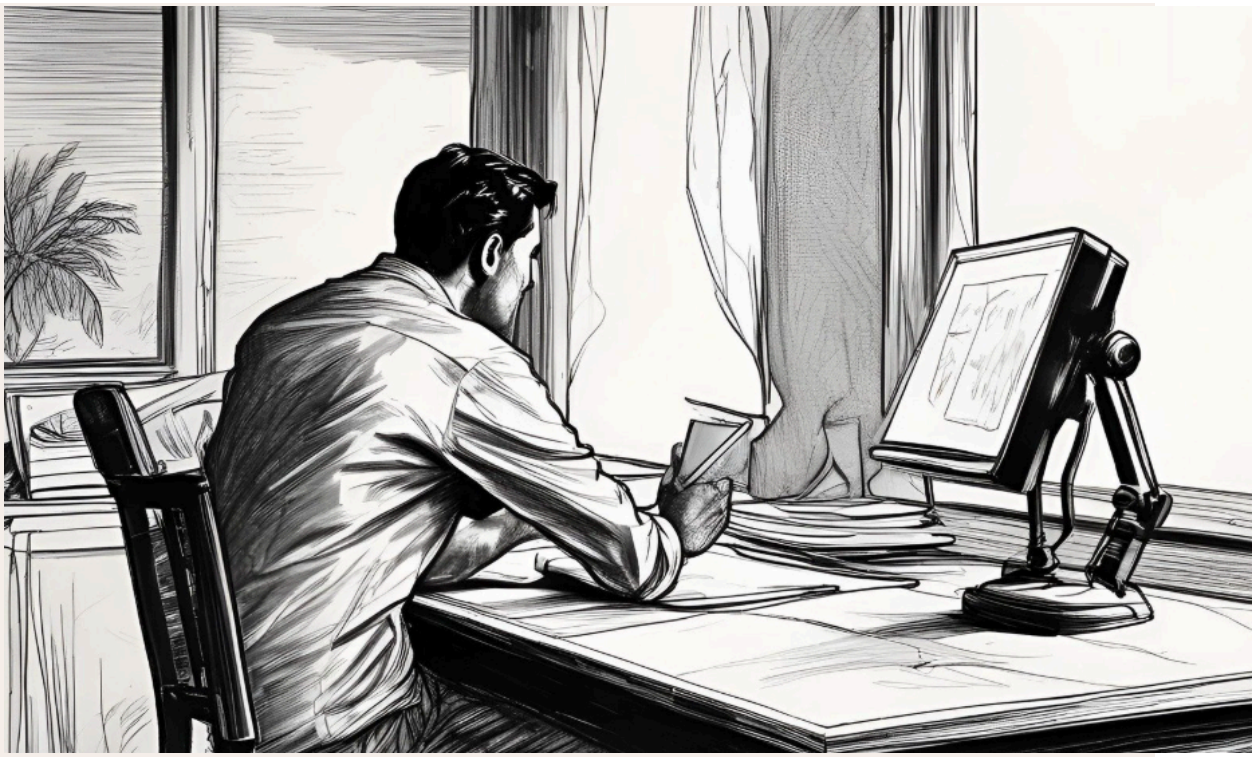
Finally, I will say that without Jasmine by my side, this trip would have been less colorful and exciting. She is extraordinary and I am very grateful to her. Our dear children are our blessing and joy, and have made this biography worth writing.

I wish you all the best.

your friend

Anil

Prologue



It is very tempting to write something to share with everyone online because it seems that the whole world is connected these days. Still I feel that it is a daunting task given the enormity of the responsibility that comes with the job of writing and baring one's soul to the unknown people whom I will never meet but who may read what I write and make their own opinions.

But I also feel that it has to be done, even if just to say that I do it for our children, who have a right to know their parents better. I wish my father had done the same because I know practically nothing about him except that he was a very intelligent and peace loving person. I know really nothing about my mother, either, except that she was a loving mother who sacrificed a great deal to bring us all up. Furthermore, I think we all owe it to our children to let them better understand us and perhaps learn from our mistakes as well as successes.

So one day I started writing. This is not just a biography but an insight into the complex relationships that develop over a period of time among people in our lives and the consequences of those relationships. It is true that I have endured difficult times and met very bad people in my life who have let me down big time, but I also met wonderful people in different countries who remain friends after all these years.

So the journey of life has been a most exciting one for me because I was fortunate enough to experience it the way I did and learned many lessons and have written extensively about these

experiences, some good and some bad but interesting all the same. I have mentioned good people in details and bad people only in passing because it is better to remember good people who uplift you than the ones who let you down. My opinions are mine, but I do understand that others may have their own that are different from mine. If my views offend others who do not agree with them, then I should say that my story is not intended that way and should be read with an open mind free of prejudices and biases.

I thank all those who have lent me their helping hands during my long journey through life, but mostly I thank my parents who brought me up, gave me a proper education and taught me values that are enduring and have served me well.

Lastly, I will say that without Jasmine at my side, this journey would have been less colorful and exciting. She is extraordinary and I am grateful. Our lovely children are our blessings and joy who have made this biography worth writing.

Anil

June 2025

Chapter One: India, the early years

My early years were happy. I am Anil and this is my story. It starts in 1944 in the placid city of Sri Ram Pur where I was born, but that was the year of great tension throughout India. While the World War was raging in Europe and the East, India was engulfed in its own struggle for freedom.

The Indian National Army led by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose fought pitched battles in the east in Burma on their march to Delhi to free India once and for all from British rule, but there were also the non-violent protests of Mohandas Gandhi in every town, city and village. Millions marched with him demanding that the British leave and burned huge piles of western clothes in every town square. Often the peaceful marches turned violent when the British police used brutal tactics.

The vast subcontinent stirred like never before and shook the foundation of the British Empire while England fought on its soil the war Germany had unleashed. They were not prepared to face the struggle of this proportion in India when they struggled for their own survival in Europe.

So it was a historic period to be born in, but blissfully I was unaware.

In fact, I heard later that Mom was not very fit to bring me into this world, but fit or not, I had to come. As a result, she took to the bed and took a long time to get well. I was born skinny, underweight and sickly and remained so for many years to the chagrin of my parents who tried hard to put some flesh on me. I had a bloated stomach and cried a lot, so my babysitter sister who was a few years older than me stuffed my mouth with sugar to pacify.

But the reason I cried a lot was because there were foot long worms in my stomach that ate all my food, so I was perpetually hungry. This was remedied when I was 10 years old or so, but by then the worms had done terrible damage to my constitution.

I was born in a family of seven children, but I was not the last. My sister Sushmita came after me, and thankfully she was the last. I do not believe my worn out Mom could have brought more children to this world after her. She had eight that survived and a few that did not. But this was normal.

The little unhealthy boy was called baby, which was not very imaginative, but imagination was in short supply when the parents had the boring task of naming babies that kept on coming. We were three brothers and five sisters in the family. Naturally our parents tried to match their son's names, so I was named Anil, my second brother named Kamal and the eldest named Nirmal who disliked the assembly line names, but that was the custom in those days.

My sisters fared better and were given more imaginative names. The youngest was named Sushmita, the next in ascending order was Annapurna then Devjani, Parvati and the eldest called Shanti.

People who do not know anything about Indian and particularly Bengali culture may know that a child in a Hindu family is not given a proper name until the kid is one year old. Then there is a great celebration, and fittingly it is called the naming ceremony, when the child gets to eat from a silver plate using a silver spoon. It is purely symbolic meaning that the parents wish the child to grow up prosperous and always eat from silver plates.

This naming ceremony is or can be quite an affair, depending upon of course the wealth of the parents. Even in the ordinary middle class family such as ours, the baby gets all the attention and eats his first solid meal at this time. The Indian hospitals therefore do not issue a birth certificate with a name of the child, which caused a lot of trouble later on. I was given gold ornaments such as a small crescent moon that my babysitter tied on my hair after making it bunched up on top. The other ornaments included a talisman tied to my waist to ward off evils, and my eyes were always daubed with kohl to make them appear bigger. These are typical accoutrements of a child. A dab of kohl on the side of the forehead completes the picture. This was also to ward off evil eyes.

My dad worked as an accountant in the Ministry of Defense and was posted in Sri Ram Pur at the time of my birth, but he moved around quite a bit all over India including what is now called Pakistan, so various members of our family were born in different places.

I happened to have a good memory. So good in fact that some people think I brag and certainly do not believe me when I say that I remember my first birthday.

Once I told Mom that I was dressed in finery and wearing a garland of scented white flowers. I was sitting on an ekka which is a horse-drawn carriage and someone was holding me up because I could not sit up straight at that age. She was clearly surprised and said that it was impossible for me to remember because it was my first birthday, and we were going to the Kali temple for the traditional blessing.

At another time I told her that I remember she was carrying me, and we were walking through a narrow lane somewhere where beggars were on both sides, and we entered a small temple of Kali. The image was small, but the tongue was huge and made of silver. Then my mother went around the image a few times carrying me in her arms, so I must have been very small.

She was incredulous and said that yes, she brought me to the famous Kali temple in Kolkata, but how could I remember in such detail something that happened when I was but a baby? I can not answer that, but I have never been to that temple in my adult life, yet I described in detail the temple, the image and the narrow lane full of beggars.

My early childhood was uneventful, and I grew up I suppose just like any other kid down the block, although my father was earning more than a middle class person being the chief accountant in an important government office. We were brought up frugally, although always well-fed and reasonably dressed. Mom saw to it that we always had shoes and clean clothes, and she did not have a maid.

So my childhood starts in the rented house in a narrow lane where I spent my first 13 years or so. We lived in a house with a tin roof and I remember there were always these naughty monkeys on the roof sitting leisurely preening and picking lice off each other. Often they made menacing gestures at us who mimicked them, but ordinarily they meant no harm.

Until one day when Devjani, at that time a lanky 17-year-old, went up behind a fat big monkey and tried to push it off the ledge. Now, she did not know that one can not just push a monkey off any ledge, let alone our ledge. But what she also did not know that a monkey when teased can be very vengeful came as a terrible blow to her because the big fat ugly monkey grabbed her shiny black hair and pulled so hard that a bunch came off. She cried hard for a long time and never did mess with the monkeys again

My early childhood was thus spent in the company of other kids of my age in the lane or with my elders. Devjani would soon get married, but Annapurna was far behind, so she was my company for a while, although I sought out kids my age more often than not.

Soon we would transfer to another house nearby, where the rooms were bigger and had a flat roof on the third floor. This became my private domain for a while. I used to sit for hours untangling kite threads or repairing kites that always used to land on our roof. Many times the kite fliers never knew how their kites landed on our roof, but the trick was simple. All I needed was a stone tied to a long string.

There was also a 5 feet by 6 feet room on the roof where our playpen was. The monkeys were always there on the roof watching us or waiting for us to leave a book or magazine by mistake. Not that they were great readers, they nevertheless took perverse pleasure in ripping up books just out of our reach. My first book of reading was thus a victim of these naughty monkeys.

There was a second problem with the monkeys there. I often thought that it was a joke that the landlord built the outhouse on the roof, and a cruel joke at that because woe to you if you forgot to bring a stick with you. We kids suffered the most as we were always in a hurry to go to the outhouse.

The fat monkeys sat on the wall facing the outhouse when they knew that we did not have a stick and menaced us with all their canines and grunts. Our doleful cries could of course not be heard by anyone downstairs.

Before I was five years old, Nirmal, Kamal, Annapurna and I went to the village of our father in Bengal during our summer vacation. This was my first train ride, so it was interesting. The narrow gauge train of Martin Burn Co. from Kolkata was also a load of fun until we reached a small town where we had to take a ferry to cross the big river.

Now, the boats in Sri Ram Pur are nice and have a cover for the rain, but the boats here were flat and had no cover. To make the matter worse, it rained cats and dogs, and we were soaked and cold. To get on the boat, one had to walk on a narrow plank that the boatmen laid on the shore because of knee-deep mud, so it was very difficult to walk on the board made slippery with mud. We were scared but Nirmal being the eldest put on a brave face, although he too was nervous.

Then the boat fought nasty waves and stank of fish as scores of fishermen brought in their baskets. All of this was very traumatic to a five-year-old, but somehow we crossed the river and were home.

My paternal grandmother was in her eighties at that time and not a very pleasant woman. That was the last time I saw her, and I never talked to her. She did not like children and sat on a big bed shouting orders that had to be obeyed instantly. She always had grapes, biscuits and many other things but never shared with anyone and often forgot to eat so they spoiled and were thrown away. I avoided her room like many other kids, but her presence was felt due to her crankiness.

It looked as if their farm was doing well judging from the huge rice granaries that were always filled to the brim, and they were prosperous, although it was only partially true. There were plenty of rice and fruits from the garden to eat, but no one had money. My grandfather had planted a huge mango orchard of choice varieties that produced tons of mangoes each summer. We kids had great fun, always eating mangoes or duhat. Most of the mangoes were used to make mango candy, so the women of the house had to extract the juice and spread it over huge

grass mats. After several coatings and drying in the sun, they were peeled off, cut into smaller pieces and stored in big clay jars. The sweet brown sugar made from the sap of date trees was another delight for us kids, who never could have enough of it.

I was mostly left alone so I spent my time making tiny clay figurines of cows and turtles or doing whatever I wanted to do like climbing trees or bathe in the stream near the house in the company of other kids.

Back in Sri Ram Pur I started my first grade schooling at a girl's school where boys and girls were admitted up to a certain grade. That is where Shanti also started schooling after the death of her husband when she was only 18 and with a small baby. I often sat in her class next to her after my lessons were over and had to endure the unwashed smell of older girls until the time came to return home. I could not go home alone at that age because there was this huge black bull with a fierce temper that often blocked the narrow lane we had to pass through, so Shanti was my protection.

There is nothing remarkable about the first grade except that I learned to count and multiply by rote, the Hindi alphabets and a few other things. The class teacher would let one kid recite the multiplication table that she wrote on the blackboard, and the whole class had to repeat it over and over.

It reminds me of the Italian movie Cinema Paradiso where Giancaldo kids did the same but could not remember what was five times five. We had to remember. The lunch was packed by Mom in a small cigarette can and consisted of one roti with a bit of sugar and ghee and rolled like a burrito.

At home, dad taught me the Bengali alphabets, so I grew up bilingual like most kids of our age. The slate and graphite chalk was used. At this time, Pa also taught us simple math and English alphabets.

I skipped the second grade and was admitted to the third grade in a different school, which was for boys only. There was a huge playground, but the classrooms leaked during the monsoon rains and the playground flooded, but on the whole this school was better, and I made progress from grade to grade, always at the top of the class.

I spent seven years there until I passed high school, which was my first board exam. It was scary and also exciting. We had to practice the exams by answering five questions in exactly two and half hours and leave the remaining 30 minutes to review all the answers. We had to learn to write in big bold and very legible letters and always write PTO at the bottom of the page. The exams went well until the last day when I had to take the geography part II exam starting at 3 pm.

In the April heat, I pedaled my bicycle furiously against a strong opposing wind and reached the school late to find that the gate was closed and the exam had already started. In panic, I pounded the gate until a kindhearted guard let me in, and I rushed to the room and sat down, very worried that I had lost so much time. On top of that, my nose started bleeding because the hot air had dehydrated the inside.

The worried invigilator poured cold water on my head until the bleeding stopped, and I got on with my exam. I passed all the subjects with good grades and with distinction in Sanskrit, to the great joy of my teacher.

Those seven years were great fun. I was a boy scout which meant that often we had to stand by the roadside whenever some fat cat politician came to town so that part was not fun. Once we had stood waiting for Indira Gandhi for hours when she came campaigning for her father in a slum of untouchables. She did not even look at us, but the kind untouchables offered food and drinks to us dehydrated kids. The teachers would not let us.

We were high-born and were not to take anything from those people, although at that age we did not understand the caste system well and played with everyone. What was fun though was the weekend cinema of Laurel Hardy and Walt Disney that the mobile vans always showed in the school, and we could sit on both sides of the bedsheet that was strung up as a screen.

Then there were boy scout camp fires where we sat around singing scout songs or learned how to make messages by arranging pebbles on the sand or by using hand signals or flags. The school provided the scarf, buckle, brown Keds shoes and a beret with red feathers. Our khaki shirts and shorts were always pressed very nicely.

I remember, when I was in grade six, an accident happened. I used to be the class monitor, keeping discipline while the teacher snoozed or went somewhere. The bullies did not like this because they were often punished. On that day I was suddenly pushed by one and my left hand landed on a spinning takli that a kid was using in our spinning and weaving class. The sharp end of the takli pierced my palm and nearly came out the other side, which caused a great commotion in the entire school compound.

Everyone was terrified, and soon the teacher came to see what all the racket was about. He was more shocked than I to see my hand crucified like that, and immediately took me to a doctor to extract the spike. I never cried and shed any tears, although it was quite painful. So with that thing dangling from my hand, I was taken to a doctor who started showing me some paintings on the wall and while I looked, he suddenly yanked the takli out in one swift motion. I winced in pain but still did not cry.

Today I know that the doctor was indeed a good one because had he pulled the takli in the wrong way, the hook at the end would have severed nerves to render my left hand useless for life. But he was good and gave me an injection, bandaged my hand and called me a brave boy.

The schoolmates waited to see if I would cry, but were disappointed. My parents were shocked and very worried, but a teacher came with a vial of antibiotic injection every now and then and took me to the doctor for checkup. Finally, the wound healed and left a small trace.

I also had songs, drama and music lessons. In fact, I was part of a team that brought back many certificates from the all district competitions. Later in the seventh grade I was chosen to go to Jhansi all state rally as part of the Sri Ram Pur contingent where I also won a third prize singing the national anthem in 52 seconds.

Jhansi was so much fun because I was a bit older to understand many things now and the long overnight train ride, the seven glorious days of competition, sightseeing in the Jhansi fort, playing, eating and messing around without restraint was a great novelty for a young kid. Sadly, all the certificates that I brought home collected dust as no one took any interest in them and were finally lost, but that is another story.

It must be said that I was a serious student from the start. I took my studies so seriously that I would come home from school, do my homework for the next day before I would venture out to play. I was to be the top notcher in every class up until the ninth grade, when some other kid took that position, but I was never far from the top even in college years later.

I usually bought old books from senior classmates and sold my books to pay for most of them. I seldom had new books even in college and always bought papers in the market that sold by kilos to save money. I was very conscious about expenses and did not want to ask from my father unless it was absolutely necessary. I was never given any pocket money, but I never resented it and always packed my roti and curry in the cigarette can for lunch even during the college days.

Once a year we had to paint the classrooms with lime that scorched our tender hands, but we did it and decorated the walls with slogans of all sorts cut with stencil and a team of teachers would later visit all the classrooms to judge which was the most decorated and painted well.

My favorite game was seven stones, but we also played gulli danda, marbles or tamarind seeds that we exchanged for marbles. There were other games as well like volleyball and cricket or football. I was given a small bat to play cricket because of my age and the bowlers threw condescending balls at me that I managed to miss, but it was great fun all the same. It is quite unfortunate that I quit all sports when I entered college because of pressure of studies and lack of time.

The bully boys in high school tried to corner me now and then, but even then I knew that someday I will defeat them in life by excelling in everything I did, although I did not know how or when.

Since I am still writing about those early days, I might as well write about the park that became so much a part of my early life.

It is a lovely park full of trees and flowers and a white marble monument in the middle of acres of garden. The monument had four sides and each side had the head of a British Royalty like Queen Victoria, King George fifth etc. and the walls were inscribed with something that we used to try to memorize. This was our favorite playground.

We had a gang of kids from our lane and every evening we used to go there and play and climb trees, jump over the neatly cut hedges or just fool around to the eternal dismay of the gardeners. There were a few girls of my age and I got to know some of them. One was called Anna and the other Priti.

Priti lived near our house and was my playmate for many years until we left the lane and moved to our new house. Her elder sister used to tease us by saying that Priti and I will one day get married, but we as children did not understand such teasing or mind it very much.

She was a wonderful girl, although not above naughtiness once in a while. She was once trying to impress me by her balancing act on the bench in the park when she fell and hurt herself. I panicked and tried to stop her bleeding by putting on chewed marigold leaves that I knew to be coagulant and expected a scolding from her father, but he was nice. We often played together which caused jealousy among other kids down the lane, but we ignored each other.

The park is near the great river, where dad used to go fishing every Saturday. Later I would become his constant companion in fishing, although I did not catch any fish worth mentioning. It was just fun to be with my father who talked to me and often asked how I was doing in school etc. I had to prepare all his rods and the baits. I had to go far to look for the earthworms every week, and I learned how to tie a fishhook with silk threads or adjust the depth of the bobber. The peacock feathers made an excellent bobber, so I went to the Central Park where there were many peacocks.

In our lane lived a fellow who had a huge goat. He tied a bag on her udder, but we kids often got hold of his free foraging goat and sucked the milk out. The fellow naturally got very angry when he tried milking his goat, but he never found out the culprits, one of them the son of our landlord.

Then there was a fellow who was a confirmed bachelor and went out every day at the same time being very punctual, but what was funny about him was that he always left his house as if someone had kicked his butt which was a spectacle we kids never missed.

The joys of growing up were many in that lane, and I suppose we did what everyone did, although I do not know how many kids messed around with very nasty hornets. We caught them and tied a thread in the middle to let them fly like a kite, and we kept them in match boxes in our

pockets. The hornets did not like it one bit and often stung, but that was the price to pay. We often exchanged hornets for marbles or other things.

There were many community festivals like Holi which is the national color festival in March and Durga Puja which happens in October, but our lane was where the Dodhikando or Dhakando as we kids called it started every year. It was indeed the highlight of the year when the huge silver howdah came out of the storage and was polished all day while the elephants munched the sugarcane stalks.

We often got to ride on the elephants as a treat by our landlord, who was the chief organizer of the event. A small girl was given extensive makeup for several hours to look like Sita, and another to look like Ram. After the blessing of the kids in the temple they mounted the silver howdah and the elephants moved out the lane majestically dragging behind generators that lit up the howdahs and other elephants. This was an annual event that created a lot of excitement. The crowds cheered and threw rose petals at Ram and Sita, and many prayed.

The parade included the acrobats, jugglers, lathi wielding warriors and many more and made a grand tour of the entire city. The poor kids endured the heat, the noise and most of all their terrible makeup of glued sequins bravely as it was a great honor to be chosen as Ram and Sita.

Then there were fairs like Guria mela which is a doll's fair and Siukoti fair that we never missed. Mom made a lot of sweets at those times as well as many other delicious dishes, but for the Bengalis, the Durga Pooja was a great event that lasted 4 glorious days.

We all got new clothes and shoes at this time and although the old tailor Suleiman always made the clothes from the same bolt and buttonholes too small, we did not mind. Durga Pooja was a fun time. One old chap used to give a select few of us satin badges that we proudly wore and whipped other truant kids who made trouble during the night shows. After all, we were monitors for nothing if we did not play the part.

Annapurna developed the talent for acting, so she was always in the lead role in the dramas that were always performed during the DurgaPooja. She brought home many silver medals. Nirmal was also talented and became a good artist. He won a prize in an art competition in Mumbai which was called Bombay in those days. He built a beautiful image of Saraswati one time when he was only a high schooler, so indeed he was talented. He made clay figurines of great beauty that people just took away, and he later learned to play electric guitar very well.

But the most neglected child of the family, Kamal, was a genius. He played the bamboo flute so well that many people came to admire him, though my folks never gave him much credit. I remember winning a prize in the elocution contest, for which Annapurna drilled me endlessly. In general, the whole household participated in the DurgaPooja festival because my father was very active in the committee. We collected so many sweets during the Bijoya Dashmi that

followed the great Pooja that we ate for weeks afterward. Visiting house to house was the tradition, which sadly now has weakened.

Our eldest sister Shanti, of whom I had written earlier, was very good at embroidery and painting. Mom was always teaching the daughters the art of carpet making, embroidery, crochet and home making but only some of them learned it well and some like Annapurna not very much.

The accident that made my father partially limping was a very sorrowful event. I think I was about ten years old at that time. We were going to a place when his rickshaw overturned on a particularly bad road, and he fell hard on the sidewalk, breaking his hip bone. I was also hurt but not badly. He stayed prostate for over a year while the fracture healed, but never could walk properly later or ride his bicycle again.

But before I close this chapter on my childhood and leave the lane for our new house elsewhere, I do like to mention that the life in that lane was never dull. We had plenty of playmates and much mischief to make, so after all is said and done, the fact remains that my childhood was very normal in every sense of the word. Annapurna played with her dolls and got them married and prepared a feast now and then, but then she was training for an adult life that would include her marriage and cooking. But we did not play together that much and I usually sought kids of my own age and similar hankering for mischief like flying the hornets.

I think a childhood, especially a happy one, has a lasting effect on adult life later. Life is like a building block, at the foundation of which lies childhood. Our home was peaceful because dad was a very peace loving person and seldom spanked or scolded us. He was content with his weekend fishing and card games while Mom handled the rest of us. She was a very good mother who always starched our clothes and polished our shoes. She was also a very hardworking mother who had to put up with dad's whims when he would go to the village and bring home to raise a cousin or two.

Our uncles were dirt poor, and they always demanded my father's help in raising their kids. These cousins, although they lived with us for many years, were always aloof and distant. Some spent nearly ten years under dad's care, but Mom never complained about the expenses.

Now the same cousins avoid us and say that we got to college, but they did not. I think this was very ungrateful of them because certainly they could have gone to college if they had first finished high school which they didn't so they bitched and complained. The fact was that they were not very smart.

My parents sacrificed a great deal of time and money for them, but they were total parasites who were ungrateful to boot. I never liked them because they were a fault-finding lot and always jealous for no apparent reason.

I must say that among his brothers, my father was the most intelligent and most successful, so they took full advantage of him. Such was his love for his poor brothers that he never complained. My dad was a saint, but so was Mom. She was very smart, although she never went to school beyond grade three, and was married at the age of 13.

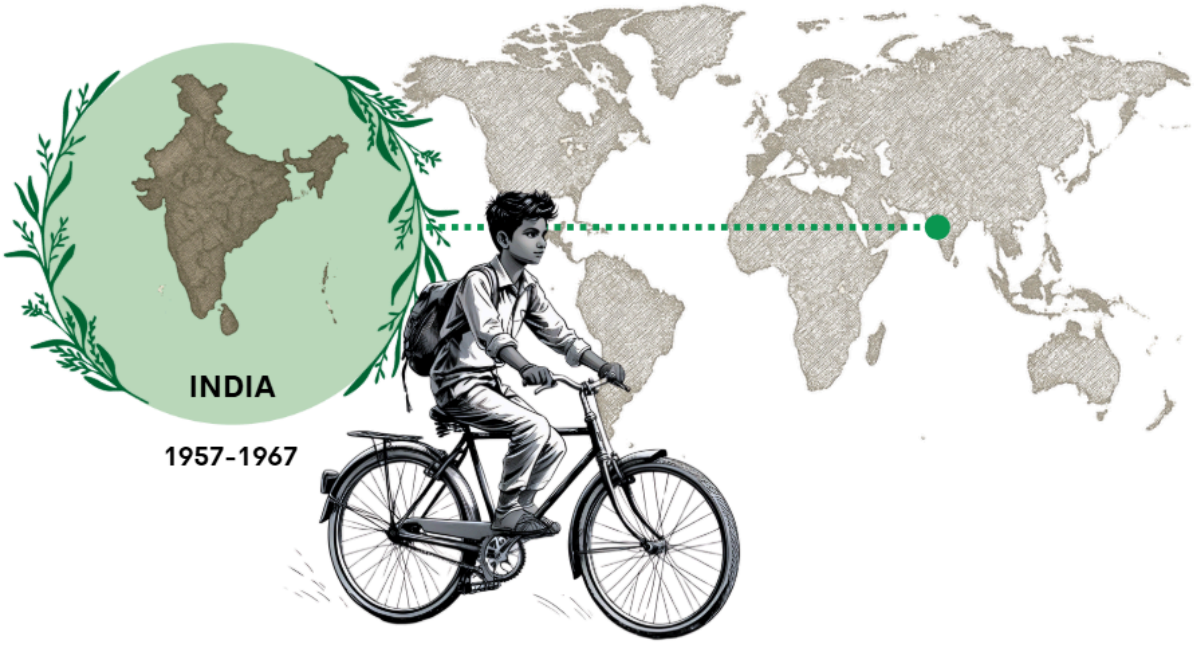
Temperamentally, we siblings were all different from each other, but that difference did not show until we were much older. Kamal was of fierce temperament and perhaps suffered the most for it, to the extent that once he ran away from home at a very tender age.

No one knew where he went and how he survived those long days he was away, but one day he showed up to everyone's relief. I knew that I could never have the courage he had at that age, and was awed by him.

Thus, my childhood memories are as vivid as those that followed later, but what was memorable about those early years so long ago was the fact that I was happy. Dad never gave me any pocket money, but it never occurred to me to ask either. We were happy without toys or nice clothes and shoes and made our own toys or games, and we never complained.

I guess what made my childhood happy was that I had many playmates like Priti or Nantu in or out of school and a lovely park nearby. But I think it was more than that. I think it was the feeling that I was secure and had a stable home with rock solid parents who cared. My childhood ends here. It was fun while it lasted, but now I must tell you about my college years.

Chapter Two: India, the formative years



Now I will leave behind the early childhood and move onto something more serious. In fact, one is not supposed to get serious at this stage, but I was an impatient kid who could not wait.

For example, I could not wait to pass the high school exam and get to college, or I could not wait to see our new house under construction come up among many other things because I was always daydreaming and wished that they would come true soon.

It was a sad day when we finally packed up everything and left the lane for another part of the town. I knew that we were leaving behind not only childhood friends and a familiar place, but also changing our lives drastically by the act of moving into our own home for the first time. No more leaky roofs and monkeys destroying our books. From now on there was no looking back which some of my friends felt more than they let on.

Although we now lived in a different part of town, I used to go back to the lane, but something had snapped in our relationship and so soon. The kids envied us because they knew we had a brand-new house and a garden, while they were still very impoverished and lived in poor houses. They now found no time for me and made excuses, so gradually I stopped going there. I think it was the same for Nirmal who tried hard to keep the old relationship but came to the conclusion that nothing was going to be the same anymore.

We were all growing up in different directions and the childhood phase was over. It was enjoyable while it lasted, but now we were definitely on a new road. I learned later that the kids

in that lane did not fare well in life and avoided us. My high school friends also became aloof, although I tried to keep up with some of them for a while.

It was in the year 1957 when we moved into our new house which at first consisted of only three rooms, porch and a veranda at the back, but father added two more rooms and a courtyard at the back later on. We did not have electricity, but that did not matter. It was far better than that rented house. Here we could start our very own garden, while Annapurna longed for the day when the trees would become big, and we would sit under it on marble benches. We were naturally greatly excited and made new friends in the community rapidly. There was a park where kids played ball, gulli danda or cricket, and I was welcome to join them. Here most people lived in their own houses and new houses were coming up all the time.

The next door neighbors were girls of my age and I visited them sometimes, but now this was frowned upon by the tradition bound parents because we lived in a society where boys and girls did not mix. I could not have a girlfriend and go on a date because Bengali society is a closed one and does not allow such freedom.

Schools were also separated by sex now. I was still three years from passing High school, so I continued going to my old school. Annapurna and I trudged along every morning together because her school was near my school, and often I found her waiting at her school gate for me to return home together.

I was a diligent student, so that excused a great deal of odd behavior in me, but basically I became a loner and stayed with my studies. My parents thought of me as a serious, albeit self-centered person, and seldom interfered in my affairs. The high school board exam was the highlight in 1960 which I passed with good grades and looked forward to college.

Kamal also passed high school and went on to college, but he was a born rebel and often at odds with our parents over some issues. He was always in and out of trouble and never seemed to study but got good grades anyway because he was smart. When he passed away suddenly due to some illness, it left a great void in my heart that has not filled yet. He was only 21.

I loved Kamal. He taught me how to make a map of India using only geometry and endlessly typed my grade sheets and other certificates that I had to submit for entry to a college. One could not give originals, hence the certified copies, but he never complained. He brought me to my college on the first day on his bicycle and often did many things for me.

He craved attention from everybody, but my parents were cruel to him for some reason and denied him the love he so much wanted. Given the chance, he would have excelled in life, but sadly that chance was never given to him.

I was not into the love and attention business being a loner and cared less if my parents or others ignored me. I knew what I wanted by the time I was sixteen. I wanted to be admitted to

the Sri Ram Pur Agricultural Institute, but this was not to be because I did not have science subjects in high school. However, another college with the same curriculum admitted me, where I stayed only one year and transferred to the Institute the second year without any problem.

These were my formative years. I was learning a great deal and fast, yet I was basically a timid person with an intrinsic desire to break out of the mold of timidity. The Institute will play a crucial role in my life from now on.

The College has a lovely campus on the banks of the river and is always full of flowers and trees, among which are scattered various buildings. In 1962, it had only about 500 students in all, including dairy diploma students, women taking home economics, the agriculture students and the agricultural engineering students. It could be considered a small but very select college where very few students were admitted each year.

To be admitted there was in itself a great feat because of the competition, but I had no problem because I was a transfer student with excellent grades in some subjects.

But my good grades in agricultural engineering in the first year sort of got to my head and I foolishly applied for admission to the engineering department in the third year, not knowing how tough it was going to be. Indeed, it was very tough and only a few students passed that year, so I learned my lesson the hard way and switched to agronomy after losing one valuable year. The decision to switch was a wise one because they would make a very good agronomist out of me in the future.

I studied hard and came out in the merit list the third and the fourth year which was the final year earning me a B.Sc. Ag degree from the University of Sri Ram Pur to which our college was affiliated.

Our professor was Mr. Dutta in the agronomy department and in time I became his favorite student, although we were always in awe of prof.Dutta. He could be such a terror, but basically he was a very kind-hearted and jolly fellow, and certainly the most respected professor on campus.

Dr. Chowdhary who was the head of the agronomy department was another great teacher who taught us agronomy as well as statistics.

He would always call me to solve a problem on the blackboard, which some of the classmates did not like because of jealousy, but I was the favorite student here as well. I would form a lifelong bond with Dr.Chowdhary.

I remember the day prof. Dutta took us all on a field trip by bicycle to various parts of Sri Ram Pur. He joked all along and called aloud anyone who lagged behind. We saw the grass research farm, dairies and many other places and had a great time. I still have a photo of my classmates.

Sadly it was to be our last outing with Prof. Dutta because suddenly he passed away due to heart failure. It was a great blow to us who loved him and collected some money to be used as a scholarship in his name, but the money disappeared. By this time we graduated and left the campus for good, never to meet again.

I almost forgot to mention that in the second year we went on an educational tour of 15 days and visited Mathura, Dehradun, Aligarh, Delhi and Saharanpur among other places with our economics teacher as guide.

I had a classmate called Susanto who was brought up by his father in a most orthodox way. Everyone made fun of the poor chap because he was such an oddity on campus, but he was good-natured and talked a mile a minute on any subject, whether he knew the subject or not. We called him chatterbox.

Even during our field trip, the students took turns in making life difficult for him and one day emptied his footlocker that his mother had filled with dry food and all sorts of homemade cookies. Susanto will later on get a doctorate degree and become a high official in the Bengal government.

At the College we used to have a period called fifth period when we used to invite outside guests to speak on some current topic and on other days had religious studies meaning Bible study or joined a class called better citizenship class. But the days when we did not have a speaker, the students took over the floor and did whatever took their fancy.

Often it was a general knowledge contest or better still the extemporaneous speaking contest where you had to go up on the stage in front of cat calling and jeering boys and girls if you had the courage to face them and speak on a given topic for five minutes. Most did not last that long and were pelted with chalks and paper balls.

But there came a day when someone pushed me to the front, so I had no choice but to go up on the stage. Now everyone waited to see what I would do next, and I knew that they were ready with paper balls and chalks to pelt me with. The jeering had already started when I picked a topic from the hat and started to speak on it. The topic was" What would I have done differently had I been the Queen Victoria". This was a silly topic, so I rejected it and asked for a second topic.

The next one I picked was" The scandal of Kristine Keeler and Profumo ". Now this was more to my liking and I knew all about the scandal because the newspapers were full of it every day. The UK defense minister Profumo was caught red-handed cavorting with a prostitute called Keeler who probably was a spy of KGB and extracting information out of Profumo.

So I spoke for the required time with some trepidation and gradually warmed up to the subject to the amazement of the crowd. But the most interesting outcome of this adventure was that from

then on I was no longer the timid person everyone knew and lost my inhibition. Now I could face any crowd and speak to them without any preparation because that is what extemporaneous speaking was all about. This ability would serve me well in the future when I had to speak in conferences or meetings with a group of farmers or any other crowd.

Just to be different was a need for me, so I joined the religious class, although I really did not care for it that much. It was only Bible reading and was meant for the Christians, but I sat there anyway and learned some Bible stories. Later I would switch to the Moral class. I also used to join the Christian prayer meetings under the tree that the alcoholic pastor always led in the morning, but this was not due to great religious feelings in me.

During my childhood I was led to believe that Shiva worship every day was a good thing to do, so I kept it up for more years than I can remember, but that too was stopped one day because I felt that it was a meaningless chore for me. I had no reverence for Shiva in my heart.

Mom noticed but did not say anything. Unlike Christians, the Hindu families are extremely tolerant towards the religious attitudes of children and never force them to attend religious services or go to temples as a routine. It is the Hindu belief that religion is a very personal matter and should be left to the individual to decide what he wants to do or not to do.

But this very tolerance makes most Hindus very Hindu because their religion is not imposed on them. They like being Hindu because it comes from their heart. More than that, it makes the next generation also tolerant to others.

In the second year at the Institute we had to join the National Cadet Corps or NCC and parade twice a week. This was after the classes and usually became the time for all kinds of mischief. I can hardly remember the time when I actually paraded like the rest of the students because I always found excuses to go to the dispensary to look at the beautiful lady doctor.

She of course knew that there was nothing wrong with me, so I went to the dorm, changed into civilian clothes and watched the girls playing basketball wearing very short skirts.

Then at the closing time I would again show up in my full regalia and quietly slip into the formation for the roll call and would often answer for the absentee friends by shouting Yes Sirrr. The absentee friends would thus owe me big time, which I would later collect somehow. The best part was the tea and samosas that I never missed.

One day, the commander asked who were the kids on Ramadan fast, to which I promptly raised my hand. Now the Ahmeds and Mohameds were excused, but I was asked to fall out. The kids had a wild time knowing that all my past antics had caught up with me, so they jeered when the commander told me to run around the field with my 14 pound rifle held up high. This was painful and humiliating, but I was naughty and this was the price to pay getting caught.

But on the whole, NCC was fun. It gave us the chance to fool around a bit at the end of tiresome studies and 4 hour long chemistry lab work. Twice I joined the NCC camps, once in Naini and the second time in Dehradun

at the foothills of the Himalaya mountains. Both camps were fun because I knew how to make the camp life exciting like that time in Dehradun, but I am getting ahead of my story.

The first camp was near Sri Ram Pur and I hardly ever went to the parade and rifle exercises by pretending to be sick with stomach ache but eating well from other's plates because sick kids were only given gruel that I threw away. This charade went on for a few days while the rest of them paraded, cursing the heat and the training exercise. They cursed me heartily as well, knowing that there was nothing wrong with me.

But one day the camp doctor got wise and reported me to the commander, who promptly asked me to crawl on my elbows holding up the infernal rifle to the great amusement and hooting from the cadets. Luckily, the very next day, the Bengali cadets approached the commander and asked to be excused from the camp because it was our national festivity of Durga Pooja.

This petition was granted, so we left the camp giving fingers to the cadets who were on their way to the parade ground for more sweating.

In Dehradun camp I escaped with Ram Nath who was my classmate and a willing partner in this highly illegal activity. We went to Musoori which is a resort hill station, messed around the whole day and returned to Dehradun in the evening to find that the last train had left, leaving us stranded there.

Now to get back to the camp which was in the middle of a forest, we persuaded an engine driver in the yard to give us a ride and told him not to stop in front of the camp, but that is what he ended up doing anyway because he explained sheepishly that the engine was very heavy and took a lot to slow down and stop.

The camp guards were on the lookout for the escapees and gave us a good chase because we were very visible in the moonlight, but we somehow managed to hide and slip into our tents. The tents in the meantime had been reshuffled so we had trouble finding our tent but finally did and found the tent leader sitting and waiting for us. He said that he had to report us to the commander because it was his responsibility.

The next day we were asked to report to the commander for possible punishment, but the commander just scolded us and said that he was personally responsible for the 10000 cadets that were attending the camp and if something bad happened to us, what would he say to our parents?

These were just some of the incidents that I thoroughly enjoyed because mischief was a part of our life when we were young. In fact, the girls were no less and often tried to corner us if they

could. When the new students arrived on campus from the railway station, we were always waiting for them and directed them promptly to the women's dorms, where the naughty girls took their bags upstairs and put them in some rooms. When the boys saw that there were bras and panties hanging everywhere, they had second thoughts and came down hurriedly.

But mostly it was just camaraderie and a bit of fooling around that helped us develop lasting bonds with some schoolmates.

During the third year, a classmate called Ramesh met me near my house and said that he lived nearby. I did not know him well, but soon we began to study together for the exams that were due. Ramesh was a real rascal and expert in cutting classes so he was ill prepared for the exams, but he sincerely wanted to pass so we burned a lot of midnight oil, studied hard and both passed the exams. He even got better grades than I in some subjects, proving that he was smart. The final year of our studies, Ramesh and I were inseparable. He always came by our house in the morning in his hand painted multicolored bicycle, and together we pedaled to the Institute along with Susanto and Abhit. Abhit was the fancy one with his brand new shiny Sen Raleigh bicycle while we pedaled our worn out bikes with worn out tires.

Being a day scholar meant that we lived off campus and never joined any on campus activity other than the NCC parade. There were many activities or games or movies, but it was very difficult for us to stay after dark, so we missed out a lot. My bicycle was also in bad shape with very worn out tires that one day gave way and I had to stay with some friends until the next day Susanto came to my rescue with a new tire that my pa had sent.

Ramesh, the class cutter and pain in the neck of most professors, turned out to be very successful in life. He would later get a PhD and work for a big fertilizer company in Delhi, while Abhit would join the ministry of agriculture in Bengal where he would become a block development officer. But Susanto would rise the highest, as mentioned earlier.

Others left no trace other than the graduation group photo that adorns our home now. The alumni association was weak, and we all knew that we would rarely meet again, India being so big.

In the fourth year of my studies, something very dramatic happened that would change my life forever. I believe it was the month of April 1965 when I noticed a small advertisement on the notice board of our agronomy department. But to say that I noticed it the first time in April was wrong because I had seen it before but did not pay any attention to it until one day I started reading what it was all about.

It said that a non-profit international philanthropic organization in the USA was looking for young agronomists to work in developing countries as volunteers and that a fellow called Lawrence had the necessary info and the application forms etc. He was a visiting scholar in our department. He said that the International Voluntary Services known as IVS. I had never talked

to him. In India, we did not generally speak to foreigners, but I decided to see him and find out more.about the IVS. He turned out to be a very nice American who explained to me that he himself had been a volunteer in Laos and would be glad to assist me in any way he can. He gave me an application to fill out and said that he will mail it to the Washington office should I decide to apply.

Furthermore, he said that it would be a good opportunity for me to get some real life practical experience working in another country but could not say where I would be sent if selected.

So I took the application form home to think about it for a while, and later decided that I needed Lawrence to help me fill it. He lived on campus with his wife Jane and a cute little baby called Jared. Jane was pretty and smiled a lot. So Lawrence helped me fill out the form and said that he will mail it with his recommendations and comments later.

A few months passed while I waited to hear from the Washington DC office, but then one day a letter came from them saying that I was selected to go to South Vietnam as an agronomist for two years and asked me to prepare my travel documents as soon as possible.

I can not express my feelings of that day because naturally I was very excited and told everybody about the letter and the offer. Lawrence was very pleased that I had been selected and said that I must go. But in 1965, there was a terrible war raging in Vietnam and the Americans were fighting the North Vietnamese in the name of fighting communism. This was in the newspaper every day, so everyone knew that Vietnam was not a place to go to at that time.

I told this to Lawrence, but he assured me that many young people were working in Vietnam as volunteers in areas that were not dangerous and gave me many newsletters from them to read about what they were doing.

I was convinced and decided to apply for a passport. But no one else was convinced and said I was a fool to jump into a mess like that and should instead work in India by accepting the job that the Bengal Government had recently offered me in Malda.

I believe two or three other students were also accepted to go to Vietnam, but they all backed out, not willing to take such a drastic step in their life. Male children in India are very much protected by the family and seldom can go against the family wishes.

My family never sheltered me and, as I had written earlier, never interfered in my decisions or plans, although they were surprised just the same when I told them that I was to go to Vietnam.

No one had ever gone abroad in our family and the notion of jet travel, passport and visas were strange and foreign to them. My father at that time was seriously ill with cancer and had just returned from Kolkata after a major surgery in his mouth. He could hardly talk and was always in pain. He was a very sick man and had a short time to live. Certainly, this was no time for me to

go to Vietnam because the family needed my support and Mom urged me to accept the job offer in Bengal.

But my father said that I was too young to work, so it would be better if I took a graduate degree before starting to work. To go back to graduate school later would prove to be difficult. My mother did not like it, but dad's words were a command. He said I should forget about Vietnam.

I was very amazed because the money was being spent like water on dad's medical treatments and if the family needed another earning member, it was now. Luckily, Nirmal had just gotten a government job and Annapurna after passing the interview at the Public Service Commission also got a job teaching in a nearby town. Shanti the eldest already had a job and dad still received his pension, but the need for money was great due to heavy medical expenses, so certainly it would have been a help to the family if I took a job instead of going to graduate school.

At this time I was invited for an interview at the Air Hindquarters in Delhi and if successful, I would be admitted to the Air Force Academy to train as a fighter pilot. The Government would pay all the expenses. But this was not to be. My father said that the Air Force was not for me, so the matter ended there because he always had the last word. I kept mum.

So I decided to go for the graduate studies and applied for admission in three different departments at the University and was accepted by two, while the College also considered me for admission to the agricultural extension course. The competition was great, but I had good grades, so admission was not a problem. The problem was money, so I accepted to be admitted to the College grad school only if they could give me a part-time job to cover my tuition. They did, so my studies began again in earnest.

I could not ask my parents for the school expenses, so it had to be my own effort. I did not particularly like the course, but I had no other choice because the university did not offer any financial help.

The graduate level studies were not difficult. There were six students in all but they were a lot older than I because they had taken study leave from their jobs. I was only 22 and secretly hoped that someday I would really be able to go to Vietnam, but my passport never came.

Six months went by and still I could not get my passport. I was in fact determined to ditch my studies as soon as the passport came because the Washington people kept on encouraging me and not giving up. They sent me 150 dollars for my clothing allowance, which was a lot of money in those days, and said that they will assist me from Saigon about my visa, but first I have to get a passport.

In the meantime I had also applied for a National Loan Scholarship that the Government decided to offer me so that helped a lot but in spite of my studies going well and the scholarship

money, these were my darkest days because it became widely known that I was trying to get a passport but not getting anywhere.

People whom I had never known stopped me on the street daily to ask if my passport had come. Often they got mixed up between passport and visa and did not know which came first because they were small town folks who had never been anywhere. It got to the point where I used to hide from people who tormented me daily and fervently hoped that the damn passport came.

When I wrote a letter to the regional passport officer, I always got a standard reply to the effect that it was under consideration and I will be notified once a decision is made in due course of time. But the time was passing, and I was getting more and more restless every day.

The neighbors did not let up either. The old ladies would tell my mother that she was heartless to allow me to go to Vietnam in the middle of the horrible war there, so my poor mother suffered silently. She did not know what to say or do, being such a simple lady.

But the year 1966 started out with a great tragedy again in our family when my dad died in January. He had greatly suffered due to his illness and his sufferings were over, but dad occupied a very big place in our heart and his absence was sorely felt. He kept money under his pillow and gave me some to go and see a movie or something even when he could not talk and winced with pain of cancer. He was my hero and a great dad. I spent so much time with him as a child, going fishing with him and running errands for him.

It was hard to imagine our family without him, and now he was gone after a long period of suffering. No doctor or expensive treatment could save him. I was only four months away from my final exams, but I could not concentrate on studies. Yet the exams came as scheduled, and I passed with flying colors and took the first position in the merit list, which in other countries is known as Dean's list. Ma was proud and very happy.

But in July there was a surprise waiting for me when our principal called me one day to his office and asked if it was true that I had applied for a passport. I said yes and was preparing to go to Vietnam.

He got very angry and said that I was ruining my career to chase after such folly and should leave the studies.

Now, I was the top student in his class and thought that it was strange that he should talk to me that way. If he had only been more diplomatic in saying that such a decision as to go to Vietnam should be carefully considered and that I should take some time to think about it and in the meantime finish the graduate course, things would have been different.But his approach was harsh, and it never worked with me. I am a very determined person, so a softer approach was

probably the best idea, but he was arrogant being the principal, and he treated me badly, so I quit.

In fact, it made me more determined to go to Vietnam and only then I decided to go to Lucknow. My family at this time came again with moral support and Nirmal said that whatever happens, it is for the best. I needed a kick in my behind to take the final leap, so the principal's outburst was a blessing in disguise.

So one day in October 1966 I went to Lucknow and asked the passport officer what really the problem was with my application. I thought every Indian citizen had a right to travel and besides there were no criminal grounds on the basis of which they could deny me a passport, so what was the matter?

He was a nice and polite chap and told me that my case had been sent to Delhi to decide because it was complicated and beyond his discretion. The reason was Vietnam. The Indian Government did not encourage anyone to go to Vietnam at that time due to their disagreement with the Americans on the war there.

So I took the name and address of the person to see in Delhi and boarded a train the same night to see if I could personally explain my case to the officials in Delhi. This was my first solo trip to Delhi where I did not know a soul. I just had a name and the address in the Ministry of External Affairs.

When I arrived at the Ministry of External Affairs in Delhi and demanded to see a certain official who was the big boss there, I was told that an appointment was necessary before an audience could be granted. This I could not accept, having traveled over 900 kilometers to Delhi to see this gentleman. So I insisted that the clerk call the boss and at least let him know that I came all the way from Sri Ram Pur to see him for a very important reason. To the surprise of the clerk, the big boss asked me to come up immediately to his 14th floor office.

When I was shown into his office, I was truly impressed.The office was huge with plush carpet and very comfortable with the air conditioner humming in the background. He must have been a very high official indeed to merit such office in the capital.

I was nervous, but he smiled and asked me to sit down while he attended to more business at hand. He received streams of visitors, some of them foreign and some local, and he often talked on phones. There was a red one which I suspect linked him to higher offices. I read Time Life magazines while he appeared to be so busy.

Finally, after what seemed like a long time, he came over and asked me what brought me to his office, so I told him the whole story and asked if he would look into my case. He listened to me very attentively and asked his secretary to bring him my file. This was done by a nervous secretary who brought in a dusty file that he surreptitiously tried to clean but was noticed.

He asked why the file had been collecting dust for six months and not brought to his attention, to which the poor chap could give no answer. At any rate, he read my files and asked why I was going to Vietnam of all places and what in the world was “IVS” - the International Volunteer Service, so I told him. He was not convinced.

He then asked how much I was going to be paid as a volunteer agronomist, to which I replied that it was only 80 dollars a month. I was going more for the experience than money, but he kept shaking his head and asked why I was going to risk my life going to Vietnam, and that too for only 80 dollars a month. At that point I became quite nervous because I knew that my chance of ever getting a passport depended upon this powerful man, so I had to convince him of my motive.

So I said something to this effect :” Sir, if the Japanese, Americans, Canadians and many other young people from so many countries could go to Vietnam for only 80 dollars a month then why couldn't an Indian? I also could go there and work. Those people risked their lives, but so could I. Besides, I really did not believe that anything bad would happen to me in Vietnam.”

This must have hit a patriotic chord in him somehow, and he smiled. He explained that it was against the government policy to even seem to support the war in Vietnam and discouraged Indians to go there, but he will try and see what he can do for me as my motive seems to be noble.

He then tried to dial long distance to Lucknow to talk to the passport officer, but the lines were busy. He spent some time dialing various numbers and finally said to me that I should return home. He will do what he can to help me. This was all the assurance I needed from this kind and mild-mannered gentleman, and happily I returned to Sri Ram Pur.

The passport came within a week. I remember that day well because my childhood friend Nantu showed up unexpectedly. I had not seen him in years, so I was very happy and went with him and spent the whole day catching up on what he did since we last saw each other. He told me that he had run away from home when he was 16 and enlisted in the army, falsifying his age. Now he was a captain in the signal corps and enjoying his privileges as an officer. He showed great delight that I was going to Vietnam. He looked so handsome and smart. I was truly happy for him.

It was a great shock for me when I learned later that he had taken his life, and I to this date do not know why. He seemed so happy.

The whole of 1966 passed away. I had gotten my passport, but the fight for a visa just got started. At that time, I did not know, but would later meet the people in Saigon who worked tirelessly to persuade the Vietnamese government to wire me a visa. Many months passed while I fretted and became more and more listless because this period of waiting was indeed very agonizing, not to mention those people who checked every day if my visapassport had

come. Now they said visapassport as one word and still did not know what it meant or which came first.

But the visa finally came, and the plane ticket, so there was no more hurdle, and I was free to proceed at last. It was a great struggle, but I had won so nothing else mattered now.

During this time, Nirmal became my staunch supporter and proud brother. He knew how hard I had tried and rejoiced that finally I got what I wanted. He said not to worry because he will look after Mom as was his duty, so I should now proceed with my life. Furthermore, he also convinced Mom that I was taking a new direction in my life, so the best she could do was to wish me luck.

Ramesh at that time was studying in Jabalpur and often came to Sri Ram Pur. He was very surprised to know that I was going to Vietnam but showed up with a car to drive me and some well-wishers to the airport in Sri Ram Pur in June 1967. This was my first plane ride, but the long journey in life had already begun. It was just the first step, and what a Momentous step it was.

I was only 22 and on my way to a foreign land. I had struggled hard and spent many bitter months, but finally it was over, and I was going to fly to Kolkata from where a big Pan Am jet would take me to Saigon.

Nirmal at this time wanted to get married, so the family began to look for a suitable girl extensively. In fact the search began a long time ago when dad was alive, but for one reason or another the prospective candidates were all rejected. I do not know what they were looking for in a girl to be suitable because in general the Bengali girls are not bad looking and most are college educated.

Sometimes it was the nose that was not right or the height or the girl was too dark skinned. Now the Indians in general are dark skinned but come the marriage time everyone looks for a very fair skinned woman. They are hard to find. Once I was asked to see a girl whom my mother was considering for Nirmal. In arranged marriage which the Bengali tradition dictates, the girl is carefully scrutinized and long bargaining on expenses etc. starts if the girl is suitable. But first the girl had to be interviewed, so we trooped one day to her house. I found the girl charming and quite educated and gave a very positive impression.

But sadly she turned out to be an inch taller than Nirmal which to me was not a problem, but I was not the groom. Nirmal absolutely refused to consider her. The parents of the poor girl even came to the house with a measuring tape to check if Nirmal was indeed short by an inch and went away dismayed, so a new search started immediately.

Then just before I was about to leave Sri Ram Pur for Vietnam, another photo was shown to me. It was a very plain looking girl to be sure, but I refused to be a part of the interview process because I had burned my fingers once. Besides, who was I to decide? It was Nirmal's choice

and only his, but I had certain misgivings, yet I kept my own counsel. I had met the father of this girl earlier, or rather he was once looking at me but never spoke. I disliked the way he looked at me and thought that the fellow looked mean, so what kind of daughter would such a man raise?

I do have a canny sixth sense in knowing a person just by looking the first time. This sense has served me many times in life, dealing with people. Either I have good vibes about a person or I don't. I usually stay away from people I do not like, and I certainly did not like this old man, but then I was about to leave, so it really was none of my business whom Nirmal decided to marry. I did not say anything to anyone and prepared to leave. Nirmal would get married to this woman in two months. Her name was Sabita.

On June 1 of 1967 I flew off to Kolkata in a wretched propeller driven plane that kept dropping like stone in air pockets making my journey very painful. My first plane ride was also the most awful because I threw up. A Peace Corps volunteer sitting next to me was very helpful in getting me off the plane because I was so weak from retching.

Mom and Annapurna had arrived by train the next day. Now the final preparation for my departure from Kolkata began in earnest. The whole clan was excited because I was the first one to go abroad, so they chattered endlessly. My uncle borrowed a jeep to bring me to the airport and on the morning of June 4 we all proceeded to the airport.

The driver missed the airport in all the excitement, and it was only after some time this fact emerged, so the jeep turned around to find the proper airport. Annapurna did not go because she had diarrhea, but Mom and others went to see me off. At the airport, it was quite a scene. They were not about to let me leave without a bit of fanfare. Mom and aunts kept on shedding tears, so the immigration officer asked where I was going. I answered quickly Bangkok because Saigon would have elicited a long harangue which I wanted to avoid.

He said things like Bangkok is a good place. He knows someone there who says so etc. etc. but ma knew better and kept quiet. Finally, the pretty American stewardess could wait no longer and said that the flight must leave, and I was holding it up, so I boarded the bus.

This time the big jet did not roll or drop like a stone and climbed fast over the clouds. Only there was the slight hum of the air conditioner and I felt some pressure on the ear as the plane climbed. Below nothing could be seen, but I was thinking of the folks on the ground and the life I left behind, perhaps forever for a foreign country I knew nothing about.

It was an achievement worth writing about. I managed to fight for my rights, got my passport and the visa and was on my way thanks to some help from that kind gentleman in Delhi and the people in Saigon whom I would soon meet. Mostly I struggled alone. But my mind was also occupied with a lot of other things. I never knew foreigners and did not know how to deal with them, talk to them or work with them. In India, we did not mix with them and always looked at them from a distance only. Friendship with them was out of the question. But Jane was nice,

and she smiled a lot and Lawrence was not bad either, so I thought that it would be alright if others were like them. I felt a bit lonely for the first time in many years, although there was no one to notice it.

Very soon we were over the city of Rangoon in Burma and saw the golden dome of the Shwedagon Pagoda that glittered in the sun. It is a landmark and can be seen even from that altitude. Soon it was time to land in Bangkok where I would have to take a connecting flight to Saigon, but a Thai girl approached me in Bangkok and said that my flight to Saigon was cancelled, so I had to stay in Bangkok overnight.

The airline will pay for my expenses and will send me to a nice hotel in their limousine and also bring me back to the airport the next day to catch the flight to Saigon. So I went downtown and stayed at the Rama hotel, which was a five star luxury hotel. Now I was a small town boy and had never been inside a hotel, five star or not, so the splendor and décor of a five-star hotel like Rama really impressed me. It was truly beyond anything I had ever known or seen, but what worried me most was the fact that I had only five miserable dollars in my pocket that the Indian government had allowed me to change against Rupees.

In a place like Rama probably a cup of tea cost as much, but I kept to myself and went to my room to sleep for a while. In the evening I went to an enormous dining hall or restaurant where there were very few people and a lot of waiters. One of them soon brought me a thick menu, but I was not familiar with the foods that were mentioned, although he said that I could order anything I wished. The airline will foot the bill.

So after a lot of thinking I ordered a bowl of soup because I noticed that some people around me were having soup, so I figured that was the proper thing to do, although at home we never had soup or wanted one.

I do not remember the rest of the menu or the evening except that the Thai waiter came back and asked if I wanted to see the night-life or Thai boxing, to which I quickly replied in the negative before the thing got out of hand because the waiter did not know about my only five dollars.

Indians in those days were such a miserable lot who traveled with only five dollars on them, but later I would learn that many other countries had similar restrictions and their governments controlled very tightly the currencies.

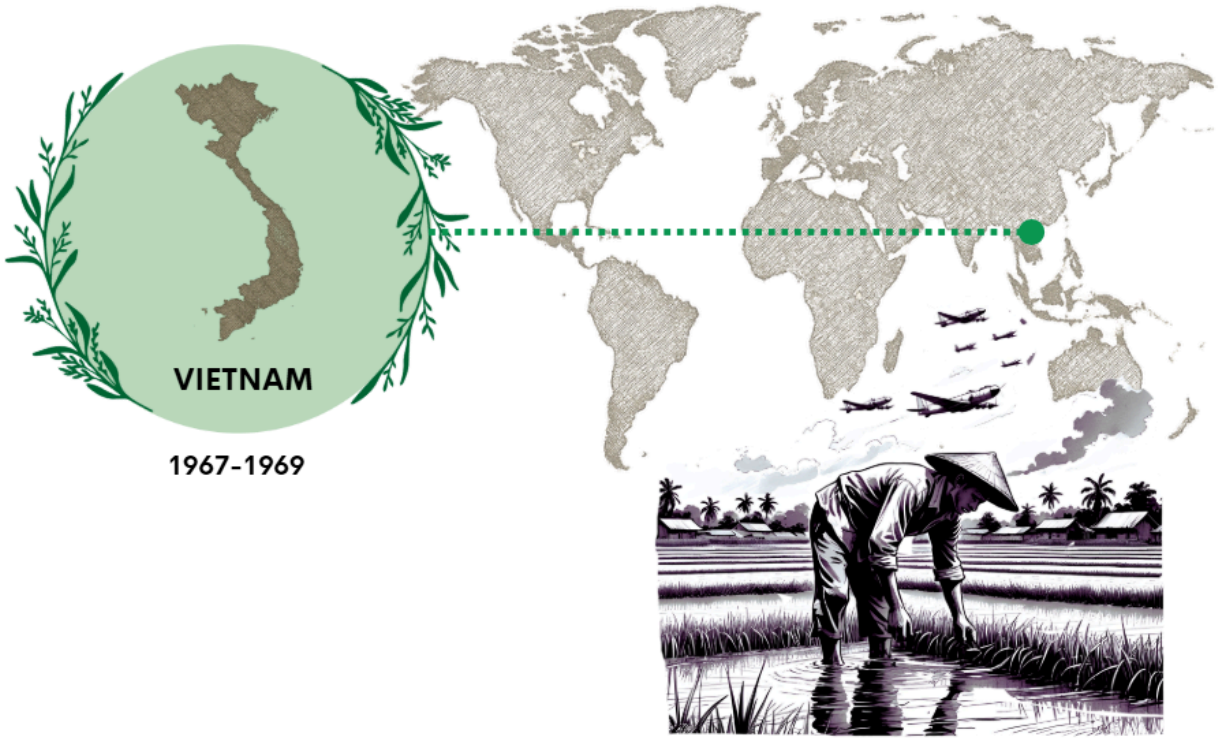
I asked the desk to wake me up at 4 am to be ready for the airport, but the sleep did not come easily, and I was up long before the wake-up buzzer sounded and went for a walk in the empty streets of Bangkok. The manager was anxiously waiting for me because the airport limo was there to pick me up. This time the flight was not cancelled, so I took off for Saigon with a stop-over in Phnom Penh in Cambodia.

The Pan Am jet touched down at the Tan Son Nhut airport of Saigon on time, but I noticed hundreds of very round holes in the ground filled with water that didn't quite look like fishponds to me. I made a mental note to ask about them later.

It is never easy to recall in detail the events that happened so long ago, but I have tried to be faithful in telling my story so far. Later it would get more and more complicated. I had a normal childhood and a normal adolescent period in my life, but from now on nothing would be strictly normal. Many unusual things were to happen, but I had no idea yet what was coming. From now on I would face many difficult situations and learn to cope with them in time, but now was the time to rejoice because I had arrived.

I would like to end this chapter here because I literally began a new life the Moment I touched down in Saigon. That is where everything began, so the earlier part was just the preliminary.

Chapter Three: Vietnam, a volunteer agronomist in a war torn country



I think it was June 6 of 1967 when I finally arrived in Saigon and was met by a big bald American fellow called Robert who said that he had come the day earlier but was told that the flight was cancelled.

He had no trouble recognizing me because I was the only Indian off the plane, so soon we were on our way to the IVS house which he said was not too far. At first, Saigon looked like a very chaotic city and the streets were clogged with assorted vehicles and many army trucks with big white stars painted on their sides. They were all trying to get ahead of each other, but not succeeding and creating more traffic mess.

Welcome to wartime Vietnam. Saigon is a sprawling city that also includes Cholon, the China town. One could not ignore the overflowing gutters and garbage piles but what struck out most was the sight of old women and men on the sidewalk sitting with black market PX goods like shaving cream, razors, cigarettes and a variety of other things. The city was full of GIs, and they could be seen often walking with their arms around petite Vietnamese in the shady parts of the city or sipping beer in numerous joints.

The street urchins I was told could knock off crates of soft drinks or beer and other things from the back of US army supply trucks, they climbed easily like monkeys.This was then sold on the sidewalks by the old people. I learned that they were very enterprising.

The IVS office was only a short distance from the airport on Le Van Duyet street and had a large building which was the dormitory, a big common room with few books on a shelf and an old beat up piano and some rattan chairs and sofas. Then there were living quarters upstairs for married people and a barn like administrative office, a kitchen and garages. There were many new and old vehicles in the yard, and the mechanics were always busy with some of them. The warehouse at the back was used by some volunteers, who kept the day-old chicks imported from Singapore in a holding pen and hung ultraviolet lights over them. They had many animal science projects where the chicks were raised.

At that time there were over 200 volunteers spread out all over south Vietnam but quite a few lived in Saigon in the IVS house dormitory where the senior volunteers had their own rooms, but the rest lived in the bunk beds in the huge dorm. Some lived downtown and I would gradually get to know some of them and never all of them.

My arrival was well announced since I was the first Indian to join the team, but not the last. Two more Indians would come later. So there were quite a few volunteers to greet me when I arrived who introduced themselves, but I promptly forgot their names. There was also a group of Buddhist monks in saffron robes who wanted to talk to me about something, but now can not recall what we talked about. It was all a novel experience for me.

There were two fellows called Thomas and John who took me out to their place downtown for dinner and made me use chopsticks which I found very difficult to handle at first but later months I became an expert in using them.

Thomas politely asked me to sit behind him on his scooter, astride, when he saw that I was sitting like a woman with both legs on one side. In India, we did not mind such things or boys holding hands, but this was not India. I had a lot to learn, but the education had already begun.

Like how to order food in a sidewalk eatery where they offered no menu, but the waiter in his dirty clothes came to your table and recited the menu fast. You had to be very alert to pick one because he did not like to repeat to you. Not knowing the language aggravated the problem somewhat, unless you went with someone.

Then you had to hold onto your plastic food tray with one hand while eating with the other and keep the legs free to kick the dogs or cats that fought under your table for scraps. Because they were always short of trays and the waiter took your tray away if he thought that you were finished.

The lottery tickets vendors or the beggars were always bothering people, so one had to learn to walk away from them.

The joke that I soon heard was popular among the volunteers, and it ran like this -One could always tell how long a person had been in Vietnam the way he ordered beer.

A person had recently arrived if the waiter brought him a beer with a fly in it because he would promptly leave the joint. If he had been in the country for over a year, he would ask the waiter to bring him another beer. If he has been here over two years then he would take the fly out and drink the beer, but if he has been here for over three years then he would drink the beer with the fly. But those who had been in Vietnam a long time would look for the fly in case the waiter had forgotten about it.

I had arrived at a time when the entire team in Vietnam was undergoing some serious discussions about the whole philosophy of working there, and that too during the intense war all around us. Soon a general meeting was called that was attended by all the volunteers and the executive director from Washington, D.C. and I remember a great many issues discussed and votes taken on many resolutions. I abstained from voting because I had just arrived and did not fully understand the issues, but I was a keen observer and learned many things right away regarding the working conditions.

Anyway, the outcome of this meeting was that the country director of the IVS team in Vietnam resigned along with a few others, who then went back to the USA to protest against the war and its negative effect on the people. Some saw IVS as tacitly supporting the war by simply being in Vietnam, but most did not agree and said that we were doing humanitarian work that needed to be done because of massive suffering of people.

The resigned volunteers would later write a book explaining the problems facing the Vietnamese people to make Americans back home more aware of the sufferings of the valiant people.

I sat through the meetings, absorbing everything but saying nothing. Only later I would start developing a strong sense of what was right and wrong and what we as individuals could do about it, but at that time in June 1967 I kept mum and just listened.

Soon, Lauren, who was our administrative officer, told me that I was to go to Long Xuyen in the Giang province in the delta for my two-month-long language training in Vietnamese. I was to have a classmate who was a Korean fellow. So one day we flew off to Can Tho and drove to Long Xuyen from there the same day.

The road to Long Xuyen was clogged with military traffic, so we were stranded somewhere waiting for the convoy to move on the muddy and potholed road when a small kid approached our car and started some small talk. We gave him some peanuts, but all of a sudden he ran

back, opened the hatch and grabbed the bag of the Korean fellow and disappeared into the thick tall grass that grew by the roadside.

This was a great shock to all of us, and we tried desperately to chase the kid, but to no avail. Welcome to Vietnam. The Korean chap had all his clothes and a camera stolen in the wink of an eye. I began to realize that not everything was what it seemed to be. I would later learn about child and adult prostitution, thievery, abuse by adults like beating women and the massive refugee problem all over south Vietnam.

Soon we reached Long Xuyen which surely was a pretty and peaceful town by the mighty Mekong River. There were wide streets and beautiful parks by the riverside and a huge Catholic Church was under construction in the middle of the town, although most people were Buddhist in faith.

The IVS house was a two-story building where we were given two beds in the kitchen downstairs where we also took our Vietnamese lessons 8 hours a day, 5 days a week from two teachers. One was from the North who spoke Vietnamese slightly differently than the teacher from the south, so we were often confused which one was right. We learned a great deal of Vietnamese in two months and often to break the monotony of studies, we would go down the road to have tall glasses of fruit juice. This was very cheap and delicious, but another reason was that the juice seller was a very pretty girl, with whom we loved to practice our Vietnamese. Of course, I was young.

We used to go out also for a bowl of Pho or Hu Tieu which is a delicious mixture of thick noodles and shredded chicken with aromatic herbs.This was my favorite. Our teachers later would invite us to a nice dinner when our lessons came to an end. I loved the food in Vietnam and was very adept by this time in using chopsticks.

Soon some high school students met us and some of them took it upon themselves to clean up our room and put things in order because we were miserable in our housekeeping chores. One of them was Miss Lan who would become very friendly with me later and bring me to a picnic by the river banks or would often give me small gifts like a nice handkerchief.

Some volunteers lived on the other side of the river, so once I went there to see what they were doing. I remember seeing a downed helicopter in the middle of the village, so it became clear that the Vietcong were never too far and in fact they were everywhere. While crossing the big river, I would often take control of the barge that we used to ferry our cars, while the amused captain just looked on.

There in the IVS house lived a Mexican American called Juan who spent a lot of time with girls in his room, showing them Playboy magazines. He was the modern Casanova, to whom the girls were attracted like flies. I complained that he should take some time out and give me driving lessons because in my job, driving was necessary. So we used to drive at midnight in the

deserted streets of Long Xuyen which unlike many towns did not have a curfew. I learned fast and did not hit anybody or anything as a trainee.

I made some friends in Long Xuyen. One of them was a Chinese boy whose parents had a coffee distribution business. He was a very nice boy and often invited me to his house to share a superb Chinese meal. The other fellow I knew had a watch and jewelry store. Then there was Miss Lan.

The Korean fellow was disliked by many. He would often bring prostitutes to the kitchen which was also my room, so I had to go out for a walk, but mostly he was aloof to me and went out every night to watch movies at the US army compound that was nearby. We never became friends.

Miss Lan used to write to me later, but our relationship came to an end the day I left Long Xuyen. I was not ready for anything like that and was now eager to settle down in TayNinh where I would stay for the next two years.

But let me tell you about an incident before we leave Long Xuyen. There was an American volunteer agronomist who worked in the Chau Doc area, so one day we decided to pay him a visit because I had heard that he was doing some very good work there. We started on a rainy day in an illegally borrowed scout car and soon got stuck in deep mud somewhere. The villagers came to our rescue and dug us out. I had some reservations about the trip and said so, but others wanted to push on.

Soon the car bogged down in deeper mud and this time there was no help, although we all got down in the mud up to our knees and tried hard. When this effort failed, we started throwing mud balls at each other and made quite a mess of ourselves in the rain that was pouring hard.

Finally, we found some US Seabees nearby and asked their help so they came with their huge caterpillar to winch us out, but they too got bogged down and went back to their camp on foot. There they gave us dry clothes to wear and coffee, which was very, very nice of them. We finally returned to Long Xuyen by boat, and the kid who had borrowed the AID car illegally got himself fired from his job as an interpreter.

On another occasion I did go to Chau Doc to meet with this volunteer who was popularly known as My Ngheo which meant poor American. He always wore a black shirt and black pajamas and carried a bag on his shoulder that had some seeds or fertilizer or something to help the farmers.

It was indeed a sad day when I learned that his body was found floating in the river with his hands tied behind. No one knew who killed him, but we were sure it was not the Vietcong who knew him and admired him.

This happened shortly after he exposed the corruption of the relief operation and talked to some US officials who came to the province, so you can draw your own conclusion as to who was behind his murder. He was so very young. I missed him sorely.

There was a big sign board downtown Long Xuyen that said that the Government of Nguyen Kao Ky was the Government for the poor people, but this was a great joke. Nguyen Kao Ky was one of the most corrupt Vietnamese who never gave two hoots about the poor. He would later flee the country with most of his money and live comfortably in the United States, but so did the president and many others.

I passed through CanTho a few times, but there is nothing remarkable about it. It was a small town full of ugly wires dangling everywhere and terrible traffic. This was something one had to get used to in Vietnam because the army people strung up miles of cables in a very slipshod way everywhere to serve their communication needs, thus making an ugly town uglier. This was the time of war, and no one paid any attention to aesthetics.

Flying into Can Tho over the mile wide Mekong River, one could not miss the tall radio tower. The IVS had a small office there, but I knew nothing about what the volunteers did there. Yes, they once brought me to a place known for its steamed Mekong turtle, so I had my first turtle but did not like it. I thought there were far better dishes than hard chewy turtle, but volunteers were not too particular.

Up until now I was sheltered from the war because the province of An Giang was peaceful in general and very beautiful, but now the time had come for me to take up my assignment elsewhere. Soon my Vietnamese lessons were coming to an end, and I was to be sent to the TayNinh province just west of Saigon to work there as an agronomist. I had heard that TayNinh was not a peaceful place like Long Xuyen, but that would prove later to be an understatement.

So one day I flew back to Saigon by hitching a ride with the pilot of a spotter plane. I was surprised when he asked me to put on a backpack of parachutes, although I did not know how to use it, but he said that it was just a precaution and most likely will not be needed. I was far from being reassured, but he took off in that tiny contraption and went about flying very low over the rice paddies of the delta. When I asked him why he was not going to Saigon, he said he was in no hurry and was looking for Vietcong.

I was truly shocked. I knew that Vietcong routinely shot at such low flying spotter planes and wished I never hitched a ride like this. But finally he had a change of heart and flew to Saigon. I did not tell anyone of this misadventure because I was surely to be scolded for taking such chances.

Back at the IVS house in Saigon I met with Roger who was being transferred to Saigon, and I was to replace him in TayNinh. One day Roger and I flew to TayNinh when we saw a plane in the process of bombing a village. Now I did not need to be told what those round holes were

when I was first landing in Saigon, although it worried me that the bomb craters were so near the airport. This was my first visual of the ugly side, and it did nothing to reassure me. I knew most of Tay Ninh was not a safe place.

I had come a long way from the placid city of Sri Ram Pur and realized that now there was no turning back. Whatever happened, I was to work in TayNinh as best as I could, so I put on a brave face and looked forward to landing on the dirt and gravel air strip.

The IVS house was a small house on a quiet street in TayNinh called Yet Ma Luong street. The volunteers got it cheap for some reason. There was an English teacher called William or Bill who had a hook nose and shifty eyes. I had a bad feeling about Bill from the start, but I kept this to myself. We used to eat together at the same place every day. It was cheap and practical, as none of us had the time or inclination to do cooking and housekeeping.

Bill taught English at the TayNinh high school, so I went to his school a few times for one reason or the other and got to know a few students there. One of them was my neighbor Nguyen Thi Lan, but this Lan was a sweet 16-year-old pretty girl who was attracted to me from day one, and I was to her as well, so I can safely say that it was mutual. She used to come to practice her English with me. There were others, but they lost interest after a while. Later, Lan and I would become very good friends.

My first few days in TayNinh were hectic to say the least. Roger was not very helpful and expected more from me than I could deliver. He showed annoyance when I could not remember the names of various villages or farmers. I do not know why he was so impatient. His inscrutable face did not tell me the reason.

Anyway, I was introduced to the district agricultural chief who was a short fellow also with narrow shifty eyes and smoked a pipe. My first impression was good about him as he invited me to a sumptuous dinner on the occasion of the farewell party for Roger but later he and I would come to loggerheads over trivial matters. I would learn more about this gentleman later.

My job proved not to be very difficult. The volunteers were not really given any guidelines as to what to do, but were attached to the agriculture office where they helped in whatever manner they could. I was an agronomist, so I involved myself with rice research and extension from the start, but I also built pig pens, compost pits and chicken coops for farmers in many parts of the province. There were also vegetable farmers I worked with near Tay Ninh. The work was tiring but interesting.

I was soon given a Scout 4-wheel drive car and gas coupons, so I was busy from day one. Soon the need came for me to get a driver's license, so I went to the police station where a captain politely informed me that although in some countries the police department helped in this matter, I was to go to another office nearby for a license.

In this office I found a jovial fellow with curly hair who said that I had to take the written exam first, and then he would give me a driving test. The written exam was in the vernacular, but a cute girl who was taking the exams with me not only explained the questions but also provided the correct answers. The driving test was simple, so I got my first driver's license. Later I would acquire a pocketful of driver's licenses from many countries, but the first one was exciting.

The working hours were from sunup till sundown, but the rule was that we had to be back in town by 5 PM and could not drive before 7 or 8 am due to security reasons. I was told that the minesweepers cleared the roads early in the morning but the Vietcong were known to be very industrious.

At night one could hear the sounds of bombs dropping from the B-52s somewhere which usually meant somewhere west of Tay Ninh like in Cambodia through which the Ho Chi Minh trail passed. But sometimes the sound was much, much nearer, meaning parts of the province were being bombed. The incessant traffic of helicopters and army planes told you that the war was all around us, but we the young volunteers took everything in stride. We just learned to ignore the sounds.

One day, the AID office asked me to return my car to them in exchange for a new one. I was puzzled because there was nothing wrong with my car, but they took it away and gave me a new Scout car. Later I found out the real reason. My old car was a bulletproof car which someone badly needed, so they gave me a tin can of a car instead. I did not know that my car was bulletproof and often wondered why she was so thirsty.

There was a British fellow in TayNinh called George who was an electronic engineer for the DECCA navigation system that he had set up there. It was the tallest tower in Tay Ninh. George was a great beer drinker who could empty a long neck flask of it in one gulp. He would often invite us, but I did not like to drink beer or smoke. George, however, was very good company, and we would often get together during Christmas or other such things. His other British colleagues were more interested in chasing maids than us, but it did not matter.

There was also a contingent of Filipino people working in a civic action group headed by a general who always flew into Tay Ninh with a swarm of helicopters and openly went around with his 18-year-old mistress. He was such a shameless fellow, but he always greeted me pleasantly enough.

These Filipinos were always seen scrapping the dirt roads with their bulldozers and not doing a very good job of it either. They built a place near TayNinh city where refugees were settled, and some schools were built, but the Vietcong blew up most of the buildings one by one and shot several Filipinos. The refugees lived in fear and soon abandoned the site.

But the general made a great show of it and told everyone an Indian volunteer had come to help the poor farmers in this resettlement site with vegetable production and what not and sent me

cases of San Miguel beer now and then. I was also invited to their parties when the Philippines President showed up one day with his pretty wife.

I gradually distanced myself from them. They were really not helping anyone but themselves, and some of them were engaged in buying PX goods to sell in the downtown black market, while others were busy impregnating maids. I did not form a good opinion of these people.

But their officers were the nicest people I ever met. They were real gentlemen and I thought of them highly. There were also a few Filipino doctors. One of them patched me up very nicely when I had a scooter accident. I just fell off my scooter because the dirt road was sprayed with oil by the Americans to keep the dust down.

The Vietnamese just looked but did not come to my aid, although I was bleeding, so I somehow managed to get up and ride the scooter back to TayNinh. I told no one about this accident, and no one could see the big scar on my thigh anyway.

Once I was invited to a meeting presided over by an American diplomat who right away said Hello Anil, which sounded so phony. We did not know each other. His smile and behavior was totally false, but then I had begun to understand the phoniness in people a great deal who would on such occasions use me as an example of how international people were helping the poor Vietnamese. I often walked out and kept away from such people.

A great deal of rice was grown in the Tay Ninh province in spite of war zones and free bombing areas. Most of the province was covered with rubber plantations that were established by the rubber barons during the French colonial period, so rubber was still milked from the trees and processed into raw rubber in primitive factories on the outskirts of the town.

I used to often go and watch the workers milking the trees and bring buckets full of white sap to boil in big vats that made the hard raw rubber. It was a hard job and I wondered how much they paid the workers but judging from their haggard looks and shabby clothes, it was probably not very much. All over the province one could see the ruins of abandoned villas of French barons. They had all left after the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu.

The Cao Dai temple in Tay Ninh was a place of utter tranquility in the middle of the war. I used to go there and enjoy the peace that it offered. The monks who built the temple called themselves Cao Dai. Their faith included the tenets of Buddhism, Confucius teachings and strangely enough the ideas of Victor Hugo, although I do not know what Hugo had to teach these gentle monks. The temple was very beautiful with decorated walls and dragons everywhere and inside there was a huge eye looking at you.

They offered you a guest book to sign. There were many dignitaries who visited the temple and signed the guest book. Later, this beautiful temple was heavily damaged due to fighting around it.

Near the town there was a big mountain called Nui Ba Den which according to the locals was a hiding place for the Vietcong but on top there was an army post supplied by helicopters, but the Vietcong were everywhere and controlled most of the province. The Americans considered such areas a free fire zone and often were seen shooting from helicopters at anything that moved. Killing water buffaloes for nothing was normal for them, although it meant great hardship to the farmers. Often they destroyed beautiful fields of rice by running tanks through them. But the most odious thing they did was to spray a deadly poison 2,4,5-T called Agent Orange from air to destroy the rubber plantations where they suspected that the Vietcong hid. Later I would attend a meeting in Woods Holes, Massachusetts on this subject to talk about what Agent Orange did to people.

The province was insecure due to all the bombings and land mines, but the city of TayNinh was not safe from attack. Once I went to see a movie in the army barracks but came home early because the movie was bad. Minutes later, the barracks were hit by mortar fire and several people died. I could have been one of them, but it was a close call and not the only one.

The other time I was in my house when the mortars started landing just across the narrow lane inside the police station. The sound was deafening because it was so close. My Vietnamese friend and I cowered in the corner of the kitchen, wondering if and when one of them would land on our house and kill us all, but we survived. Then the helicopters came and started spraying gunfire.This went on for a long, long time, but the result was visible only at daybreak. Just outside our house were severely mutilated bodies of Vietcong laying in pools of blood while swarms of flies covered them.

They looked so young and helpless. So much blood and gore for me to notice every now and then was getting on my nerves.

But the old women just passed by with their vegetable baskets, barely looking at the bodies but making comments as if it was not a big deal. But it was a big deal because thousands upon thousands of young people were dying every day in that war that was draining the lifeblood of this country. Children played with toy machine guns or grenades and the TV show Gun smoke, Combat and Wild Wild West that was popular with the army brass.

In any country, children are the mirror of what is truly happening around them. The kids saw only blood and gore and thought that playing with toy guns and grenades was the thing to do, while in peaceful countries they played with each other or flew kites. How I wished that they too would fly the kites instead, but the war was raging and in 1967 there were half a million US soldiers. The frequent checkpoints on the road serve another purpose. They checked the ID of every Vietnamese and packed off young Vietnamese to boot camps without giving them a chance to inform their folks. Often, parents did not know what happened to their sons until a body came back for burial with a note from the government.

There were a few Indians in Tay Ninh who had shops on the main drag. They spoke good Vietnamese and bad English. They were also into black - market and often asked me how things were going. I said that one day the Americans will leave, so they should think of their future. Surely the Vietnamese will not tolerate them in the future, but they said that the Americans will never abandon them. They were wrong, and I was right, but they did not know it then and did not believe me in 1967.

As it happened many years later, the Americans did pull out so many Indians and Chinese fled in panic in rickety boats and many drowned. But at that time they were riding high and thought that their good fortune in black market dealings would never end.

The Vietnamese people tried to amuse themselves anyway they could because life was so grim. Once I saw a song and dance drama where the artists were dressed in long flowing gowns and beards. They danced while the musicians played flutes and made a racket with their cymbals, but the crowd loved it. I did not understand what was going on but saw that people enjoyed this brief respite from their sad ordeal of daily struggle to survive.

But such respites were rare, and the violence was more frequent everywhere as the war was building up throughout the countryside. We could sense the danger and often saw bodies on the road where a recent battle had taken place. Once I was on my way to Saigon when a huge explosion blew up the bridge I was about to cross in the Hau Nghia province. This particular province near Saigon was a hotbed of Vietcong activity. They dug miles of tunnel in Cu Chi, but the Americans never knew of it.

I was naturally scared, but could not go forward until a temporary bridge was brought in to fit over the gap. All the while, the gunfire never ceased. There were many such incidents, but yours truly was unhurt. I never knew when my luck would run out, but then no one knew. Anything could happen.

This is the time when I moved into a new house with another volunteer, while the hook nose William got himself a single house due to his romance with a Vietnamese woman. I was glad he was no longer living with us.

My new housemate was called Douglas, who was a very simple-minded fellow and showed his coin and stamp collection eagerly to everyone. He did not know much about agriculture and certainly not about tropical agriculture but made up for it with his enthusiasm. I do not know what happened to him after I left TayNinh.

The pipe smoking agriculture chief at that time was getting a bit tired of me because he felt that as volunteers we had a lot of freedom to do things he could not do due to stringent bureaucracy. This was grating to him, so he took it out on his subordinates with long harangues. I kept myself busy with the rice extension program and had many farmers to look after. Some of them were

getting good yields from the new rice varieties from the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) that we had brought.

The IR-8 and BPI 76 varieties were spreading in some parts. Many farmers asked me for seeds, so I started a seed multiplication program where a farmer would give me back part of his harvest so that I could give it to someone else. The Ministry of Agriculture in Saigon appreciated my efforts and gave me rice kits to spread new varieties of the province.

I believe it was the month of July in 1968 when our field director asked me to see him in private. I did not know what was coming or what I had done wrong, but he smiled and said that I was the unanimous choice of the entire team in Vietnam to be nominated for a prestigious award in the United States, and he wanted my consent. I was surprised but gave in. It was just a nomination and at that point did not mean much.

The director also told me to forgo my planned vacation in Cambodia that I was about to take and go there with a companion who had assured me of the charms of half French Cambodian girls in Sihanouk ville. In fact, he had already arrived in Saigon and our plane tickets and visas were ready, but I could not go. He never forgave me for it and went alone sulking.

Then one day a cable arrived from Washington, D.C. saying that I had indeed been awarded the International Distinguished Service Award by the Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, and I was supposed to receive it in person. All my expenses were covered by this award.

But a great many things had happened before this turn of events, so let me go back a few months to the month of January 1968. I had just received a telegram saying that my friend in Chau Doc whom the farmers called My Ngheo or poor American had been killed. It was so sudden and shocking that I decided to hitch a ride in a helicopter the same day to arrive in Saigon, hoping that perhaps they will let me see his body.

The helicopter brought me to Bien Hoa air base outside Saigon, from where I took the communal taxi to Saigon in the evening. People were on the streets in droves because it was the night before the Vietnamese New Year. They were celebrating with firecrackers and balloons. The sidewalks were full of vendors selling all kinds of food and candies, and there was an atmosphere of gaiety which was so rare in Vietnam.

I used to wear a black shirt, black pajamas and a conical hat that farmers wore, so I looked like any Vietnamese and blended into the crowd easily. I also was getting good at the language. The American guards and even the Vietnamese guards were often wary of me and always asked for my can cuoc which means ID. It was always funny to watch their reaction when they knew who I was and used some epithets that I will not print.

The IVS office told me that I could do nothing and was not able to see the body of my friend, so I decided to return to Tay Ninh the very next morning because I had invited a few Vietnamese

friends over for the New Year's celebration there. I think at about 5 am, Roger brought me and two others to the airport in his jeep and left in a hurry because the guards at the gate started shouting and pointing their machine guns at us.

We did not know what was happening, so we got inside the gate with our heavy luggage and the gate was shut tightly. That is when all the hell broke loose and bullets started flying in all directions. There were very loud explosions, and we saw people running around firing at anything that moved. Naturally we did not move and stayed on our belly, I do not know for how long. This was the start of the infamous Tet Offensive, and we were right in the middle of it at the Tan Son Nhut.

In fact, the real scale of the offensive by the Vietcong throughout Vietnam was not known until much later, but clearly they had entered the perimeter of the Air Base. Now they set about destroying parked planes and helicopters and blew up a lot of them. We saw fires breaking out here and there. The downtown had been hit, as was evident from the rising column of smoke, although at that time we did not know that a real battle was going on at the US Embassy and elsewhere.

Late in the evening we decided to go back to the IVS house because we could not go back to our stations, so the three of us ventured out on the empty street with that heavy Foot Locker and tried to stop a three-wheeler taxi, but he was not about to and gave us a wide berth. Somehow we managed to stop him and said that we will not hijack him. We paid our fare and then some and reached the IVS house, but the place had been evacuated.

There was not a soul to be seen anywhere. We had not eaten the whole day, so we looked for some food in the kitchen. We were not lucky. The refrigerator had been cleaned up, so we went to bed hungry. Actually, we took turns sleeping because we did not know if someone would come in and shoot us dead in the middle of the night. The Korean outpost outside our office was under attack and the gun fire continued the whole night. We watched from the rooftop the helicopters firing with tracer bullets and there were explosions throughout the night. This was the biggest offensive the Vietcong had mounted so far, and it would shake the confidence of the South Vietnamese as well as the American governments.

The next morning, a missionary chap showed up in his VW minivan to see if there were some people stranded and rescued us, but we still did not know where the rest of the team went. So a search began downtown, and soon we found them all cooped up in a hotel. There we stayed for a few days and some rations were found and shared frugally until the battle started to die down after a week. It was only then that we were allowed to go out again.

Soon, the field director asked for a few volunteers to work in Saigon to help with the refugee relief operation. I was glad to help and borrowed the jeep to do just that. This was a time of great activity. I went every morning to the ministry of social welfare and loaded whatever relief goods they gave me to distribute to various centers. Food, soap, nuoc mam which is a stinky

fish sauce, mats, medicines, fuel, rice etc. I carried them all day until exhaustion took over. The only food I got to eat was half cooked rice mixed with a can of sweetened condensed milk, but the job was satisfying. I got to know the University of Saigon students who started calling me Anh Phuc which means happy brother.

They were my guides and directed me to where I was supposed to go. I tied a red cross flag on the jeep lest someone mistake us for someone else and shoot at us, and I drove like a madman all day long. This went on for a month. One day I was carrying a lot of fleeing refugees. They sat everywhere in the jeep and some even sat on the bonnet making it difficult for me to see the road, but I had to carry them to a safer place if there was such a place. A woman came running and pleading for help to rescue her wounded husband. I heard the battle raging just down the block, but others urged me to leave. I still remember the cry of anguish of that poor woman I could not help, but I was responsible for many.

Once I saw a street battle raging in Cholon which is the Chinatown of Saigon and made a quick U-turn. There was nothing worse than getting caught in a crossfire. I got very street savvy and got good at cat and mouse games of avoiding trouble.

The director was happy that I was helping out, but Roger cursed me heartily and said that the stink of nuoc mam still lingered no matter how much he washed the jeep. One bottle had by mistake cracked open, but it wasn't really my fault. I missed working with the students, but the time had come for me to return to Tay Ninh.

While in Saigon I once met a gentleman who came from IRRI in the Philippines and stopped by the IVS house where Roger, who was now the head of the agriculture team, introduced me. We started talking mainly about rice cultivation, research and extension and I pointed out many difficulties as well as some potential problems. The IRRI scientist was very impressed and said that I should be sent to the Philippines for further training if such a possibility came along.

Then in April of that year (1968) Roger told me that I will be a part of the team that will go to Los Baños in the Philippines for a three-week training program in rice cultivation and extension methods. I was overjoyed. I was getting so tired of the situation in Vietnam that I really needed a break, so this was very welcome news indeed.

When we landed in Manila one morning, we were amazed by the difference. We stayed at the Filipinas hotel near the Rizal park where we sat at night soaking up the beauty of the place. There were lighted fountains that played with music, and people strolled hand in hand eating ice cream. Kids played and lovers smooched. The expanse of a huge garden in the middle of the city was totally out of this world. It was so relaxing.

We did some shopping in Mabini street, where I sat with a nude woman on my lap while my companions took photos. The nude woman was a mannequin but looking at the photo no one

could tell. We were just being funny and full of pranks after the tense situation back in Vietnam. I bought a barong tagalog which is a traditional-embroidered shirt made of fine pineapple threads.

Los Baños was a sleepy small town where the University of the Philippines and IRRI are located. While IRRI had modern buildings spread out over a large area and was an international center for research on rice, the university by comparison looked shabby and like a small rural high school with low old buildings and a dirt road dissecting the campus. But the campus was green and the hills of Makiling looked majestic in the background.

We used to take our lectures at the farm and Home development office and went to IRRI for the practicals. The three weeks of training went by very fast, and we learned a lot of things about rice, insects and diseases of rice and how to make dapog where you spread seeds on a banana leaf and plant the seedlings only after 11 days. We also tried our hands on handling a water buffalo that they called carabao.

Some Filipinos invited us to their homes and beautiful young ladies serenaded us with piano recitals and wonderful meals. I was totally charmed. People seemed to be so hospitable that an idea took germs in my mind at this time. I thought that in the future I would like to come back here for graduate studies or do some research at IRRI if someone offered me a scholarship.

My fate was being entwined with this beautiful country in a way I was not to know for a long time.

The day before we were to return to Saigon, we went to Pagsanjan where one can go up to the waterfall in shallow boats that the boatmen expertly guide through the rapids and big rocks. The manager of a resort lodge there invited us to a party at night where we passed the time dancing tinikling holding hands of pretty girls who taught us how to dance in between clashing bamboo poles. It was all so much fun, but now Saigon waited, so once again we trooped to the airport.

Back in Saigon and finally in TayNinh it was the same routine of working and listening to the sound of B-52s bombing at night.

The whole of 1968 would pass like that, but in December the team decided to have its annual Christmas party in Dalat, and I was urged to join. So we all flew to Dalat which is in the highlands and is a very beautiful place with lakes and hills all around it. It was also very peaceful. The Dalat girls had ruddy cheeks and wore their Ao dai so well, but I was still immature. The IVS girls were also friendly and often asked me to dance with them during the parties, but I generally shied away from them.

The first time someone offered me a glass of wine, my cheeks burned with shame because in India we never drank anything alcoholic. Dancing with girls who were holding you in a rather familiar way was also very embarrassing to me because as I said earlier, we had nothing to do with girls in India. The separation of sexes was rigorous indeed.

But here the American and some Vietnamese girls seemed so free. Some even smoked, which I had never seen before and wore clothes that no Bengali girl would dare even in a dark room, but I was getting used to many things. I was not timid anymore, but I was still very Indian.

In Dalat we were invited to a party at the Military academy and when someone asked if there were birthday celebrants, I was singled out along with another Japanese American girl. Now the Vietnamese girl who introduced me to the crowd had never heard of Sri Ram Pur so said that I hailed from Alabama thinking that I was an Afro-American, so Alabama sounded right to her. In fact, no one cared.

I was asked to cut a huge cake and was even given a gift wrapped in fancy paper that turned out to be ladies shoes, although why anyone would give me ladies shoes was beyond me. Perhaps it was meant for the Japanese girl and got switched somehow. I gave it away to Lauren, who was only too happy.

I can not end 1968 without mentioning Bala Subramaniam. He was a south Indian who had attended the college in Sri Ram Pur and was the second Indian to be accepted by the IVS Vietnam team. His specialty was animal science. He came almost a year after me because he too took the long road to get a passport and visa, but finally he arrived and came to TayNinh looking for me. I was working that day somewhere along the main highway, so he found my car and me. I was very busy that day manhandling a huge water pump that we had to install somewhere, so I was very dirty, muddy and in my trademark black outfit.

He was surprised to see me and realized that we volunteers did whatever was necessary at that moment. Maybe he learned something. Anyway, he worked in Saigon and in the vicinity and set up poultry farms. But early during his stay, he got mixed up with the Tamil population of Saigon who, after enticing him with the language and food that he surely missed, started borrowing money from him. Clearly, he was in trouble because they were exploiting him due to his homesickness.

I came to know about this one day and said that he should forget about the Tamils and save all his stipend because it will one day come in handy for his future education. That is what I was doing so that I could go for graduate studies somewhere after Vietnam. He listened and from then on started saving. Eventually, he would go to the University of Wisconsin for a degree in animal science, but I never saw him again once I left Vietnam in 1969.

The third Indian to come to Saigon was a Sikh girl, but I never got to know her or anything about her. She would later get married to an American fellow and live somewhere in the United States.

But there was another marriage in the offing. One day, Roger said that he and Lauren were getting married. This was very good news. I knew them both and liked them, so wished them well and gave Lauren a gold chain that really surprised her. After their marriage they would go to Darjeeling in north Bengal and from there go to Sri Ram Pur to spend a few days with my family.

They said they greatly enjoyed Darjeeling and the hospitality of my family. Nirmal said later they at first hesitated to eat with them, thinking that Indians were so poor that they ate only once a day. Their ignorance about India was astonishing, but they were learning.

I sent 20 dollars to Mom every month and the rest was saved. I had local currency called a piasters allowance for food and other expenses, so I built up a small nest egg in two years. It was not much, but something to start with. I had applied for admission to the graduate school at the University in Los Baños for the Fall of 1969, but they never replied. Then a fellow volunteer who had returned to the States said that the California State Polytechnic College in San Luis Obispo was a very good agriculture school where he was enrolled and could send me the application forms if I so desired.

So I applied and waited. Then came the news that in January 1969 I was to go to St. Paul in Minnesota to receive the award. IVS had nominated me for the International Distinguished Service Award (IDSA) given by the Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, but I did not think that I would be selected. It was a surprise when it turned out that I was chosen by Macalester College.

The year 1969 was full of surprises for me. I did not know what was in store for me, but I prepared to leave for the United States one day in January. The flight made a stopover in Hong Kong on its way to Tokyo. In Hong Kong, the departure was announced, but one gentleman was delayed coming onboard. He finally showed up huffing and puffing and sat down next to me. The woman in the window seat was probably his wife, the way she smiled at him.

After take off he started talking to me and asked where I was going, what I did etc. to which I replied cryptically because I was not about to start my life story again. But he persisted, so I said that I was going to the States, but first I had to stop in Tokyo to see a friend, and then I would continue to Los Angeles. At this point, his interest picked up.

He asked whether I had been to the United States before and what I was going to do in LA. So I said that I was in fact going to a place called San Luis Obispo where there is a great college and I had applied for admission there.

Also, I told him that I wanted to meet with the admission officer personally to convince him that I spoke very good English, so a TOEFL was not necessary for me. At this point, he smiled and said something like. "Young man, you have just passed your TOEFL ". I was very puzzled, so he pulled out a card from his pocket and said that he was Dr. Robert Fisher, the president of the California Polytechnic College in San Luis Obispo.

Now imagine my surprise. Here I was reluctantly chatting with the president of Cal Poly sitting next to me in a plane flying from Hong Kong to Tokyo, and generally speaking I did not talk to people in the plane or bus or train. But he was such a nice gentleman. He was also genuinely

impressed that I worked in Vietnam as a volunteer and was to receive an award at the Macalester College, which was a very well known institution.

Now he took down my flight number, date and time of arrival in LA and said that he will leave a message for me at the Pan Am desk of the LA airport and will leave me detailed information about how to reach San Luis Obispo, where to stay there etc. I thanked him profusely and got off in Tokyo. This was no coincidence because I really do not believe in coincidences since then.

Just imagine the odds of meeting someone like Dr. Fisher on a plane in Hong Kong and sitting next to him on a big jet that carries 200 people. One in a million? One in ten million? Had I been just a seat ahead of him or behind, I would have never met him, let alone talk. I do not know, but I do know that it was no coincidence. A much higher power was guiding me and my life. The same power that saved me so many times from harm in Vietnam.

Tokyo was very cold, and I did not get to meet the friend I was hoping to see, so I left for Los Angeles the next day and arrived in LA on a Thursday night. This is very important, as I will explain later.

At any rate, I checked with the Pan Am desk there but found no message, so I thought that Dr. Fisher being a busy man perhaps forgot about it. I then got on a bus to Santa Monica terminal, from where I took the bus to San Luis Obispo. There was no problem. My friend came and found a decent hotel room for me and brought me to the campus early Friday morning.

Now I will explain the significance of arriving on Thursday in LA. This was by chance because I left Tokyo earlier than planned. What I did not know was that the American colleges are open only from Monday to Friday and are closed Saturday and Sunday, unlike in India where Saturday is not a holiday. Had I arrived as previously planned, I would have never met anyone at Cal Poly because I was to go to St.Paul directly.

I was not at all ready for a second surprise when I got to the campus. The academic vice president and the admission officer were waiting for me on the curb and said hello Anil, Welcome. I did not know what to say, but finally asked how they knew that I was coming? They replied that Dr. Fisher had called them from Honolulu and told them all about me.

Now the admission officer said that he will be glad to attend to me right away if I could show him my grade sheet from the College. He was impressed. Who had not heard of the Sri Ram Pur University? I was given an I-20 card right away, which facilitates the student visa.

I also liked the campus. It was lovely, surrounded by low hills dotted with oaks and other trees. The buildings were modern, and the campus was vast. I was very relieved that my future looked bright, and I was to return in September to start my classes as a graduate student in the soil science department.

In a way I was glad that I did not go to Los Baños for studies, although it would have been cheaper, but Cal Poly was a very good agricultural college although more expensive. I did not have any scholarship, but that did not worry me. I had some savings and for the rest I would have to get a part-time job somewhere, but that was in the future.

Some friends drove me to Los Angeles so that I could catch the flight to St.Paul. While driving on the highway, I noticed that the signboards lit up like electric bulbs. I was told this was because they had reflectors on them. There were also reflectors of various colors embedded on the road that looked really beautiful like runway lights on airstrips. It was a very smart idea. The signs said gas food lodgings every now and then or exit number so-and-so. Driving was really made easy here with all kinds of signs.

I was thus getting my first-hand knowledge of the United States from friends who showed a lot of patience with me. In Los Angeles, I met with a few ex volunteers who had served in Vietnam. They warmly welcomed me and one of them took me to the airport. That night, Richard Nixon was being inaugurated in Washington, D.C. This man later would bring the war to a close, but that was still many years away.

When the plane landed in Minneapolis, I looked out the window and saw heavy snowfall. Everything was white with thick snow. But the biggest surprise was waiting for me at the arrival lounge, where my old friend Lawrence was waiting for me. It was Lawrence who had given me the application form so long ago in Sri Ram Pur and now here he was waiting for me. He had obviously found out that I was the recipient of the award and even knew when I was to arrive.

The Macalester people who had come to receive me stood on one side with warm clothes, guessing that perhaps I was not well-prepared for the cold weather, and they were right. No one had bothered to tell me that it was so cold there, so I was in my casual clothes. They were also surprised but pleased that I had an old friend like Lawrence here. We then proceeded to the Macalester college, where I was put up in a dorm. I promptly went to sleep and must have slept over 12 hours straight because of the time difference and the jet lag.

Finally, when I woke up, I found that many people were waiting very patiently for me and wanted to talk to me. I was introduced to many students and others. I heard my name being called on campus frequently and wondered who knew me there. It turned out that an Israeli girl had the same name, and she was obviously popular there. In the Middle East it seems to be a name for girls, although pronounced a bit differently.

The award ceremony that night was very exciting. There were four more awardees from various countries, but I was the first to be presented. I had to get up and say something. So I started out by saying that I wished for a moment of silence in honor of a friend of mine who was killed in Vietnam and who was the first awardee of the IDSA.

He was very popular with the Vietnamese, who called him My Ngheo or poor American. He was so dedicated to his work that he could not come to Minnesota to receive his award and was killed during the same month he was supposed to be here. Afterward I spoke for some time about what I did in Vietnam and how I felt about the Vietnamese who suffered so much. The war was evil, but they were heroic people who fought the French tooth and nail and now the Americans, and I hope that one day soon they will get their freedom and start rebuilding their devastated country bit by bit.

Then Lawrence took me to his home, where Jane was there to welcome me. Little Jared had grown up a bit. I also had the opportunity to meet with the parents of Hubert, who was working in Hội An at that time. I assured them that Hubert was doing an excellent job there and was safe. His younger brother was very sweet, and his parents were very gracious.

Now the time came for me to fly again and this time it was to Washington, DC where I stayed with the executive director in Arlington in Virginia. He had set up a few meetings for me in Washington, so I first went to see the director of the AID. He was a very condescending person and started telling me how great a job I was doing there teaching those ignorant farmers about modern agriculture. I could not disagree more and said that it was I who was learning from them. The Vietnamese farmers were very smart people but he did not like this one bit and stood up. The meeting was over and I was glad. His high rank did not impress me, and he should not have talked that way, but this was Washington where people tended to talk down to Asians in a very patronizing way which was not pleasant.

My next appointment was worse. The Indian ambassador gave me exactly five minutes to explain what this was all about. He had never heard of the Macalester college or the award, and did not seem to give a damn if I as an Indian had been honored. He listened impassively and soon got up. The meeting was over, and I was really glad to leave. My companion was disturbed at this reception. He said that he thought my government would receive this news more happily, but he did not know about India or its diplomats abroad.

I was reluctant to meet more such people and said so. I recall a radio interview as well, but it was the same story. No one really cared. So after a few days in Washington I left for Paris where I wrote a letter on behalf of one volunteer who was suffering in a North Vietnamese prison and gave it to the North Vietnamese embassy there, but I am sure they ignored it.

The Canadian volunteer who had been captured during the Tet offensive was still in jail in North Vietnam, although he was just like us and totally innocent. He spent more than five years there before he was released. I tried what I could to plead for him, but it was of no use. From Paris, I went to India to spend some time with my folks in Sri Ram Pur. They were happy to see me and know that I had won some sort of award. Macalester and IDSA did not mean anything to them, but I think they were happy to see me. This was the first time I met my sister-in-law, called Sabita.

I do not have much to write about that visit to India except that being home felt good. They asked a few questions, but in general did not show a great deal of curiosity about Vietnam or the United States. Mom was happy that I was going to study after my tour of duty in Vietnam. I ate well and mostly rested.

I still had a few months to serve in Vietnam, so one day I flew back to Saigon. I was quite getting used to long distance flying by this time and had just made my first round the world trip, but there would be many such trips in the future. My foreseeable future looked good, so I returned happily to TayNinh. However, my happiness was not to last long because the agriculture chief there was very upset.

He thought that I had given him orders to look after my rice farmers during my absence, although it was not true. I had only requested him, but his interpretation was different, so soon I packed up and left TayNinh for good and settled in a small village called Go Dau Ha near the Cambodian border but still in the TayNinh province.

Here I was free to carry on my rice research and extension activities, but the problem was where to stay. I slept in the car the first night inside the army compound because they told me that it was not safe outside. Then they fixed me up to stay with the Sea Bees, who had a camp there.

The Sea Bee people were soldiers who lived inside a heavily fortified compound surrounded by barbed wire and land mines. They were coarse and vulgar people who drank a great deal of beer and watched 8 mm pornographic movies in the evenings. Their doctor, who was an Afro-American, insisted that he will personally pay for my first sex, but I declined.

So instead of moving in with them, I stayed in the warehouse away from their living quarters, but there was no peace here either. At the back lived the maids, so there was constant traffic to the maid's quarters at night. I was in desperate need of my own quarters, but a house to rent was difficult.

Then one late night the rockets started landing inside the compound and some landed a few yards from where I was sleeping and narrowly missed the warehouse. I think the parked trucks that took the brunt saved me from shrapnel because the warehouse walls were made of tin.

In panic, I ran to the nearest foxhole, but the damage was apparent the next morning. A rocket had landed near my car and blown out all the tires, and the windshield looked like it had many bullet holes. At that time I became desperate to move out of there because the camp was a target, so my luck could run out the next time.

The high school teachers of Go Dau Ha then came to my rescue and found me a room downtown. The landlady was the old Ba who also prepared meals for the teachers at noon and evenings. This was perfect, so I moved in and made friends with all the teachers. Most of them

were unmarried females, but it did not bother me. We ate our meals together and developed very friendly relationships. One of them started teaching me French, but I could never figure out le table or la table so that did not last.

The old Ba was very protective towards me and scolded the kids to no end when I found my watch missing one day so they pretended to look for it and soon "found "it under the culvert. The Ba could make them pee in their pants. Her son was a retired pilot who said that my camera that I just paid for was not new, and I had been conned.

Now, this is a story worth repeating. I had saved my piasters over many months so that I could buy a decent camera someday. I was very angry that they had cheated me, so I went back to the shop in Saigon and demanded a refund or a new camera. The shopkeeper simply ignored me. So I wrote a long letter to the Minister of trade and explained my case and demanded justice. One day two representatives of the Ministry came looking for me at the IVS house in Saigon where I was staying and asked me to go with them to the shop where I had purchased the camera.

This time the shopkeeper was very nervous and produced a new camera right away in exchange. The ministry people asked me if I was not satisfied then the matter will be reported back to the Minister and further actions will be taken. They could easily cancel the license of the shopkeeper on the grounds of fraud and put him out of business. But I let the matter rest.

My work progressed well, and I was very popular with the farmers, who would often block the road to stop my car and invite me to share food with them. They always had something or other going on, like weddings or funerals, so I had to share food with them. Even the soldiers guarding some bridges or places would ask me to stop and drink rice wine with them.

The best food was also the simplest food. During the rainy season, the farmers caught plenty of fish in their rice paddies using a bamboo contraption that was like a cage with a hole on top. Then they roasted the fish on fire by the roadside and wrapped the fish, some cucumbers and aromatic herbs in a rice paper and dipped it in fish sauce to eat. It was the best food because there was nothing like it.

They would often stop me and urge me to share their food. They hung a hammock for me between the coconut trees and let me sleep and brought coconut water to drink later. I loved these farmers and their hospitality.

They also protected me. One day I heard gun fire just behind the farmer's house while I was discussing something. It sounded like the AK-47 which the Vietcong carried. So my farmers asked me to leave right away.

It took some time to turn the car around on that narrow road, but finally I left. The next day, the farmers told me that the Vietcong came after I left and asked many questions. They knew who I was and what I was doing but left a warning. I was not seen with Americans.

At another time I drove past a point where minutes later an army truck was ambushed and many killed, so I knew later that the Vietcong were hiding there and saw me coming but let me pass.

Many volunteers were not so lucky. During the Tet offensive, three volunteers were captured by the Vietcong and two of them were handed over to the North Vietnamese army, who then put them in a prison in Hanoi. I had tried in vain to plead in Paris. The girl was released and was even given a comb as a gift that the Vietcong made out of shell casings.

One volunteer in Hội An hid inside a closet the whole night when the Vietcong came knocking and another was shot at who was slightly hurt. The killing of my friend in Chau Doc was mentioned earlier, but I do not think it was the handiwork of the Vietcong, who were blamed for all atrocities. They had attacked the national voluntary service compound in Phan Rang where a few months earlier I had taken advanced Vietnamese lessons. Many were wounded and a few died, but the worst fighting was in Hue.

The random violence was a routine thing, so one never knew what was going to happen or when. Like one time I was with Roger waiting for an appointment with the AID officer in Saigon when I started walking back and forth to kill time. As I walked away from the gate, a grenade was tossed by a chap who was on a motorbike. The huge explosion hurt many, including a well-dressed lady who happened to be there at that time. My luck was being sorely tried, so I wondered when it would run out?

There is no use writing everything about Vietnam. There were some good times and some bad. There was nothing else to do except to work like a donkey and return home exhausted every day. There were no distractions like movies, books or TV. Everything was shut down in the evening, so we had to stay home and listen to the gunfire or bombings by B-52s in nearby Cambodia or elsewhere. The border was about 8 miles away.

Finally, the time came for me to say goodbye to all my farmers and friends in Go Dau Ha. In July 1969 I was given the assignment by Roger to visit the volunteers who worked in the agricultural team and write about their work so that it could be included in the annual report. I welcomed this job heartily and first went to Ba Xuyen to set up the language training program for the new arrivals there.

This also gave me the opportunity to visit Hubert. I was eager to see him and tell him about my visit to his parents in Minnesota. I had told them that there was nothing to worry about Hubert which made them very happy.

But the fact was that there was plenty to worry about Hubert. He lived in a village where he worked as an animal husbandry specialist and was so devoted to his work that he made his own house look like a pigsty. He had a big wooden bed on which he piled up all his belongings and somehow managed to sleep on it too. I never looked under his bed but assumed it was worse. By comparison, my room in Go Dau Ha looked like a Ritz hotel.

He ate poorly and looked like a scarecrow. Clearly, here was a case that needed some help, but not from me. Most volunteers were lousy housekeepers, but there was no one equal to Hubert. I arrived one evening when he took me to a hole in the wall eatery in his village. The only menu was a bowl of soup with an egg floating in it, which looked green and tasted truly awful, but he ate it and said I was spoiled. I went to bed hungry that night. He then took me to his farmers, who were mostly Cambodians. They offered me a plate of rat meat that I refused to eat, so they asked Hubert why? I looked like a Cambodian to them, so they thought I was pretending.

The Chinese volunteers who had arrived in Ba Xuyen were a mixed lot. They were very fun-loving and fond of drinking a terrible wine called U cha pi. The girl was worse. She could out drink anyone who dared and walked around in a slit skirt causing traffic problems in that one horse town. I had to convince her that a more modest Ao Dai would look good on her. When Lauren came one day to see how things were going, they got her to drink a lot of U Cha Pi, making her very tipsy.

But Ba Xuyen was not very peaceful like Long Xuyen. One night, a grenade was tossed into a crowd, causing many casualties. I carried the wounded in my car, but the Chinese volunteers had fooled around with the gears of the 4-wheel drive, so the car could not run well. I cursed them heartily and somehow brought some of the bleeding people to a hospital at a crawling speed.

When we arrived at the hospital, I shouted for the stretchers, but they were chained together with a padlock and the keys could not be found easily. This was sad. I had never been to a hospital where the stretchers were padlocked.

My last assignment of writing the agricultural report took me to Long Xuyen, Ba Xuyen, Nha Trang, Ban Me Thuot, Dalat and many other places in south Vietnam where I visited the volunteers and took photos of their activity. I saw Sabrina in Dalat where she was doing work on entomology. She lived in a big house and kept fresh flowers in vases. I wish she had seen how others lived.

In Ban Me Thuot I saw for the first time how the mountain people lived in their long bamboo houses. They made beautiful baskets and other products to sell, but the Vietnamese looked down upon them because they were dark skinned and tribal. There were many tribes living in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, mostly in the hills and mountains.

My tour was nearing the end in Vietnam. It was sad because after all I loved Vietnam and the people. I spoke the language relatively well and came to admire the resilience of these brave people who had known nothing but war for the last 30 or 40 years. Millions perished and millions more were wounded. Millions were refugees in their own country, and the whole social fabric was in tatters. There were beggars, prostitutes and street children everywhere. No one knew how long their suffering would last.

The government corruption was widespread, and the soldiers often refused to fight a useless war because they did not believe in it anymore, while the North Vietnamese and their Vietcong allies fought relentlessly. Some 60,000 GIs would lose their lives there and untold numbers would lose their limbs as well. But the US was bent on continuing, in spite of massive protests back home and around the world.

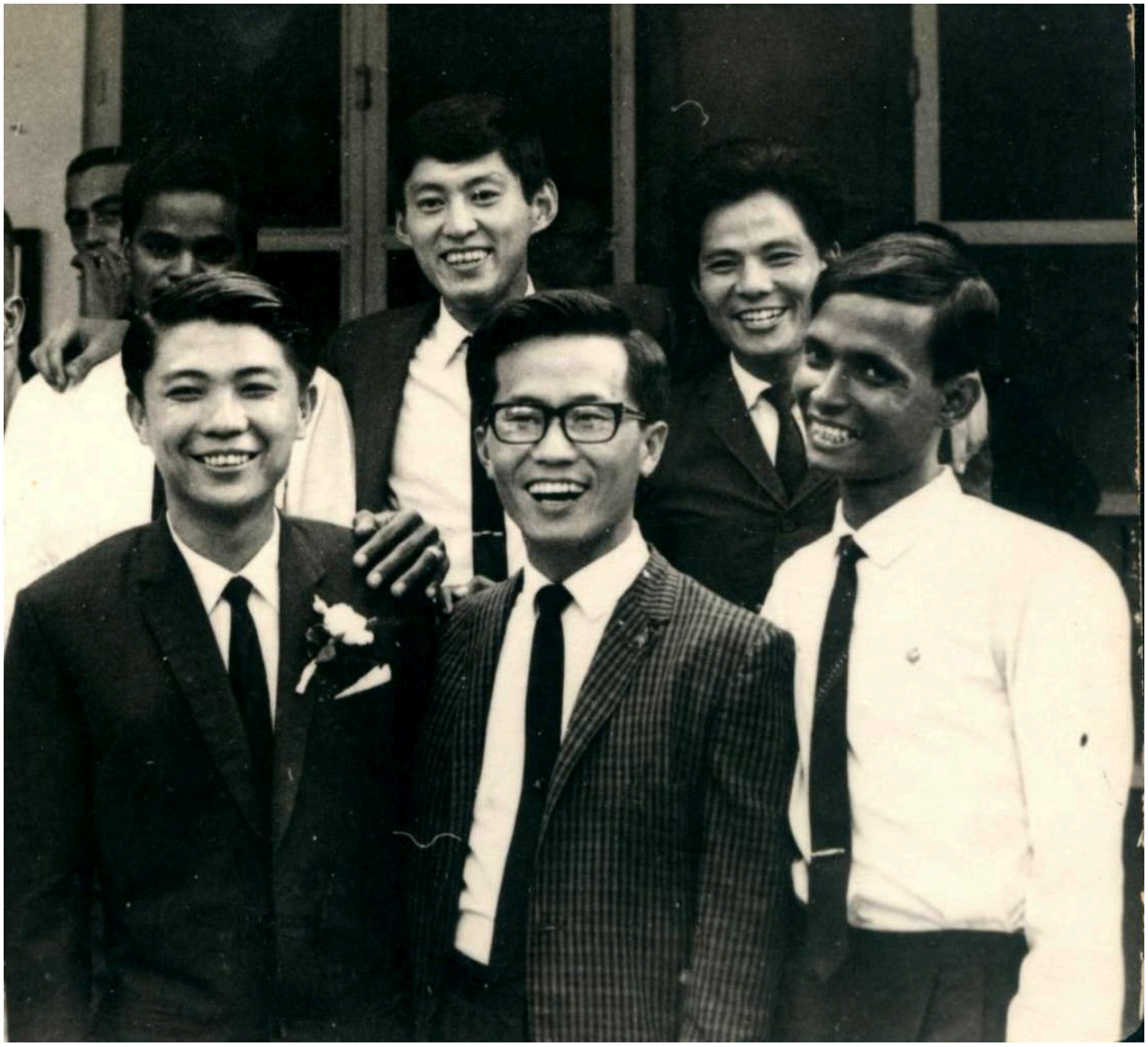
I was an eyewitness to this great tragedy as many others were, but there was nothing any one of us could do, so we kept on working. There were a few volunteers like My Ngheo and Hubert who gave us all an example of what true dedication to work really was. I felt insignificant compared to them, but I loved Vietnam nonetheless and tried to do my share.

The day before I left Saigon, John and his girlfriend Suzy took me out to dinner. I knew Suzanne well, she was a very beautiful girl, and often thought what would have happened if one day she and I came to know each other better. I would again meet her in the future, but that is another story that I will tell later.

The Vietnam chapter was closing, and I started to look forward to graduate school in California. I came to know many Americans and other nationalities while in Vietnam. Some were good, and we became friends, but others not so good. Some were there for the wrong reasons, but very few had the courage to resign and return home to press for the end of war. Only a handful did in 1967.

The field director asked me if I could go to Los Baños in the Philippines and help with the training program for the incoming volunteers before going to the United States. This was also a very welcome assignment, so I agreed.

The last scene was at the Tan Son Nhat airport, where all the Asian volunteers and a few Americans gathered to see me off. Someone took a photo of us all. We all wore ties and smiled into the camera one last time together before scattering into the big wide world for good. Soon I was airborne.



My friends who came to see me off at the Saigon airport in July 1969

Chapter Four: Philippines and Japan, exploring cultures

Philippines visit

It pleased me to think that I was going back to Los Baños again because I really liked the place. I also liked the Filipino people, who seemed to be very friendly and were very easy to get to know. Of course, I was dealing with the educated Filipinos in the university town who were

different from the ordinary folks, but my later experience with the ordinary people also proved to be just as enjoyable.

I stayed at the international house on campus and soon became very busy with the volunteers who came for training in the rice production that I was to organize. Again, the Farm and Home Development office of the UPLB took over the training of these young people, some of whom were to go to Laos and others to Vietnam.

I had earlier met with a scientist from IRRI in the IVS office in Saigon. It was he who helped with the practical training of the volunteers at the IRRI farm, where they learned to plough the fields with carabaos pulling the instruments or plant the rice seedlings using the dapog method.

The Americans had never even seen the rice plant before, let alone a carabao and had absolutely no idea what was involved in the production of rice, but they learned and got dirty in the mud.

I met many people at IRRI, but had no idea that this institute would one day play a very crucial role in my life. My fate was drawing me closer and closer to this country in an irrevocable way, but I was not aware of it then.

After the training was over and volunteers left the country, I decided to stay on in Los Baños for a while. The cafeteria was next door to the international house, where I took my meals, so I soon came to know Nellie de Guzman and her gang. She was a very fair and pretty girl who was friendly and smiled at me from time to time.

After a few days of smiling, one day she came over and sat down with her food tray next to me and asked my name. I felt a new beginning. Soon I was introduced to Teresita, Ling Ling and many others, and we formed what the Filipinos called a bercada or gang of friends.

This new-found friendship would last a long time. We used to always eat together and go out together. Often we would sit on the steps of the Women's dorm or the International House and strum guitars and learn to sing Tagalog songs together. The songs I liked best were Sarung Bangi and Silayan. We sang together and clapped our hands and thought tomorrow would never come. There were also a few boys in our group, and they were the nicest Filipino boys I would ever meet.

Nellie and I would be drawn to each other like a moth to a lamp. Who the lamp was, was obvious. She even named one of her newly born nephews Anilito which in Tagalog meant baby Anil, and she always waited for me everywhere when I was not waiting for her everywhere. This was not romance, or at least I did not think of it that way, but she was a very pleasant company and I think she and her barkada genuinely liked me.

Teresita and Ling Ling were also a lot of fun. Then there was Arlene who invited me to her home in Baguio up in the highlands where her younger sister took me around to show me the spots

and her parents welcomed me. Back in Los Baños we continued our pleasant days, but we all knew that soon I was to leave for the United States and perhaps never see them again, which made all of us sad.

Visit to Japan

I still had one month of vacation before September when the Cal Poly classes began, so I decided to go to Japan and visit my ex IVS friend Tadeo Hayashi who lived in Tokyo. My Filipino friends were sad but so was I.This was developing into a pattern. I had left many friends in Vietnam whom I would never see again, but I had to move on, so one day I flew into Haneda.

I easily made friends everywhere and was not shy. I tried new things and new places or new food just for the fun of it. There was a daredevil streak in me that I had perhaps picked up in Vietnam.

Tokyo in August 1969 was very different from January. It was warm and sunny. Tadeo came to Haneda to pick me up, so I stayed with his family for a few days and got to know his sisters who said I should call them imotosan.

The mother Hayashi soon sent me to the bathroom to disinfect. That is the proper word after all the grime of Vietnam, but the Japanese are a very clean people, so a bath was a must.

The bathroom was tiny but so was everything in Japan. People lived in small but very functional apartments that were decorated plainly with tatami mats. In one corner of the bathroom stood a cubicle about 3 feet by 3 and about 4 feet tall, covered with a rubber flap on top. This was filled with very hot water. I was supposed to get into that cubicle and roast, so I washed my face and elbows and came out.

This of course did not fool the old lady, who dragged me back to the bathroom and indicated that I must get into the cubicle to take a proper bath. Tadeo explained that I must put a foot slowly down and get used to the heat, and then gradually get into it. It took me some time to get used to that inferno, but slowly I began to relax.

I was soon given a small cup of hot sake to gulp down when I came out weak and sweating but very clean. I choked, not realizing how strong the rice wine was, but it felt good. I was learning the merits of Japanese bath and sake first hand. The warmth spread throughout my body and I felt as if I had been given a new life. The truth was not too far from it.

My stay with the Hayashi family was full of fun. I learned a few words like konnichiwa, kombanwa, imotosan, arigato gozaimasu, chute mate kudasai etc. that I practiced a lot later on my own. They took me to many places of interest in Tokyo like the Ginza, the Ueno park and the Imperial palace. We once went to an immense swimming pool where 10000 people gathered so just imagine the size of it. There were many pools and water jets, so it was great fun.

One day they took me to see a grand spectacle in Asakusa where I saw the dazzling performance of dancers and actors on a vast stage. The settings, decorations, the glitter, lights and stereophonic sound was like nothing I had ever seen anywhere, and I was very impressed. The manager of the theater asked me if I liked the show. The word like was an understatement.

Then Tadeo took me to a festival called Bon Odori where people in yokattas danced around a platform where huge drums were giving the beat. There were paper lanterns everywhere and people wore traditional Japanese clothing that I found quite attractive.

It takes some time to get used to the crowd in Japan, though. In the subway trains, at the Ikebukuro station, on the streets and in fact everywhere one saw the elbow to elbow crowd. Once I went to see a movie, but that was a big mistake. They always sold more tickets than the number of seats, so there were always a lot of people who stood at the back and made a mad dash for a seat when anyone got up. I could not fight such a crowd.

The crowd were on the street one-day mourning the death of Ho Chi Minh, whom they admired. This frail old man had the lion's courage to stand up to the might of the French and later the Americans but died before his homeland could be free.

In the trains, you had to inch your way toward the door a few stations ahead of time, otherwise you could never get off during the short time the train stopped. The Japanese were a friendly people and always gave you their cards that they always carried.

But the trains in Japan are fast and punctual. I took the bullet train to Kyoto one day and was amazed how fast the train really was. Outside was just a blur, but a glass of water on the window sill could not spill. I also noticed how mountainous the country was. There were a few patches of green here and there, intensely cultivated, but the rest was sheer rocks and endless tunnels through which we passed at a very high speed. Kyoto was far, but the train was not called a bullet train for nothing.

At the railway station, I asked some people if they could suggest a place to stay, but no one understood me. It was getting dark, and I was eager to find a place to stay, but the problem was the language. English was far from becoming a world language, at least in this part of the world. The Japanese people at the Kyoto station were having fun gawking and endlessly chattering, but finally a kind soul arrived and in a few broken words told me that indeed there was a place just near the station that he could recommend.

I walked to the inn and found it to be a delightful place. There were some ex Peace Corps volunteers staying there as well, so I was in good company because no one knew a town better than a Peace Corps volunteer. The rent per day for a bed space on the tatami floor was 500 yen, which was not much. I remember the Japanese girl with big glasses who knew only one word in English. " You stay? " To which we nodded and handed over the 500 yen for the day. It was a routine every morning.

The TV was always on whether someone watched or not and mostly not and the bath time was a mad rush because unlike in the west the Japanese baths were a communal affair where 10 or 12 naked Japanese would get in so the water was not very clean afterward so to speak hence the rush to be the first in and out. What took time to get used to was the sight of the naked Japanese in the bathtub, casually chatting. I could never get totally naked, which they just thought funny and laughed.

The Japanese food is excellent. I found that all the restaurants displayed their dishes outside in a showcase with their names and price tags, so it was easy to just point to it when the waitress came to take the order. The display was made of plastic but looked very real. My favorite dish was Unadon which was steamed eel with rice. I also tried sushi in Tokyo once.

At this time the Japan government was getting ready for the Expo in Osaka so learning English to cope with the international visitors was given a priority and many Americans staying at the inn

got jobs there, but I went out every day to look at the shrines and temples. Some of the most famous shrines were in Kyoto, like the Ginkakuzi and Shinkakuzi temples.

I do not know why, but girls in most countries are friendlier than boys to foreigners, and Japan was no exception. All you had to do was to smile at them and ask them for directions. Then they will be all over you chattering in English because seldom they get the chance to practice what they learn. I mean, you have to be very old and ugly to be left alone, and I was neither very old nor very mmm. Often they followed me around for blocks, insisting that they accompany me to some place. It got to be embarrassing because I didn't mean to distract them from whatever they were going to do before we met.

Once I went into a big store where I asked for a hand painted Japanese scroll, but I did not know the word for scroll. The manager did not understand and shook his head, although I tried my best with pantomime, toilet paper etc. but nothing worked so he called for more help that soon arrived. They all chattered incessantly but could not decipher what this foreigner wanted. I finally left when I noticed that they were calling for more people.

One night I went out with a Peace Corps volunteer for a stroll downtown and found a beer pub in a dark alley where the Japanese were gulping down beer like water. The place was full of acrid cigarette smoke. The Japanese took immediate notice and swarmed around chattering, but we just smiled because we did not understand a word. Soon tall bottles of Asahi beer appeared, and they urged us to gulp it down, although it was not my style.

As soon as we finished the first bottle, new ones arrived, and they would not let us pay for them. The Japanese were having a whale of a good time, but we were in trouble, so we left after a while to their disappointment.

Further down the lane, we watched with fascination an old Japanese metal craftsman bent over a piece of brass and engraving it. He invited us into his shop, which was also his house. Soon many women and children arrived and sat around us talking at the same time and brought in bowls of noodles and chopsticks. They urged us to eat and kept on offering more food.

I had never known such hospitality to total strangers anywhere. It was so nice. Finally, we got up to leave, saying arigato a number of times. But the old man was not finished with us yet. He gave us each a piece of engraved brass work as a parting gift, to our utter surprise.

Japanese people are full of delightful surprises, as we were learning. I met a Japanese fisherman who invited me to go night fishing with him in the sea where he used his trained cormorants to catch the fish, but I was advised by some that it was a risky adventure, so I missed my chance of a lifetime to see how a cormorant caught a fish without swallowing it. The trick I was told was in the ring around the neck of the bird. The fishermen were very smart indeed. This was a land of contrast, where there was a bullet train as well as a kimono. Men wore yokatta with a black sash. In fact, the mother of Hayashi made me a lovely yokatta.

I liked Kyoto very much because there are so many peaceful shrines. One shrine had a rock garden where one could sit the whole day in meditation looking at the white pebbles that the monks raked very artistically around big rocks. If you looked at them for some time, the rocks disappeared and looked like waves lapping against the mountains. The temples were splendid with shiny pillars and grass roofs. The stone lanterns leading up to the temples through greenery were uniquely Japanese. These people did nothing half-heartedly.

I spent many days in Kyoto not wanting to go back to the crowded Tokyo, but one day I had to leave. The bus ride to Nagoya and on to Tokyo was quite nice, but what surprised me was that the bus driver stopped in many places just to tell the waiting passengers that it was full. In India the buses never stopped to show such courtesy.

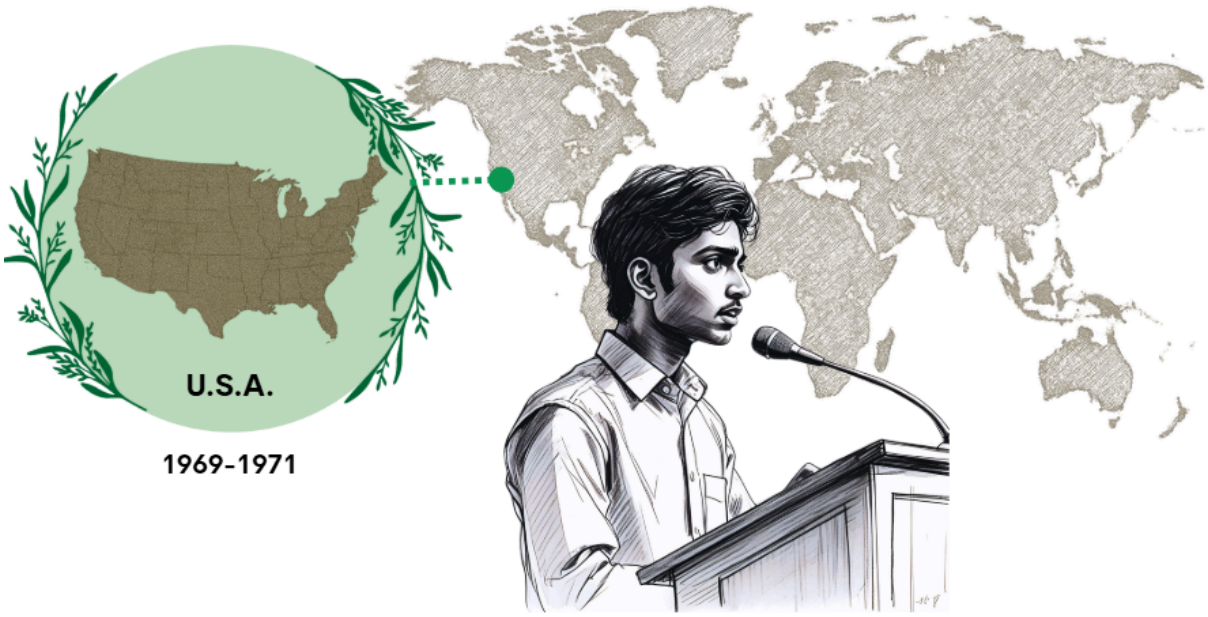
Back in Tokyo, Tadeo said that one of his uncles wanted to meet me, so one day I had a nice talk with him over delightful Japanese food. He was a very curious person and found in me a goldmine of information about India and Vietnam. I asked if he had ever heard of our national hero Bose, who had come to Japan to seek help from emperor Hirohito to fight the British.

He shook his head and said that the name did not mean anything to him until I wrote it down. Then his eyes lit up. Oh yes, he said. Everyone knew and admired Bosei for his courage. The emperor gave him a lot of support during the world war, but sadly, Bosei died in a plane crash somewhere.

I surprised the Hayashi sisters one day when I said that Hideko Takamine was known to Indian intellectuals and movie fans. They were delighted that I knew about their idols. In India, Bengalis are not as isolated as they appear to be because they are voracious readers of anything in print. Often we read about foreign countries, their art or literature or personalities. Gogol, Dostoevsky or Pushkin were widely read, albeit in translation.

Soon the wonderful vacation in Japan was over, and the time came to say goodbye to these friendly and hospitable people. I will never forget the Hayashis as long as I live.

Chapter Five: United States in turmoil



This time I arrived in San Francisco, from where I took the bus to San Luis Obispo. The classes were to start soon. Passing through San Jose, Salinas, the Steinbeck country, Paso Robles, Atascadero etc. I could see the scrub oaks and pastures full of cows until we came to the hills of San Luis Obispo.

The oil rigs in the northern part bobbed up and down everywhere and the wide highway full of speeding vehicles reminded you that you are in the United States where almost everyone drives a car.

You also noticed the Howard Johnson or KFC signs everywhere. People here gobbled up fast food as if it was the only thing to do. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry going somewhere. There were huge trucks with trailers loaded with new cars for delivery, but every town had a used car lot.

I had arrived in the United States at a crucial time when the entire country was going through soul-searching for answers to the war in Vietnam. There were massive protests all over the country against the war, and the pro and anti-war protesters often clashed, with dire consequences. Many young people fled to Canada or elsewhere to avoid the compulsory draft, and some went to jail in protest.

But the mood of the government was ugly. It kept up the pressure on Vietnam by increasing the bombings that now included Cambodia while negotiating for peace in Paris, but peace was still many years away. Almost everyone had an opinion pro or con on the issue.

I stayed out of controversy, although some people knew that I had just come from Vietnam and knew first hand the situation there.

My roommate was from Oklahoma who was a nice chap and chased girls all the time when they were not chasing him. The infernal telephone rang sans cesse because his numerous girlfriends would not leave him alone.

At last, I was once again a graduate student after that hopeless stint at the College in India. I wish the arrogant principal of the College could see me now, but I did not gloat. I had long hard studies ahead of me, but my professors and adviser were really great. They helped me out with my study plan and gave me a lot of valuable advice.

Here, the graduate students were mostly left alone to decide what they wanted to study, although they assigned a professor to guide you. I made steady progress towards a MS degree, but the only problem now was money. I did not have enough to cover all my expenses, so I took a part-time job in the cafeteria cleaning tables and later a night job cleaning classrooms.

I also tried my hands as a short order cook and a tire repair man but did not last long. The night job earned me just enough to pay for some expenses.

The dormitory was fun, but at times the fun got out of hand, like the time my roommate was seen collecting pennies, although I would not say what for. We were to soon find out. He was a very naughty fellow and always up to some mischief.

Our dorm had so-called towers because it had a unique architecture. It was built on a mountain slope, so all the towers were at various levels. We were in tower 7. The next day the tower 8 boys were frantically banging on their doors that they could not open from inside and all got locked in.

Soon the manager was called for help, who trotted up to find pennies wedged between the door and the jamb so no one could turn the knob. It took a long time to pry out the pennies one by one and let people out, some of whom were late for exams or other classes. They were indeed very furious and started to hunt for the culprit. It did not take them long to find out.

I came back to find that the reprisal was swift. Our room was full of shaving cream that stank for weeks even after cleaning up. Not only had they identified my roommate who had wedged the pennies, they thought I was in it too. It was useless to say that I was innocent, although I did give some pennies.

I had never seen such a terrible mess. When I wondered how they had gotten into our locked room, someone explained that they did not have to. All they needed was a paper bag full of shaving cream, stick it under the door and bang the bag. That did the job and did it well.

Then there was a fellow who had the habit of singing aloud with his microphone that disturbed everybody. This fellow was very afraid of tarantulas. Sure enough one day some big nasty looking tarantulas were found in his bed that freaked the fellow out. The hills behind the dorm were full of them. This time the culprit was not found, but my roommate had a knowing smile on his face.

I was getting used to the American campus and especially the dorm life. All kinds of pranks were the order of the day here. One half of the dorm was for the girls and there was a common lounge, but the visiting hours were lax.

Then there were the nights when boys raided the panties of girls. I was amazed to see the girls dangling their underwear and boys chasing to get them. Whatever made them do such foolish things was beyond me, but I was told that these were college traditions here.

One night there was a water balloon fight. We filled up balloons with water and dropped them on unsuspecting people below from our windows. They even drenched the security police one night with a hose. The engineering students were probably the most mischievous. When one student asked them how to make a blinking light in his window, they advised him to put a penny in the socket and then put the bulb on. Soon the entire dorm plunged into darkness that led to more mischief.

The dorm organized many parties when students munched pop corn, danced or watched movies. I usually stood aside awkwardly because I did not feel comfortable dancing with girls, but a freshman called Debbie took it upon herself to teach me some lessons. Here holding hands or kissing was common, and I will not go into details about what else they did, but this sort of thing was common in a mixed dorm like ours. The manager was an old woman with owl rim glasses and dangling chains who ignored most of the shenanigans until things got out of hand once in a while.

In our dorm lived a Vietnamese girl I will call Tuyen who was small like most Vietnamese girls but cute. She said that she was from Can Tho, where she had lived near the IVS office. We became friends, and often we went to a Chinese restaurant and talked endlessly about what I can not recall, amid the tremendous din the Chinese made. I never understood why the Chinese restaurants were so noisy and why they had to shout to order food.

Anyway, Tuyen and I were often seen together because we could not escape unnoticed from our dorm. There were always some students sitting on the front porch brushing their hair or just sitting and noticing everything, especially when two people were seen together more than once. This led to gossip among them, but we ignored it.

Another thing was that the Americans went on dates in blue jeans and tee shirts, but Tuyen and I always put on our best clothes. This was a spectacle they never missed, and often we could hear their comments. Nevertheless, Tuyen was pleasant company and I think she enjoyed talking to me as much as I enjoyed her company, but one day she said that she had a boyfriend all along. I did not know this, so I stopped abruptly. I am sure the hair brushing students noticed, but making and breaking was nothing unusual on an American campus. It happened all the time.

Many years later Tuyen would flee Vietnam and pass through the refugee center in the Philippines on her way to the United States again where she would be granted residency, marry her boyfriend and live somewhere in California. I have lost contact with her.

In the dorm, I had no less than 3 roommates in one year. The Oklahoman moved out one day when he declared that he was getting married. Now I had known his love affairs a bit, but he really surprised me by that announcement because he was marrying a girl he had met a week earlier.

The second fellow used to sit with his feet into a hot bath every night wearing some sort of welder's goggles, holding an arc lamp to his eyes. When I asked what it was all about, he said it helped clear his brain, which I believe was foggy most of the time.

During Christmas of 1969 the dorm was vacated so all the American students went home and the foreign students like me were sent to foster homes in various places. I was sent to stay with a kind lady in Lompoc who also took me to Santa Barbara. There I joined a group singing carols and “we shall overcome” protesting the injustices and war peacefully. I saw the anguish of parents whose sons had become hippies in protest.

The Cal Poly campus was considered a conservative campus where aggies in Stetson and blue denims and cowboy boots menaced anyone with long hair or protesting the war, but one day I wore a black armband that students were passing out and got a lot of nasty stares. I was an aggie, so what was I doing wearing the armband? I often spoke about the war in churches where old women would listen to me very attentively and pressed on some coins in my hands to my utter embarrassment. I was not doing it for money.

During the Thanksgiving holidays, I was surprised when an American came out of his house and invited me to dinner, proving that there were many kind and generous people in this country. The children were absolutely charming, and they loved my story telling. I got on well with kids in any country except perhaps Algeria, but I will tell you about them later.

Now the time had come for me to find a cheaper place to live, so a friend of mine found me a room in the Wesley House just off campus.

But Wesley house was not any better. It was cheap living, but I never got to know any of the 9 Americans who lived there. They were small town boys who did not show any curiosity about me. One of them asked what I was listening to on my shortwave radio. It was BBC, but he had never heard of it, so I said I could also get VOA and many other stations. He had never heard of VOA either. The only radio they knew was the AM/FM radio that people had in their cars. These were college students.

At first, my roommate seemed like a nice fellow who liked to walk with me in the moonlight and chatter, but one day he fell off his bunk bed on my study desk and shattered the beautiful porcelain eagle that I had received as a gift from someone in Hong Kong. Only then I came to know that he was on drugs and had other mental problems.

Luckily he moved out, but in came another weird fellow who one night insisted on bringing me up to a mountain top in his jalopy to show me the lights of San Luis Obispo. I was really annoyed because it was 2 am and the lights of San Luis Obispo were nothing to rave about.

I found them to be very mediocre and strange, but I had my night job and daytime studies, so I was very busy or tired to mind them. I painted the house, fixed the lawn and even found an old carpet for the living room, but they did not care and often cleaned their motorbikes on the carpet.

The stupid telephone constantly rang, and it was always girls because between them, they must have had a platoon of girls chasing them.

They would bring in dogs who felt free to chew up my brand new and expensive boots. In short, I did not enjoy staying there a bit and was biding my time when I would graduate and leave.

I did not have many friends after Tuyen and I parted ways. My Vietnamese friends lived far from the campus, so I rarely saw them. Then in one of my classes I met Alice, who had very blond hair and brown eyes. She was very friendly and said that she liked me a great deal. I came to appreciate her as she was always ready to come to my aid whenever I needed it.

Once we went on a field trip to Yosemite National Park. Americans pronounce it Yosemiti I do not know why. Anyway, Alice and I became good friends and talked about Oh I do not know what. She would show up at 2 am to pick me up and bring me to the Greyhound bus station when I could have taken a taxi easily, but she said that she liked to. We had a lot in common. We were both outgoing and curious about the world.

I was at this time invited to speak to a distinguished gathering of scientists in Cape Cod, Massachusetts where the topic was the abuse of defoliants and its effect on people in Vietnam because I had some first-hand knowledge of the 2,4,5-T called Agent Orange. The Americans sprayed it on the rubber plantations in Tay Ninh to flush out the Vietcong. The spray often drifted onto banana plantations and killed the plants.

I showed some slides and spoke about how devastating the effect of defoliation was in Vietnam. Others spoke about its effect on soil poisoning and mixing with the food chain that led to deformed babies or abortion. I met some very prominent scientists there and one of them, a Cambridge professor, kept contact with me for over thirty years.

Then in December, the executive director of the IVS in Washington DC asked if I would join him at a conference of voluntary organizations in Varna, Bulgaria, so I took some time off from my studies and went to Bulgaria. Alice was very impressed and brought me to the bus station.

My Bulgaria trip got off almost on a wrong footing when someone put my luggage on the belt bound for London. The poor Pan Am agent ran to retrieve it and put the correct tags. A disaster was thus avoided, and I was on my way to Paris, where I stayed a few days before going to Sofia. The airport in Sofia was practically deserted when I arrived one evening, but I waited because I was told that someone will receive me and fix me up somewhere for the night, so I waited what seemed like a long time.

Finally, a girl arrived and said that I must wait some more because she had some other business to take care of and will return soon, but she did not. So I took a taxi and asked to be brought to the Tourist Bureau. It was late at night, but they were open and friendly. They asked if I wanted a hotel room or a private home. I opted for a private home, so they gave me a chit of paper and told the driver to bring me there.

The driver finally found the house in question in a narrow lane, but the lady of the house first wanted the chit of paper before she would open the door an inch. After these formalities I was shown to a room where a wood burning stove stood in one corner giving some heat and not much else. Although the language was a problem, I tried to break the ice by trying to explain that I was going to Varna etc. but they remained impassive.

Finally, I had an idea. I pulled out some slides of New York and showed them with a view finder. They were truly amazed. Remember, this was 1970 and Bulgaria was a virtually closed country at that time. I was lucky to get a visa to visit the hermit kingdom. Anyway, the hunger pangs started to hit me, but the lady made it clear that the agreement was just for a bed, so I ventured out in the cold, dreary night of Sofia looking for a restaurant.

The wide boulevards were empty, and I saw no sign of any restaurant, although I had some basic knowledge of the Russian alphabet and could read signboards. I had no luck, so I wandered for quite some time until I saw a place where people were eating, so I went in and ordered some food.

Soon I was surrounded by the noisy Bulgarians who wanted to talk to me and know where I was from etc. just like in Kyoto. I explained as best as I could, but the conversation was not going anywhere with pantomime. Soon a plate of omelet, thick slices of bread and a huge bowl of yogurt arrived.

The bread was a bit rough, but I was not about to complain, so I chewed as best as I could. Soon more bread and omelet arrived, but I had enough and wanted to pay and get out. Now I was in for a great surprise. They told me that it was not a restaurant at all but a canteen for the factory worker and the food was mostly free. I was very embarrassed and wanted to pay and get out quickly, but they were having a great time and would not let me go. They did not accept any payment and kept on asking me all sorts of questions. Some offered me their foul smelling cigarette, but I declined and finally extricated myself from that mess.

The next day I found a crowd at the airport all going to Varna to attend the same meeting, but the snow was heavy, and the runway coated with it, so the Varna flight was cancelled. There were many nationalities. The Italians had obviously come well-prepared for the cold weather judging from the bulge in their great coats from which they imbibed liberally and offered me to partake as well. Finally, it was announced that a flight to a place called Turgovische or something like that was leaving, so we could all take it and take a bus from there to Varna.

This was good news, so we all got on before they could change their mind or the weather got worse. This was no time to be choosy, although the propellers reminded me of that awful plane from Sri Ram Pur to Kolkata long ago. It was cramped, and the fat Bulgarian stewardess kept on bumping my shoulder with her behind, which was doubly annoying. She passed on some tough candy that tore up my mouth, but at least we were going someplace.

Now in Targoviste which was a very small airport we looked in vain for something to eat and raided the small cafeteria that had nothing, so a fellow was sent on a bicycle to fetch some bread and cheese and some wine.

My companion and seatmate was a six-foot tall German girl called Heidi who shared some food with me, but it was not enough.

The Italians drank their dinner, but the problem now was how to get to Varna. This problem was solved when a lone rickety bus made of wood and belching smoke showed up.

A crowd of farmers or town folks was waiting for this bus for a long time, but they were told that the foreigners had the priority and would get on first. They did not like this one bit, and I am glad I did not understand their language to know what they were saying. I am sure it was not praised. Not knowing a language can sometimes come in handy. Anyway, the bus that was shaped more like a boat than a bus took off through the country road.

Now, the Bulgarian bus is unlike any other bus I have ever been on. I mean, I did not mind the hard seats and the poor shock absorbers, but they continuously played some sort of martial music that began to grate on my nerves and nearly empty stomach. So I looked outside the window to notice the peasants working, chicken free foraging and all manners of farm equipment, tractors, trailers, carts, horses etc. The buildings were sturdy and farms large. Obviously, we were passing through a very agricultural area. The road was narrow, and the

driver was a bit too fast for my liking, but we finally arrived in Varna in one piece, which was good.

Varna is on the Black Sea and a beautiful resort city. It was modern and had interesting architectural designs, although I admit I am no expert in designs.

The beach is proudly called by the Bulgarians Zlatni Piasatzi or the golden sands. The town looked empty, this being not the tourist season. We were lodged in a nice hotel right near the beach. One could see many ships with Russian markings, reminding you that you were in their backwaters. North of Varna was the border of Romania, and Odessa was not too far. I had studied my geography well.

The meetings were endless where everyone wanted to make a speech as if speech making was going out of style. At the end of the meeting, the Bulgarians hosted a grand champagne party and a high ranking official came to address the gathering. I was very impressed when after a long speech, a Bulgarian interpreter translated it verbatim without notes. Afterward, there was dancing and a lot of champagne, but no one danced with poor Heidi. She was over six feet tall, but I did not mind. She was only 4 inches taller.

There was one evening when we were invited to the ballet downtown that was very well done. One woman tersely asked me not to take photos, but on the whole the Bulgarians were a formidable host and did everything possible to make our stay enjoyable. An excellent pianist played during dinner and the food was very good.

I was ready to leave after the delightful stay in Varna, but an unexpected problem arose. There was a cholera outbreak in Turkey, so all the flights to Istanbul were cancelled, stranding me in Bulgaria. The Pan Am New York did not respond to many telexes I sent to reroute me, so someone suggested that I take the train to Istanbul.

There was another surprise waiting for me at the hotel but a pleasant one this time. They said that my bill was paid by the Government because I was a state guest. The Bulgarians also enjoyed such privileges in India, so I thanked my Indian passport silently and asked the driver to bring me to the airport. He ignored all the red lights as we were a bit late already, but I found out that I had left my coat in the hotel.

So the poor chap made a rapid U-turn to fetch the lousy coat and brought me to the airport up to the plane that had already started the engines. A frantic waving of hands and rapid fire Bulgarian worked miracles, and the pilot opened the hatch to let me in. But my troubles were not over yet, so read on.

In Sofia, I went to the train station and asked the help of a Polish fellow from Poznan to find me a ticket and a sleeping berth on the night train. Now, some kids saw me with a camera and asked me to take their photo and insisted on taking my photo as well, so they grabbed the

camera from my hand. They were a bit overly playful, but the result was that they dropped my camera on the cobblestone and soon disappeared to my dismay.

In Sofia, I went to see the famous cathedral where long robed monks were singing in a delightful way that echoed in the high vaulted dome, but the basement was full of marvelous religious paintings of Madonna with baby Jesus and various other themes. I saw icons there that were hundreds of years old and most wonderful. There were crucifixes and chalices as well.

The train left promptly at 9 PM bound for Istanbul and I found my seat. So far so good, but the night was not over yet. At around midnight, we had crossed the border to the Turkish side when two policemen knocked on the door and asked to see my visa. But I did not have a visa, which made them nasty, and they asked me to get off at the next stop and go back to Bulgaria to get one. I looked outside and saw a dim kerosene lamp flickering at a lone, empty station, so I decided that I was not going to get off that train unless they threw me off like Gandhi.

When the policemen saw my resolve, they changed their tune and said that they could give me a visa for twenty dollars worth of Turkish liras. This was, however, easier said than done because no one gave me liras in exchange for my traveler's checks on that train, although I knocked on every door pleading. Finally, I returned to my seat and locked the door from inside, so the policemen could not bother me again that night.

The next morning there was a knock on the door again, but this time it was a different policeman. I explained that his colleagues were really nasty, although I thought the Turkish people were really very nice and he himself looked like a nice chap. A little bit of buttering works miracles at times.

He apologized and said that he would give me a visa for three dollars, but he could only take Liras. I then came up with the idea that I could pay at the airport because it all goes to the same treasury, right? He agreed and stamped my passport.

At the airport in Istanbul, I vented my frustrations at the Pan Am agent and said that it was their responsibility to look after their passengers and did a very poor job of it. He said that he will try his best to put me on a flight to Delhi and called me later to inform me that a seat had been found on the flight to Beirut, from where I will connect to a BOAC flight to Delhi.

At that point I was willing to be routed through Timbuktu if that helped, so I went to Beirut. But my ordeal was not over yet. In Beirut, they put me up in a hotel by the sea front but forgot to pick me up for the flight. I called many times to no avail. Finally, a taxi man showed up and said that he had trouble finding me because the airline gave him the name of the wrong hotel, so I had to hurry up because we were late.

When I arrived at the airport, I found the place empty and no agent anywhere, so I pounded on their door to get some attention. Finally, a fellow emerged and said that I was too late. The flight

had been closed and taxiing out. This was absolutely the last straw. I had gone through a lot of trouble to get here, and it was not my fault that I was not picked up on time.

I asked the agent to call the tower and the tower to the pilot, who was still on the runway. Maybe he will open the hatch and take me onboard. The chances were slim, but I had to try. It turned out that the pilot was in a good mood and decided to take me on board. So the hatch opened, stairs brought in and I got on.

Remember that those were the days before the three-hour check in and endless body searches. Now try to get on a flight that has left the parking lot, and you will know what I mean.

Then we sat on the runway for an hour. The reason was that there were more than 50 unaccompanied kids on that plane and one kid was missing. The pilot absolutely refused to take off until the kid was located, so a tedious process of roll call began. The kid was later found. He was just being a kid and having a bit of fun playing hide and seek.

I of course went to Sri Ram Pur and after a few weeks there decided to stop by Manila and Los Baños again to see if some of my friends were still there. I found that many had graduated and left Los Baños, but Teresita was still there, and it was she who took me to Lucent to look for Nellie de Guzman. There the trail led to Manila, where Nellie lived in a place called Gagalangin Tondo. This place is notorious for crimes and thievery, but I went anyway.

Nellie was very surprised to see me, but we went to ride in the bus that the tourists took to see the famous sunset in the Manila Bay and while we were enjoying the sunset, she said that she was engaged to be married to a Moslem fellow from Mindanao. The sunset looked so ordinary after that. I do not know why I was so upset. She was definitely not my girlfriend, so why was I upset? I do not know. But I do know that nothing was the same afterward, and I soon left for Hong Kong on my way back to the United States.

However, something very interesting happened while I was in Los Baños this time. One day I was talking to a scientist at IRRI who seemed to be very interested in what I did in Vietnam when the deputy director general walked in. I was introduced, so he asked a few questions and was about to leave when I blurted out that I liked IRRI very much and would someday like to come back here to learn about rice research given half a chance. Could he by any means consider me for a scholarship?

He was a real gentleman and said that the first thing to do was to apply and then IRRI will decide whether I qualified and even brought me an application form. I thanked him and took the form with a promise to send it to him with supporting documents later. This would in the distant future develop into an extraordinary story that I will write about soon.

So I returned to San Luis Obispo after spending a few nights in Hong Kong. I went to Macau by boat from Hong Kong, but the Portuguese officers there would not let me off the boat. India had taken over their colonies of Goa, Daman and Dieu, so I was the victim of this geopolitics.

I had just made my second round the world trip, not in 80 days but just as adventurous as that of David Niven, but now the time had come for me to write my thesis and finish up the graduate studies at Cal Poly.

My professor and adviser was a very kind and helpful person who gave me a lot of help, his labs to work in and his instruments to draw my illustrations so one day in June I graduated, wore my toga to listen to S.I.Hayakawa who made a long and boring speech.

At this time, wonderful news came from IRRI that took me completely by surprise. They offered me a one-year full scholarship to do rice research there and said in their letter that they had found my qualifications very good.

But I had by this time committed myself to go to Algeria for two years as a volunteer agronomist with the IVS so I could not accept the IRRI offer. They were very gracious and said that if I was interested in the future to go there, then I should at that time re apply, and they will reconsider my case.

The Cal Poly chapter was closing, but not before I mentioned that there were many who helped me. Friends like Alice, Tuyen and my professors made it worth the hard work that was required to graduate. Dr. Fisher had not forgotten me and inquired about me from time to time. He was a very kind person.

There were many joyous occasions like the Poly Royal carnival, various concerts, music bands, football games, kite flying, Christmas parties in Lompoc, with my foster families in town and later in Atascadero, the trip to Rosamond in the Mojave Desert, up the highway to Big Sur, San Simeon and the Hearst castle etc. The rodeo games and the county fairs were fascinating and truly American.

Alice one day brought me to the bus station at night, and we said goodbye, never to see each other again. She would later get married to a forester and live somewhere in California. Her gift of a Native American charm with a strand of her golden hair tied to it to ward off evil still decorates our home, although sweet Alice has disappeared forever from my life. I do miss her.

The long road to Washington state was tedious, but I wanted to see Lauren and Roger there before leaving the West Coast for good. She now had a baby called John, and Roger was still trying hard to get into the Veterinary school. It was really good to see them. I recall the time we spent on Mt. Hood last spring throwing snowballs at each other and having such a good time. We reminisced a lot about Vietnam and our mutual friends.

They had visited with my family back in Sri Ram Pur and I had visited the mother of Roger in Connecticut. Now I was going away not knowing when or if I will ever see them again. They were very good people and good friends.

Now I had to go back to Washington, D.C. where they had arranged for me to take intensive lessons in French. I needed to speak French in Algeria. The old friend Hubert was waiting for me in Washington and gave me a tight hug. Remember Hubert of Ba Xuyen who lived like a pig? He had fixed me up to stay at a dormitory near Dupont Circle and take my lessons at the Sanz language school downtown.

The Sanz language school in downtown Washington was a shabby place where they gave me a very cold room and a blackboard. There I met a very beautiful and young girl waiting for me. She was obviously French and spoke English in a lilting French accent that bowled me over right away.

She said that she was Nicole Gautier, and I was her only student, and she expected me to learn to speak French in two months' time. I said that I was an old goat and learning a tough language like French was a bit too much to expect, but she smiled and said we will see. She was determined to make me learn the language.

So we started the routine of je vais, tu vas, Il va etc. and the difficult French grammar and conjugation. The rules were so complicated. I soon started getting into French because after 8 hours a day, 6 days a week one had little choice in the matter. She had said that I will speak French or her name is not Nicole. But another matter soon came up. I was getting a bit tired of the Sanz because the air conditioner malfunctioned. One day I asked her how much Sanz was paying her per hour, to which she was reluctant to reply, but I insisted on knowing. I had a very good reason.

She said they were paying her 3 dollars an hour. I was surprised. The Sanz was charging 6 dollars an hour and making 3 on her and giving us a lousy cold room to boot, so I promptly told them that I was no longer interested in taking lessons there. Then I convinced the IVS to pay her 4 dollars per hour, so everyone was happy except Sanz. But who cared about Sanz?

From then on, Nicole and I became best friends. We could now take lessons anywhere, so we went to the zoo to learn about animals or Georgetown market to learn the names of vegetables and fruits etc. or often we sat in the park near Dupont circle to take lessons there. I also made rapid progress to her delight, but I was not fluent yet.

One day my old Vietnam friends invited me to a get-together where a pleasant surprise was waiting for me. It was Suzanne. I could not believe this, and did not know that she was in town. Remember how I felt about her in Saigon? Here she was, the same and even more beautiful Suzanne.

When she came up to say goodbye, I blurted out that I had often thought what it would have been like had I known her more.I had kept it to myself because she was going with someone, but she was incredulous and kept on looking at me. Finally, she said that she had no idea that I would be interested in a plain girl like her. She was just being modest. She also said that she had broken up with her partner a long time ago and was working in D.C.

I did not know what to say or do because I never thought I would ever see her again, but here she was in Washington, D.C. in June 1971. I could call it fate or something. The days passed rather quickly. We had so much to talk about, and so much remained unsaid.

If Nicole noticed anything, she did not say, but one day she said that she would like to meet this girl who had cast such a spell on me. They got on splendidly as soon as they met, but Hubert was in the dark, and we kept him so. Suzanne was always late for appointments, or it seemed so because I was always waiting for her somewhere.

She brought me to a place called Monticello in Virginia, where a former president lived and kept slaves in his basement. The house was ordinary, but a stern old woman kept on yelling at kids who touched anything. She also brought me to the Shenandoah park and many other places. A concert near the Potomac River or a movie in the open air somewhere were many events I enjoyed. I remember the movie. It was the "The Man called horse" and the "Little big man".

We even talked about our future together and wrote to Nirmal about her. He was very happy that at last I had met someone I could live with and welcomed her to the family. This was very gallant of him because I could sense the storm this news must have been causing back home. I came from a very traditional family where a marriage outside the caste or religion was unthinkable.

Our time passed quickly, but I also made steady progress in French. One day I went to a store where Nicole admired a necklace, so I secretly packed it for her and gave it as a surprise at my farewell party. My time in the United States had come to an end, and I was soon to leave for Paris. Hubert and many other friends came to the party, where I talked to Hubert for a long time that annoyed Suzanne, and she said so later.

Nicole was a wonderful girl. I will never forget her. She was also very French and crossed streets anywhere she pleased, at red lights or not. Once, I saw the red light and asked her to stop, but she went ahead anyway and found a policeman waiting on the other side. I had not seen him standing there, so he must have hid himself. Now he asked Nicole for an ID and fined her 5 dollars, which took her by surprise. I also got a ticket, so a lesson was learned. Nicole said that I should visit her parents in Compiegne.

But something had already gone wrong with Suzanne and I could feel it. She drove me to Dulles one day when I gave her a pair of earrings. We were saying goodbye again, but this time I could feel that it was more than that. I think she was more mature than I and knew at that time that nothing would come out of our new-found relationship. I was born to be a wanderer, and she

was not. She had told me one day that she did not care to live anywhere except in the States, but for me, living in the States was out of the question. I did not belong there.

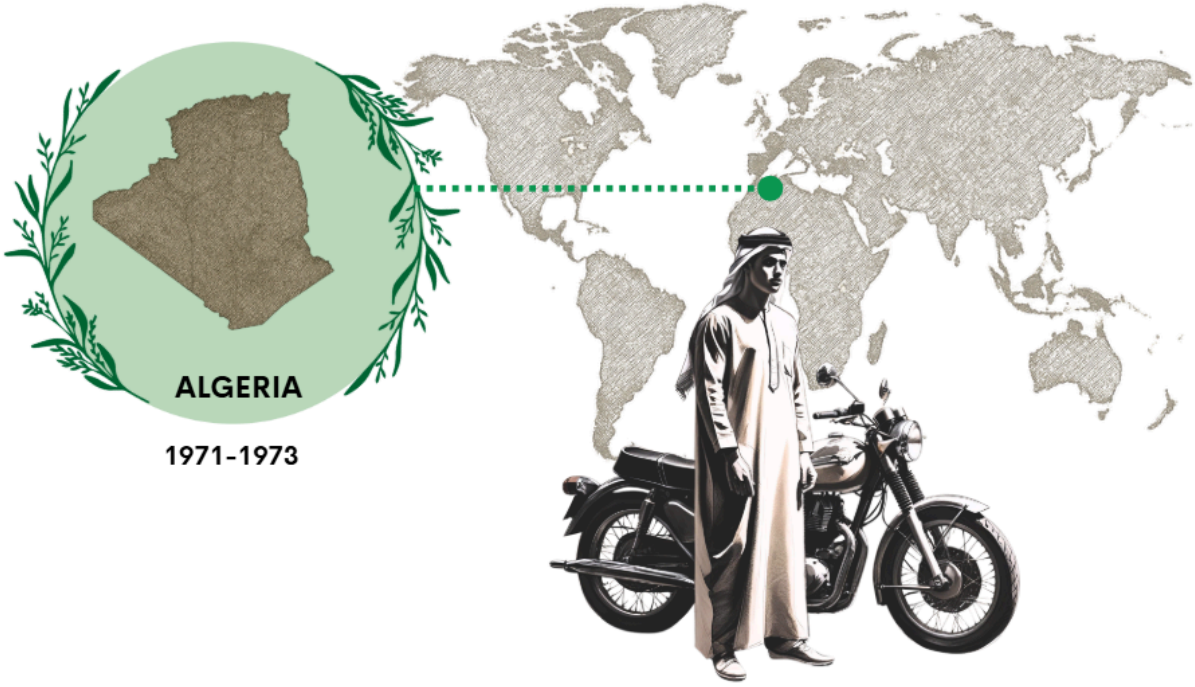
I was going where I wanted to go, out to Africa where I would work with farmers, like in Vietnam. Suzanne knew this and believed that I was a determined person, but so was she. We parted as friends, but I never saw her again and do not know to this day where she is and what she does.

In the air, I spent a lot of time thinking about it and felt sad. She had come into my life like a hurricane, but that is what she exactly was, a hurricane. As you know, hurricanes never last. They always move on, leaving behind devastation. I am not a weak person and do not feel downcast easily, but she had an effect that was hard to overcome. Perhaps time would cure it, as it usually does. I looked forward to landing in Paris once again.

In France, I was to visit the Gautier family in Compiegne as I had promised Nicole, so one day I took the train from the Gare du Nord. Nicole had drilled me well, so getting to Compiegne was not difficult. The Gautier family was delighted to receive me and went out of their way to make my short stay very enjoyable. They brought me to Pierrefond castle, Napoleon's palace, the Foret de Compiegne where Marichal Foch had signed the armistice with Hitler and many other places of interest.

Mme Gautier brought me to Chantilly and the musee there had excellent paintings of Rembrandt and others, so the few days passed rapidly. I would have a chance to visit with this wonderful family again, but now I had to leave France because Algeria beckoned.

Chapter Six: Algeria, riding winds of freedom



Arriving at the Dar El Beida airport of Algiers one afternoon in September 1971, I found the custom's officer a bit paranoid about the things foreigners brought into the country. He wanted to charge me hefty duty on my slide projector and the camera but Stephanie, who was the country director of the IVS, said that I should say" pour demenagement".

This was not working well, but I slipped out quietly when the fellow was distracted by something or someone. Stephanie was a model of efficiency, spoke French and Arabic and knew Maghreb well. I was the first agronomist to arrive, so she was excited and chatted endlessly about what the IVS could do in Algeria given the possibilities. I listened but did not pay much attention. I was curious to find out what happened in the next few days, and most especially where I was supposed to be stationed.

In Washington, D.C. I was told that I will be posted in Setif which is an extensive wheat growing area in the eastern part of Algeria, but my experience told me that on the ground things were often done differently.

So the next day we went to see the personnel officer at the Ministry of Agriculture in Algiers who turned out to be a mean fellow. He ranted that the country will soon have its own agronomists and will not need any foreigners, etc. It did not bode well for a person of my experience and education, but the mood in the country seemed to be nasty, and he was simply mouthing the unofficial line.

I began to wonder if I had not made a mistake to come to Algeria after all. They did not seem to be very friendly. But the deputy director of the ministry was more polished and probably a well traveled person. He received us warmly and said that it would be better for me to go to Tizi Ouzou in the Kabyle mountains, not too far from Algiers. He felt that the isolation in Setif would be too hard on a bachelor like me.

So I went to Tizi Ouzou. It is about 100 km east of Algiers and very mountainous. It is a small town surrounded by hills and higher mountains that were always covered with snow in the winter.This is a part of the Atlas mountain chain that sort of goes east to west. The southern side of the Djur Djura as the Algerians called it is the start of the massive desert of the Sahara, but the narrow land between the mountains and the coast was very fertile and green.

This is where winter wheat, barley, oats, corn and a variety of other crops were grown, often with irrigation. In fact, the agricultural land was in millions of hectares and certainly adequate for a small population of Algeria. I began to wonder at the wisdom of sending me to Tizi Ouzou where they mostly grew olives. I was to soon find out.

In Tizi Ouzou lived a couple called Stan and Cathy Winters, who taught English at the girl's school. They were helpful in settling me in, but in Tizi Ouzou it meant a dreary hotel room because there was a shortage of housing. They were staying at the French Foyer Culturel, but I was put up elsewhere.

My office was just down the block, where I was coolly received by my Algerian counterpart and very warmly by a French fellow called Jean-Claude. Soon I met a Tunisian fellow who invited me to share his studio.

Stan and Cathy were in the meantime given a nice apartment, but they forgot about me, so I stayed on with Mohamed, hoping that one day I too will have my own place. But this was not to be. The housing problem will dog me for a long, long time in Algeria.

Mohamed was very fond of TV which he played until the station signed off so I had to pretend to sleep. I disliked the shrill Arabic music, but I was just a guest. Had it not been for this kind fellow, I would still be in that flea infested hotel room with peeling paint, so I put up with his TV and Arabic music. We did not talk much, although my French had improved substantially. I was forced to speak French all the time because no one spoke English, which made my progress more rapid.

There were a few shops with not much to sell and a few restaurants where the menu remained the same, but it did not matter. I had lived in far worse places in Vietnam. Here at least I had a nice corner of a room to myself and the office was just a walking distance away. There were a few French cooperants who were doing their alternate service and a few other nationalities like Canadians, British, one Spanish, One Belgian and now one Indian. Algerians liked Indian or

rather they liked Indian movies, but there were no Indians in Algeria except perhaps at the embassy.

I liked the cold crisp mountain air of Tizi Ouzou and used to get up at 6 am, put on my shorts, tennis shoes and gloves because it was so cold in the morning, run down 4 flight of stairs and down the valley where I practiced some calisthenics and other morning exercise. The Algerians watched, but soon got used to this routine. Then I would buy a liter of milk, run upstairs and shower, eat a hearty breakfast and go to my office. It felt good, and my hollow cheeks started to fill out.

I started going out with my counterpart in his tiny Renault 4 and got to know the province well in a short time, but all I saw was mostly olives. Why did they send me here? I was a field agronomist in a mountain province. It did not make sense. The Algerians did whatever their ministry asked them to do. This turned out mostly to be collecting data by phone on how many barley fields were planted that week.

The province was divided into districts and each district had so many state run farms run by managers who depended on their supervisors who in turn depended on their laborers for ploughing, planting, harvesting etc. So when the agriculture office called the districts, they called the farm managers who then called the supervisors who told them that approximately so many hectares of wheat or barley were planted. The fact was that no one really knew, so it was just guesswork.

At the office this data would be meticulously compiled to be sent to the Ministry every week. All the provinces in Algeria were required to do this every week, tying up thousands of people in useless unproductive work. No one knew what the ministry did with this massive amount of data. The sheer stupidity of it all appalled me. But woe to you if your data were not ready when the Ministry called. Everyone was scared of Algiers including the director whom they called patron.

There were many Bulgarians, Yugoslavs and few other east Europeans I never knew from where, but these people were often seen with the patron rubbing their palms together and drooling. They tried to create the impression that they were working hard, but when I went out with some of them due to carpooling, I found them collecting anything they could get for free from the state farms. A crate of oranges, or roses that some farms grew were put in their cars.

They also told everyone that my travel stories were mostly made up, and perhaps I had just passed through an airport to claim that I had visited a country. I never understood their meanness as they never spoke to me and tried to get to know me. I never reported their scavenging, either. In my spare time I practiced my French with Jean-Claude or read my lessons, but one day someone stole my French lesson book that Nicole had given me.

The loss was great as I could not buy that book anywhere, but my French improved dramatically with Jean-Claude as my de facto teacher. I could now read, write and speak French, perhaps not like a Frenchman but better than an Indian. But more and more, I was getting disenchanted. Sure I made a lot of friends among the foreigners and a few Algerians and sure the climate was nice and grapes cheap, but I was an agronomist in this mountain province where they grew olives and a little bit of wheat and barley.

People did not care if we did nothing, so most people did nothing and read the newspaper when the Patron was not around. He would often ask why the so-called experts did not know the answer to this problem or that, while the government was paying them a good salary. The East Europeans would grin and try to hide their embarrassment. I began to form a low opinion of them.

One day, the Tizi Ouzou sports council organized a cross country run of several kilometers. There were many professional athletes who came to run, so when I showed up to join, they thought I was a great runner from India.

I warmed up with a lot of calisthenics and started to run along with a crowd of runners. Soon they all left me behind, but I continued on, determined to finish the race no matter what. I followed the flags and ran through the mud and water because it really was a cross country run.

The whole town had lined up on both sides of the only street to watch the show, and they applauded heartily when I returned last, panting and nearly exhausted. The next morning, some of my French friends who had watched the tail end of the show congratulated me for being the first to get in. Why would the Algerians applaud if I was not? Apparently they did not understand the Arab sense of humor.

I was from then on eagerly sought whenever there was a cross-country race organized anywhere. I enjoyed this sort of physical activity that I had never done before. People were amazed to know that I had never run before I took up cross country racing, but I often did things like that and enjoyed doing it.

One day I received a summon from the police in Algiers to report to them, although I did not know why. Stephanie and I went to find out. It turned out that they did not like the Vietnamese stamps on my passport and wanted to know what I was doing there. I said that I was a volunteer agronomist there, so they said" Thank you. You may go". It was silly. I had traveled 200 kilometers just for a one-minute interview, but they did not care.

Policemen in Algeria were arrogant and were rough with the locals. Even with the foreigners, at times they were rude and often stopped me on the road in a discourteous manner simply to ask where I was from, but people were not bad. Some of them were actually very nice to me.

I at this time started to plan on how to get out of Tizi Ouzou, so I wrote a letter to the Ministry to ask for a transfer to an area where rice was grown. I had a lot of experience in rice research and could be useful to them. To my surprise they agreed and after six months in Tizi Ouzou, I was transferred to Mostaganem province in the west where a great deal of rice was grown. Stephanie was happy because usually the Ministry did not listen to anyone.

Suzanne wrote more and more infrequently now, although I counted the days for her letters. I invited her to Algeria and would have wired her a ticket, but she wrote that she was busy with the mobile unit of the anti-war protest team, visiting many places. She could not come but promised to write more often. The letters became rare and one day stopped altogether. I knew then that the chapter of Suzanne was closed forever.

I was soon to leave Tizi Ouzou, but I had liked the snow capped mountains of Fort National and Azazga. I even went to a Berber marriage in the mountains, where smart Berber girls who wore no veils, but short skirts, invited me to dance with them. Berbers are not Arabs and have their distinct culture and language apart from the rest. They are very handsome people and wear long white djellabas of finest camel wool. It looks very elegant on them and quite warm.

But the poverty was also apparent. They lived in a mountainous country where there was little hope for jobs because agriculture was limited. Sure it was very scenic where you could look at the Roman ruins and the blue ocean beyond, but such scenery was not enough for people who looked at them all the time and did not have the same fascination as the foreigners. They had other pressing needs like schools, housing, electricity, potable water, roads, dispensaries and clinics and mostly jobs.

Thousands had immigrated to France to work in their sweatshops to send home money, and more were going. The exodus was great from these beautiful hills, where young were few and old many.

One could see the wrecks of planes and tanks wedged in the ravines to remind you that only 9 years ago they had fought a devastating war that had claimed a million lives of Algerian men, women and even children. The film" Bataille d'Alger" is worth seeing.

When I said that I knew the story of Djamila Boupacha, they were surprised, but Djamila was greatly admired in India for her bravery and articles on her appeared in popular magazines in vernacular. She was an 18-year-old lass who had fought against the French occupation and was tortured by the French secret police. Algerians had fought the French tooth and nail and paid a heavy price for it. Now I began to understand their reluctance to talk about the past.

To understand Algeria better, one has to know its bloody history. The war lasted from 1954 to 1962 and was as brutal as any war can be. The French had just been booted out by the Vietnamese after their defeat at Dien Bien Phu so they were adamant that they as a nation will not be humiliated again, not by some fellahin whom they disdained. Algeria was not a colony. It

was a part of France or a department as they called it. It was French soil, so they were not about to turn around and leave. Furthermore, it could have a domino effect and people in Martinique or Polynesia or elsewhere could start getting the idea. They could not handle that.

So they killed the Algerians at will and tortured them. They blew up their homes in Casbah and all over Algeria. There were many Djamilas whom they raped and tortured, but the brave Algerians fought on tooth and nails and paid a very high price. The guerilla leaders like Boumedienne, Ben Bella, Bouteflika and others led the fight and millions joined. It was the first time in their history that the women threw away their veils and grabbed the guns to fight along with their men.

But it must have been very rough for many, and I wondered if that lame man was born like that or was he tortured? There were many telltale signs all around you. It made them edgy and somewhat secretive. The scars were raw and not properly healed yet, but all over Algeria one could see the past or what remained of the past. The abandoned villas of the French colons or pieds noirs were everywhere, often used as warehouses.One could still see the blown up houses in Casbah in Algiers.

But they did not hate the French now. Cooperants like Jean-Claude came to Algeria to do their alternate service. They were the nicest French people I would meet anywhere.

When de Gaulle started the talk of Algerian Independence, the disgruntled army officers plotted to kill him and nearly succeeded. The Day of the Jackal written by Forsythe is worth reading. France had fought bitterly during the world war and was occupied by the Nazis. They fought long and hard to keep Vietnam as their colony and source of rubber and minerals but were defeated. Now there was this problem in Algeria, but de Gaulle was wise, and he correctly read the mood in France.

When people read the account of Djamilla Boupacha and how the French police had beaten and tortured her for days, the public opinion went against the occupation and the pressure mounted on de Gaulle to do something. The rest is history. I had arrived barely 9 years after the war ended, and they gained their freedom, but I could see that the wound was still raw and people were edgy. I could not write about Algeria without writing about Djamilla.

We, too, had fought a long and bitter war against the British since 1857, but the Algerians did not know anything about India except that the movie actresses were always pretty with white skin. They liked Indian movies that had kings and queens, romance, fights and clowns, lots of songs and dances and wondered aloud why I never went to see any. They also called all Indians Hindou which I explained was incorrect. Not all Indians were Hindus, but they had learned it from the French.

At about this time, just before I was about to leave for Mostaganem, Stan and Cathy invited me to their all-girls' school where the girls were presenting an evening of songs and dances. I shaved clean and put on my suit with a matching tie and showed up at the school.

This was my first experience meeting Algerian girls in close quarters because in town you could see only their veils and not the faces. I arrived a bit late. The show had already started, and the auditorium was dark, but the usherettes noticed me just the same, took my hand and guided me through the narrow passage to the very front row where some girls were pinched and pushed aside to make room for me.

Now the girls noticed that there was a stranger dressed in a dark suit and started whispering. Soon there was a scuffle among them to decide who would get to sit next to me. I was nervous and waited to see what happened next. I did not have to wait long. Soon a pretty girl appeared and with a triumphant smile secured the next seat and whispered into my ears that she was going to be my official interpreter. The skits were in Arabic.

She also said that she knew where I lived and worked, and perhaps I was an Ingenieur. I realized how small Tizi Ouzou really was. Other girls pinched her to get away, but she held her seat while I watched from the corner of my eyes, this sideshow. I do not remember the name of my self-appointed interpreter, but she spoke beautiful French and explained what was going on. Stan and Cathy were nowhere to be found.

Then the intermission lights came on, and 800 teenagers noticed that indeed there was a Hindou among them, whom some of them had seen elsewhere. This news was catastrophic for me. Literally, I was mobbed and many surrounded me chattering and pushing or shoving each other.

Now mind you, in an all-girl's school like that, they only saw their male teachers. They were not allowed to be seen with boys on the street or even their brothers, lest someone misunderstand. But here they were in their elements, in their own domain or world, where they did whatever pleased them. These girls were really wild, and I began to be afraid of them.

They asked if I was married. When I replied "No I was single" they misunderstood me and shrieked in unison" Oh monsieur you are a singer? Please sing for us" and started dragging me to the stage.

I was in big trouble and looked for help, but luckily at this time the lights went out and the show resumed. But the girls seemed to be more interested in me than the show, and waited for the show to end. I dreaded the show to end because I did not know what was in store for me or how I could escape now. Finally, the evening was over, and I got up in a hurry to take the wrong corridor to the squeals of laughter, but they were not through with me yet.

A girl and a very pretty one at that introduced herself as Oultache and wanted my address in Mostaganem, so I wrote it down and quickly left the premises. Outside, I found Stan and Cathy waiting and smiling. They had seen what had happened.

One day I arrived in Algiers to meet Stephanie who would drive me to Mostaganem. It was some 400 km west of Algiers, but the road was excellent. It was a bigger town and on the coast. The nearest big city was Oran further west and some 80 kms away. Mostaganem was flat unlike Tizi Ouzou and the beaches were lovely. But first I had to find a place to stay.

There was an American English teacher who let me stay with him, but he turned out to be on drugs. The Algerian authorities did not like this and tended to come down hard on drug users. I was very uncomfortable and started to look for an alternative desperately. The help came from a Yugoslav fellow in my office, who said that a room was for rent in the house where he lived. He lived in an Algerian home where I thought women were secluded and foreigners not allowed, but I was wrong.

In the house the women wore short skirts showing a good deal of their legs and other parts as well, but that did not bother me. What nauseated me was the squealing kids or crying kids, I could never tell which were doing their toilet on the floor anywhere they liked. Their mothers cleaned up only once a day.

I had to always look down because I never knew what I was going to step on, and millions of flies attracted to the feast made life very difficult indeed for me. I could not go to the roof because a fat neighbor thought that I was looking at his ugly wife, although why would anyone look at ugly women perhaps never occurred to him. Again I started to look for a place of my own. But I was in for more miserable months ahead.

This time a place was found for me in the dressing room of the local stadium where the janitor let me stay, but his son broke in and stole most of my money and ransacked the suitcase. But it was not an airtight case, so the son got off scot-free while I started my search again. In desperation, I went to the housing office and said that it was not fair that I did not have an apartment while others lived comfortably.

The officer showed sympathy but said that nothing was available that would suit me. I wish I could show him my dressing room or the other room full of flies and say that I must have my own place. Finally, he gave me the keys to an apartment, saying that it was substandard, but I could go and take a look if I wished. The apartment turned out to be a studio with a long room, one nice bedroom, kitchen and a small bathroom fitted with hot and cold showers. One whole wall was made of glass and overlooked the green vineyards and the ocean beyond. This was paradise.

Now that my housing problem was solved, I turned my attention to another problem, no less vexing. It was the problem of transportation. The office did not have enough vehicles for all the

ingenieurs so often I could not go out to work in distant locations. Carpooling helped somewhat, but not much.

So I asked the IVS to buy me a motorbike. It was a big black and red and chrome beautiful MZ bike made in East Germany. I loved it. I also got a black leather jacket, helmet, leather gloves and goggles to go with it and would zoom past amused Algerians. Algerians did not like motorbikes and told me that I would fall down, catch pneumonia, it was not fashionable, it was not suitable for an ingenieur etc. etc. but it really did not matter. The kids loved my bike and always clapped their hands whenever I passed through their villages. Only the gendarmes rode motorbikes in Algeria.

I started to work earnestly and covered vast distances on my bike. My work at this time included rice research in the Oued Rhiou area, soybean, forage crops like trudan and fertilizer trials in Mascara and other districts.

The deputy director appreciated my efforts and asked me if I could oversee the aerial fertilization program in the Mascara district. The vast state owned farms of wheat and barley had to be fertilized from air using Antonov planes, so I used to go very early before sunrise during the winter and supervise loading the hoppers with Urea. Then the pilot flew in between two flags on the ground.

To prevent catching pneumonia, I covered my breast with thick newspaper before putting on the jacket, but still could feel the cold. The winter is very rough there. Once I fell off my bike in a village on the road to Mascara because my fingers had become numb. I could have fallen into the deep lake off those sheer mountain roads to Mascara, but I guess I was lucky. The deputy director sent me gas coupons for my bike, but some of my colleagues pocketed some of it. Still, the work was good and satisfying. I obtained excellent results by sowing pre germinated rice seeds using a seed drill. The fertilizer trials were also doing well.

Soon the time came for me to go on a vacation. I opted for a ship to take me to Marseille and from there to Paris. I had heard that one could get cheaper airfares from there to many places. My French cooperant friend Yves brought me to Oran one day where my misadventure was to begin shortly. This was my first sea journey, but little did I know what was in store for me.

The ship looked very old and rusty, like a slave ship. It did not look very seaworthy, but they were loading cars and people, so finally I got on and found an easy chair on the deck. It soon left the port of Oran with seagulls following us quite a ways. I watched the blue water and the receding shoreline while one Algerian fellow started lambasting the government, that kept everyone amused for a while.

Late at night, the ship started rolling and pitching in such a way that made me very sick. We all went down and tried to get into a comfortable position, but it was useless. The rolling continued and I soon became very sick, vomiting. There was no water to clean myself, so you can imagine

the misery. I knew I had made a big mistake, but I could not get off now, so I tried to endure it with gritting teeth until we came to Alicante in Spain.

I jumped out to get fresh air and some water but dreaded the rest of the journey that was to last the whole night. It was a nightmare. The next day, when we arrived in the port of Marseille, I had no energy to stand up. The custom's officer rubbed salt on the wound by saying that my luggage looked like airline luggage. He also asked a nurse to give me a white powder that she poured into my mouth and gave me a glass of water. I felt better after some time and vowed never to board a ship again.

The French trains are fast and comfortable although a bit expensive, but then everything in Europe is expensive compared to India. I did not mind. The night train zipped past Dizon and other cities and arrived in Paris the next day. I had been to Paris a few times before and knew the city reasonably well. The Metro was old but reliable and had a route map near the entrance that lit up when you pressed the button of your destination and showed where to change the train. It was very ingenious.

The travel agent at the Place de la Denfert Rochereau told me that I could fly to Delhi and back for half the regular fare. The catch was that you could not choose the date and time or the airline. I did not mind. I had also to be a member of a flying club for at least six months, but the kids who ran the outfit were very street smart. They produced a certificate for me back dated six months and voila I was a standing member of a dubious club. It was hilarious. Soon they called me and said that I was to report to the Le Bourget airport in the evening for a flight to Delhi.

I was happy and finally going home, but at the airport there was a surprise. The flight had been cancelled and would leave the next day. I did not know if it was a con job, so I went again the next day and found a gleaming Iraqi jet getting ready to take off. I was to pass through Baghdad, but that did not matter. In the air, I asked for the real reason for the cancellation of the flight the previous day and was told that the Israelis were bombing over Syria, so the pilot did not like to take any chances.

The Baghdad airport lounge was full of black burka clad women, reminding you that you were passing through an Islamic country. I lived in Algeria, but there the women wore white shiny silky veils that looked quite nice. Here it was all black and like a tent with two peepholes. Anyway, I got back to the plane in a hurry and the rest of the journey was not very remarkable.

When I flew back to Paris, I went to the shipping company office and said that it was a shame they operated the rust buckets like the one I took the last time, and there was no way I was going back to Algeria in that slave ship. They said that I was in luck and could take the most modern ship called El Djezair back to Algiers. The ship was to leave the next day, so I rushed to the Gare de Lyon with only a few minutes to spare and got on a train to Marseille in the nick of time. But the train was a sleeper train where a reservation was required.

Soon a young chap showed up and said that I had got on the wrong train. Well, wrong or not, I was not about to get off. The Istanbul train ride had taught me a few lessons, so I said that he should look for a sleeping berth for me. In France, it helps a lot if you speak French.

Sure enough, he came back a bit later and said that a berth for the monsieur had been found and would cost me an extra 18 francs. No problem.

The French girl in the lower berth and I talked for long hours until sleep came. She started shaking me early in the morning and saying Monsieur Monsieur Get up please. Your station is coming soon.

The taximen in Marseille are not as nice as the ones you find in Paris because they are mostly Corsicans and look like they are on parole, and probably are. Their meter never works when they spot a foreigner and charge whatever takes their fancy. You could not ask the policemen to intervene, so I paid the fare and got to the port. Marseille is a tough town. You have to look like a Corsican to live there, or an Arab. They don't mess with the Arabs because many carry knives.

This time I was not disappointed. The ship was huge and gleaming white. They gave me a nice bed with clean sheets and blankets, so I was very happy. The ocean crossing this time was quite uneventful, so to speak. I was not really ready for any "events".

I had worked in the Mascara region very hard during the winter and gained the confidence of the deputy director, but my real interest was rice, so I moved to a village called Oued Rhiou 100 km east of Mostaganem where I found a storage room for fertilizer on a farm as my temporary shelter. But the farm manager called Mohamed said that it was not right for an engineur to live in a storage depot and insisted that I move in with him.

It was very kind of him and he really was a very nice person. It was also very rare for a foreigner to be invited to live with a family, but he called me his brother and welcomed me. His young wife was very pleased when I took some photos of her with the baby with my zoom lens and gave her some copies. The photos were very good thanks to my good camera. The work on rice progressed well and I spent a very productive time there

The pre germinated rice seeds planted with a seed drill came up nicely and a mechanical weeder could be used in between rows instead of herbicide. The work on soybean, forage grass and corn also progressed well. The French professors of the Institut Technologique Agricole or ITA of Mostaganem came out one day to photograph the plants in my research plots to use as teaching materials. I felt professionally satisfied, but an Angolan fellow in Tlemcen was not. He had a lot of trouble with his counterparts, so one day I decided to see him. My big bike could take me anywhere in Algeria.

The gendarmes often stopped me on the road because it was very rare for them to see an Algerian in a djellaba riding a big red and black motorbike, so they stopped me to check my papers. Imagine their surprise when the djellaba clad rider turned out to be a Hindou speaking French. They would laugh and send me on my way, and would often salute me zipping past.

Tlemcen is near the Moroccan border and a small town where my Angolan friend was having such a hard time. So I gave him a few ideas that he took seriously and stayed on to complete his tour of duty.

The work I enjoyed most was working with private farmers. In Algeria, the private farmers were doomed. The state acquired the best land everywhere, leaving the fellahins the unwanted poor land where they planted wheat, barley or other crops. But my heart went out to them because they so appreciated any help I could give them in their agriculture.

The government mostly ignored them, but I started working with a Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) expert who was working with the private farmers in Mascara and helping with the fertilizer trials. I often worked very late in the field with the farmers who, realizing that I had not eaten the whole day, brought bread and olives or invited me to share their couscous. Often they would put some eggs in the hood of my camel hair djellaba that I always wore.

I loved these simple folks. They were proud people who did not accept favors easily. They lived in mud houses and wore tattered clothes and plastic shoes full of patches, but they were the nicest people I ever met.

The land reform program of the government was heavily against these poor people because their policy was to continue to expand the state owned farms due to their socialist policies. Many such displaced farmers ended up working as laborers in the state owned farms, but there was a fierce opposition building up that resulted in one attempt at bombing the ministry in Algiers. The bomb did not cause much damage and its coverage by the state controlled TV and radio was minimal, but people knew through the grapevine. While on the subject, let me write about the state of Algerian agriculture at that time.

The state owned farms were huge, meaning one farm could be a few thousand hectares. Many millions of hectares of vineyards were being uprooted to plant wheat because Algerians did not drink wine, so there was no market for it. Most of the wine was exported to France where they mixed the stronger Algerian wine to blend theirs and I often saw the Russian ships in Mostaganem that loaded up wine and oranges. In exchange, they gave tractors or other farm machinery, so the barter worked well.

But the Algerians discarded expensive farm machinery that broke down for the want of a simple part. Often they ordered the wrong tire size for their tractors or the wrong parts. So the result was that their machines were in sorry shape, often held together with bailing wires or ropes. One could see huge piles of discarded farm equipment in massive junkyards outside the towns.

Clearly this was a tremendous waste of resources, but no one cared. Earlier, I had written about how the ministry tied up thousands of people collecting useless data on how many hectares of wheat was planted each week.

The grains harvested were often stored in conditions where they spoiled or rats infested the warehouses. In this country of a small population and so much agricultural land, they wasted tremendous resources. The agricultural offices employed thousands of technicians who rarely went out to solve problems because they were ill trained to do so. The few Russian made Fiats cars the office provided were inadequate and often had problems of overheating.

But there was also tremendous progress towards public housing, rural electrification and roads. I was told that they were building a schoolroom every five minutes nationwide. One could see this progress everywhere. The roads were excellent and the bus and train service very good.

People wore plastic or rubber boots, but everyone had shoes of some sort. Fruits and vegetables were plentiful in the market and prices were low. Obviously, some government departments were doing a good job, but the agriculture ministry was not one of them.

The ITA in Mostaganem trained the future agronomists, but my French friends teaching there complained that the students were not very much into learning and some were very cocky and boastful because their jobs were assured. The personnel officer at the Ministry in Algiers had made it very clear that soon they will get their own people to run the agriculture and will not need the foreigners anymore.

The small town of Mostaganem was, I suppose like any other, where everything shut down after 6 pm and where the favorite pastime for men was to go to small cafés and drink very sweet mint tea. The overwhelming body odor and stinky cigarette smoke was enough to deter anyone from entering those cafés. It certainly deterred me. Besides, I did not like sweet mint tea.

But there was very little else to do, unless one counted the endless Brigitte Bardot or Louis de Funès movies or the awful Italian cowboy movies. This changed when there was an Indian movie. Then the crowd fought with the police to get in, such was their ardor for the Indian movies. I stayed home. Our pickup van passed each morning by the posters, and one could hear all the oohs and aahs whenever Brigitte Bardot or BB movies were shown. I found BB boring, but the Algerians did not agree. She was the sex symbol.

I also observed a curious phenomenon. Sometimes there would be these people going around a particular block in town, wailing at the top of their voices. I was told that they were the professional wailers that one could hire if wailers were in short supply. These people worked extra hard to prove their worth. I pitied the people who lived in that block.

Many Algerians went to a sauna once a week, so every town worth its name had a sauna or two. Curious as I was, once I ventured into one and found a steam room full of people, some of

whom were getting a massage and others simply sitting around. Now a sauna in Asia is usually associated with massage girls who often did more than massage, but here in Algeria it was not so. Here people went to the sauna to get a good cleaning. So I roasted myself in one corner in the steam room and came out, but a masseur wrapped me in huge towels head to foot and asked me to lie down.

One could get very sick indeed coming out in the open without first bringing down the body temperature, so the Algerian knew what he was doing. The sauna was always reserved for women, always on Fridays.

The French cooperants in Mostaganem were a delightful lot, and many became my good friends. Yves used to pick me up at my office often. He lived on a hill and the winding stairs brought you down to the most exquisite small beach one can imagine where I could swim in the azure blue ocean.

There were many such beaches, but never very crowded. The Algerian lifeguards patrolled in motorboats and stopped anyone going out too far.

We often caught baby octopi that squirted ink when scared and spear fishing was also fun, but simply lazing in the sun on the white sand with warm water lapping at you was like being in paradise. Yves and his friends also made meshui which is slowly roasting a lamb on charcoal fire. I did not mind the smoke and the hard work to turn the lamb and sprinkle salt water on it because it was so much fun. Later we would dance to some cassette music and drink the red Algerian wine until the wee hours on the terrace overlooking the blue and later dark Mediterranean. French women were never too far whenever there were French men to liven up the party.

Yves was fond of me and I genuinely liked him. We kept up correspondence for over thirty years. He lives now in Limoges with his wife and kids. He once invited me to go with him to Constantine and at another time to look for prehistoric sites in Fronda. He loved adventure and once went in his 2 CV to a very remote part of the Sahara and got stuck. I was not so daring, I took a bus to Ghardaiia which is a desert town. I will tell you the Ghardaiia story a bit later.

In El Asnam lived a Québécois called Louis, who was very fond of riding my motorbike. Once we went to Oran where we ran into some Algerian girls. They invited us to a couscous party, but we did not go. I do not know why. We really did not want to have anything to do with Algerian girls because they did not invite you to their homes and those who did were not the right people. Oultache would prove to be different, so perhaps she was an exception. Correction. Oultache was an exception.

She kept writing to me, and our night watchman would always smell the envelope before handing it to me with a wink. She said that she was now studying in Algiers and would like to see me again. Once I sent her a telegram saying that I will meet her in front of the Grande Poste

in Algiers so she came and was about to leave when she looked at me again. I was in my djellaba with a hood over my head, so I looked like any Algerian. Then her eyes lit up with recognition.

She had grown taller and more alluring than I remembered and had in tow the same small girl I had met in Tizi Ouzou except that she was not so small now. Oultache did not wear a veil and looked like any French girl out on a date. She again invited me to meet her parents, who were very educated people, but I never found the time or the opportunity to do so. Oultache was a very sweet girl, but I regretted that we lived so far from each other. How often could I go to Algiers? Her last letter to me was in India, when she wrote that she may go to France. I have very fond memories of Oultache.

I often visited Louis in El Asnam and got to know many French Canadians and French cooperants there. A French girl I will call Christine was one of them. She always managed to sit near me or look at me when she thought no one was looking. Louis said she did nothing else one evening and perhaps wanted to be my friend. It was a strange way to develop friendship. All she had to do was to ask my name and shake hands, which she later did.

I once told her that I found it to be boring to repeat my life story to every Tom, Dick or Jane and should perhaps carry a tape recorder and just play the tape. We never became good friends.

However, closer to home, I had many friends among the French residents of Mostaganem. Near my apartment lived Pierre and Monique, who always looked for me if I did not see them for a few days. Once, Monique came over to find me with a fever and nursed me back to health. No one else would have cared. Certainly not the Algerian neighbors. Living alone has its disadvantages.

Another couple who lived nearby were also very good to me and always invited me to their place. We would sit with some scotch and listen to Jean Ferrat or discuss the problems of the whole world, including that of Algeria of course. Christian worked in our office and was always ready to help anyway he could, like the time a friend broke down outside the town and had to be towed to a garage. The Bulgarian chap in our office refused, but Christian came right away and brought my friend and his car to town.I never could understand the East Europeans. They were shameless and would ask me for dollars, but never helped in any way.

Near Oran lived an American fellow called John in a magnificent villa named Clos Veronique. He was a funny fellow who would often wrap his arm around a gendarme and talk him out of giving him a ticket. John liked to invite young people to his villa for elaborate parties, complete with square dance and good food. His English wife told us while we were sipping tea at breakfast one day that John was quite a prankster during his bachelor days in England, where he once made a cardboard fin, stuck it into the river and took a photo saying that he had spotted a dinosaur.

This hoax spread far and wide in England until it reached the Royal Society of this or that, so some experts started to take the fin rather seriously and set up a vigil in case the dinosaur decided to show up again. The monster didn't, but its giant footprints were seen on the riverbanks, confirming John's story, until some reporters got a bit suspicious and followed the trace to John's dormitory where they found the cardboard and plastic contraption.

The funny part was that even after the hoax was revealed, some village folks were seeing the monster or hearing it breathing down their necks for weeks.

John, Yves and I had one thing in common. We often talked about the mess in Algeria where, often in the name of development, huge sums of money were squandered by the ministry of agriculture. The harvests were poor in spite of massive mechanization, fertilizer and many new wheat varieties, Dr. Norman Borlaug had brought from Mexico because the soil was poorly prepared by ill trained tractor operators, seeds planted at the wrong depth or the fertilizer applied at the wrong time.

I had earlier written about the colossal waste of manpower in collecting useless data, but there were many such examples. The system did not permit any meaningful change, and initiatives were ignored. The agricultural director of the province had the most boring and thankless job of holding office when the state of agriculture was in such dire shape, and he was unable to move people to do something about it. They were sticklers for the forms and one could not go anywhere without the "ordre de mission" that had to be signed, stamped and entered in a log book.

I also found out that the Ministry was substantially underpaying me, although I had a Master's degree, so I started writing to them and demanded a remedy. After almost 18 months, they agreed and said that all my back pay will be paid to me.This was only partially true because Tizi Ouzou ignored this directive. Still, partial justice was better than no justice, so I waited.

Wonderful visit to Italy

My vacation was not going to France in that slave ship I had written earlier about but to Italy. I was taking some time off and traveling light, which meant just my backpack and a camera. At the airport, the officers smiled and said that I was indeed a light traveler, but I did not want to carry heavy luggage to spoil the vacation.

In Rome, I found my way to the international youth hostel near the Tiber river, but the hostel was overflowing. Summer was the time for travel in Europe, so thousands of young people hitchhiked or traveled by train across Europe, and many stayed at the youth hostels. But at the hostel they could not keep a close watch, so I sneaked in, took a bath and ate in the cafeteria and went out to spread my sleeping bag on the hill near the hostel. Only the shower part was illegal, but I did not feel too bad about it.

It so happened that I was not the only one who did not find a place in the hostel that night. There were four girls I do not remember from where in the same predicament, so they too spread their sleeping bags near me, hoping that I will be their protector from bad Italians. The poor girls sat up very late when I went off for a walk and said I should not leave them there, but I was really not their chaperon. They could take care of themselves.

But Rome is full of crazy people. All you have to do is to go to Piazza España where you could see the amalgam of derelicts, some on drugs, some peddling contrabands and others busy kissing Rodin style, totally oblivious to others. No one really cared a great deal. The Carabiniere or the local police chased them off, but they were like sparrows that could not be kept away from the wheat field. Usually they posted a look-out for the police and whistled if trouble was on its way. You never saw people pack their wares so fast and disappear. A few wares that fell off were collected minutes later because there was a camaraderie among these people that the police could not break.

Then there were the ubiquitous Japanese with their cameras, giggling and snapping photos of overflowing gutters or the Casanovas. They always traveled in groups with flags and a guide who often read from the travel book aloud while the group gawked and photographed furiously. Be a Roman in Rome, but that meant crossing the streets anywhere en masse while the Italian drivers in their miniscule Fiats honked and screeched their tires shouting insults to the crazy foreigners, but the Japanese just smiled.

I went around holding my camera tightly because there were many thieves in Rome. You had to be particularly wary of the gypsy women near Termini, who would often bare their breasts to distract you while their urchins picked your pockets. They had many such tricks up their sleeves. One was the ketchup trick, when a woman would "accidentally" spill some ketchup on you and try to clean it up while the kids worked your pockets.

One day I found the strap of my camera cut with a sharp razor blade, but not all the way through. I was lucky. They did that sort of thing in the buses, caught the camera and got off while you looked and could do nothing.

The youth hostel was cheap and clean. I was given a membership card for five dollars, which allowed me to stay at any youth hostel in Italy. There were many nationalities, but it became a joke that the Dutch girls were always from Utrecht and every German was called Heidi or Wolfgang. Two of them noticed me and said hello, so I said hello and nothing more.

I had miles of museums to see and catacombs to explore, so I started on my own. The Vatican museum, the Borghese garden and museum, Coliseum, Caracalla baths and Roman forum were all visited.I saw a place full of skulls and bones that were artfully arranged by the monks but grotesque just the same. The catacombs near Via Apia outside Rome were not something to rave about either, but I saw them all. Often, photography was not allowed in some places, but I suspected commercial reasons behind it.

The funny part was the youth hostel itself, where one could sit all day on the wide steps and exchange information with the Heidis or Wolfgangs. Often such exchange paid off, and you learned of a cheap but good restaurant or a place to stay in Florence. Girls sat brushing their hair or scribbled the new information in their little book, and the boys sat around trying to figure out which girl could be the companion for the day. In Italy, it was important to have a female companion on the road, otherwise one never got a free ride.

The trick was to post the girl at a strategic location and hang back. As soon as a car stopped, you showed up. A girl could stop a car a lot faster than a boy, especially if she was dressed for the part. This meant tight skirts and blouses that the girls learned to unbutton a bit.

I used to just sit and watch the show because I did not need a female companion. I had purchased a 3000 km train ticket at a discount and could travel anywhere in Italy. They gave you a booklet and the conductor deducted the kilometers from the 3000 km credit until it ran out. It was a very good system that freed you from buying tickets each time.

Now, at the youth hostel you could always see the Italians with unbuttoned shirts showing their huge gold cross and an unlit cigarette dangling from their lips. They never carried matches and went up to the girls and said "you have fire "? If the girl was smoking, she would hand over her lighter, but it really did not matter whether she had "fire" or not. It was the ruse the Italian Casanovas used to start a conversation.

It often worked like this. These Italians always worked hard with girls. They were not interested in boys. So they used the "you have fire" trick a lot, but there were other tricks as well. They tried to make out with girls by asking them if they were interested in seeing Rome that only they could show.

They had motorbikes and could show all the interesting places. Usually the girls said "No, thank you" but once in a while there was one who went with them. But a firm no did not often dissuade these pests.

If nothing worked and the girl started brushing her hair again, then they would pull out folded plastic sheets full of cheap slides or post cards that they offered at a very special price. Fake Ray Ban watches, small souvenirs etc. were numerous items they could produce at the drop of a hat.

They did not quit easily, but eventually wandered off to try the same game all over again. I enjoyed these shows and said to the Dutch girl that the fellow approaching her will ask for" fire". She said that she had been approached already, but to the Italians these north Europeans maybe looked alike.

My first stop was Sienna, which was an old town full of interest and worth visiting. I came from a country where old meant several thousand years old, but this was Europe where two hundred years was very old. Nevertheless, Sienna did not disappoint me. It was a medieval town built in a haphazard way but had a church with zebra stripes that I had never seen before and a very good museum.

The center of the town had a plaza and a fountain where in ancient times, boys fooled around and got killed in sword fights over girls but now the square was empty save for a few Palestinians who found me a trattoria to stay in. The trattorias in Italy are cheap boarding houses where the mama sans are a bit strict about the hours but otherwise ok.

I stayed in Sienna and looked at the art galleries or just sat around in the open air cafés sipping beer and soaking up the sun. From Sienna, I went up to Verona where a crowd in front of a drab looking house told me that it was the house of Juliet when Romeo found so attractive. There were I suppose the Romeos and Juliets in all ages, except that perhaps the style has changed a bit. Now the Romeos ask for "fire".

I then went up to Bolzano near the Swiss Alps, where most people spoke German and where Dolomites are famous. It is a pretty place full of mountains, vineyards and ruins of what looked like fortifications and towers from ancient times. Then the next stop was Florence or Firenze. The youth hostel in Florence is very nice, sitting in the middle of acres of garden outside the town and had electric doors like in banks. The two Dutch girls I had met in Rome were here as well and said hello again.

Together we saw a lot of museums, Boticelli's Venus and Michael Angelo's sculptures like David that stood naked in one of the plazas. The girls giggled at his nakedness, but the birds were indifferent and pooped all over his head and shoulders that no one bothered to clean.

Tired from looking at endless art galleries, we often sat in parks watching the tourist buses pull in with loads of old people. Judging from their Kodak instamatic and dangling chains, they were probably Americans, but there were many nationalities.This was the tourists' season, after all.

The Dutch girl was from Utrecht and told me that she was going to Switzerland to be a nurse. In India girls from good families did not become nurses as Indians looked down upon this profession, but in Europe it was just like any other profession. She was surprised, but then the Indians had many hang-ups ingrained in their culture that she did not know about.

Florence is also known for its gold jewelry, leather goods and many other things to lighten the wallet, but the rule is to always bargain. Drop the price by half and just walk away. They will soon catch up with you.

In Venice, I met the same Dutch girls and asked if they were following me all over Italy. They just laughed and said that in fact they were leaving that day and forgot to pick up a bag full of clothes at the hostel. Could I please please pick them up and leave a note? The receptionist asked me what was in the bag and handed it to me with a knowing smile. It was some bikinis and bras that the Dutch girls had left behind and could not go to the beach without. They were not that liberated.

Venice in summer overflows with tourists. They ride in gondolas, sip beer in the open air cafés, and swarm through the souvenir shops that sell cheap glass works and other tourist paraphernalia. The Piazza San Marcos is where they all gather and revel at the filthy canals and Italians singing bawdy songs pushing their gondolas. The cafés hire American girls to sing to attract American tourists. The vagabonds abound as well who spread their open guitar cases to get a few coins and the artists sit by the canals to draw charcoal pictures for a fee.

But on the whole Venice is quite nice where there is no traffic and one can walk around the narrow alleys or just sit and sip beer in numerous cafés. Just don't mind the smell of sewage that the Italians dump into the canals. It is part of the charm of Venice.

My next stop was Naples, where the youth hostel was near the famous bay, and you could see the hydrofoils plying to Capri all day long. The Vesuvius in the distance reminded you that it was an active volcano that had buried the town of Pompeii nearby, so one day a whole bunch of us trooped to Pompeii. Luckily, Pompeii was closed that day, so a look-out was planted while we helped each other up the wall to jump inside. We had the whole town to ourselves, which was great fun.

The plaster cast of bodies found under the ashes and a chained dog that tried in vain to get away were a few of the ghastly exhibits we saw, but the mosaic works in some of the houses were interesting. The Herculaneum next door had a huge amphitheater.

Near Naples is Paestum, full of ruins, so this time I had to have a companion to find a free ride. An Irish girl obliged, and together we explored the endless broken pillars of buildings without a roof. Now that I had seen enough ruins to last a lifetime, I headed off towards Sicily.

At the Reggio the ship takes the entire train to the port of Messina where the train slides back on track effortlessly. But my destination was Mt. Etna, so I went first to Catania, from where a bus took me to Etna. It is the most active volcano in Europe and erupts from time to time, devastating the villages, but the Italians did not care. They put up hamburger stands right up the slope.

The cable car takes you way up the moonscape, but not quite up to the crater. Only hardy folks go up there with great risks. I was never hardy, so I decided to come down. This was now easier said than done because all the Italians had the same idea and shoved and pushed to get into the few cable cars, leaving me stranded. I saw with dismay the last bus leaving the parking lot but could not fight the Italians.

Finally, I came down and saw the same German couple and their small child I had met in the cable car going in their VW Beetle. They gave me a ride and tried hard to get me a hotel room in Catania.This was not possible, being the tourist season, so I ended up staying at a campground. They sat with me until the wee hours of the morning just talking. Can you believe this? They also kept writing to me for twenty years or more from Hamburg, where they lived. Such are the nice people I got to meet everywhere.

In Messina, I got to a campground that was meant only for the Italians, but I did not know that. I found the camp full of children who surrounded me and started asking all sorts of questions. I could only say "non parlare Italiano" in response, but in the end I started playing with them to their great delight. I taught them a few new games that they learned quickly and from then on would not leave me alone. They had never been given so much attention by a foreigner, so they showed great love. Some would stuff cheese into my mouth, and others brought melons and other things to feed me.

Their mothers were also amused. One of them took my shirt off and very patiently fixed the broken buttons while I took a nap under a tree. I had never known such hospitality except in Japan that I wrote about earlier. One rarely got to see this side of the Italians, but I guess I was lucky.

The kids were in tears when I got up to leave. They begged me to stay, but I had to go on. They kissed my cheek one by one. It was sad to leave. I wish the Algerian children were so lovable. I had promised to write about them, so here it is.

The Algerian children up to a certain age had a very tough time growing up because they were unloved. Their mothers would boot them out of the house to have some peace and time for their washing or cooking routine, so these unloved kids went out looking for trouble. They broke car antennas, scratched paint, tried to slash tires and made all kinds of mischief to occupy their time. But what bothered me most was their favorite pastime of torturing tethered animals.

No one told them that it was wrong to torture animals or do other bad things, so they grew up wild. Near my apartment lived many such children who looked like angels but were real devils. I found this out the hard way because at first I thought they were lovely children I could play with.

But soon I was overwhelmed because more and more kids started to appear from nowhere, and they all wanted me to play with them. When I could not do this, they turned against me and became angry.

It was the first time in their life someone had shown some interest in them, so they were not about to let it go because they craved attention. They poured sand on my motorbike engine and scratched the paint in frustration. But the Italians loved their children and showered them with attention, so they were so sweet.

My vacation was ending, but not before making a last stop at a place called Sapri. This was a beach camp where some Italian students came over and asked me to join their group. They said they were from Milano. They passed the hat to collect some liras for a party that evening. We bought spaghetti and wine and needed to make a campfire, so some fence posts went missing. We sat around the fire, strumming guitar and singing, while one fellow showed me a few yoga postures. He had the same high forehead as Kamal and wore thick glasses.I kept looking at him.

I stayed there only for a day or two, but it was great fun. One big girl was afraid of the water, so we carried her to the water like a swinging sack of potato and dunked while she squealed. They all wanted me to stay, but I had to return to Mostaganem so they made sad faces and signed my bag with pentel pen one by one.

Soon I was back in Mostaganem and tried to put aside the nostalgic memory. Behind my house lived a few Cubans who worked in the local hospital. They always played baseball, but they did not look friendly and did not speak anything but Spanish, so I watched them from a distance. The Algerians tolerated these Cubans but said that they were not very good doctors because often they forgot spoons and forks in the stomach before sewing the patients up. Perhaps this was an exaggeration and the Algerian way of saying that they were not up to the standard. Besides, I do not know of any doctor who uses spoons and forks during surgery.

But standard or not they were there because of the Cuban Algerian friendship treaty and made a great show to the extent of inviting Fidel Castro to inaugurate a new wing of the hospital. The town was scrubbed clean, and the sidewalks whitewashed for days. Finally, Castro came with the Algerian president in a long motorcade of black Citroën DS. The security people had arrived and blocked off most of the streets, halting all traffic.

I decided to take some photos with my long lens and approached the presidential car. In Algeria, the policemen will obey you if you speak with authority. My friends were watching this charade from behind the fence and wondering if I will be arrested soon. But the policemen did not bother

me. The tough looking Cubans were a different matter. They asked for my pass, so I said I was a reporter from ABC and did not speak French or Spanish. Nothing doing. Anyway, I got some great photos.

In Algeria, the policemen kept a watch on everyone and collected registration cards from all the hotels to know the movement of foreigners. One always needed an "ordre de mission "to go anywhere to work that the gendarmes frequently checked at road blocks. The No Photography signs were posted in many places, even if there was only an ugly wall behind a fence. They frequently interrogated Algerians who mixed with foreigners to know what they talked about, and they scrutinized passports to check if it carried some undesirable visas. They intercepted mail to see who was writing to whom.

This sort of situation made Algerians aloof, although some people like Mohamed in Oued Rhiou were really very good and caring people. Once I was asked in by a couple who saw me getting wet in the rain on my bike and fed me couscous, and some of my office mates invited me to their home in another town during the Eid al-Fitr celebration after the Ramadan.

But Algeria in general was a tough country. The separation of sexes did not permit a free mixing, which reminded me of the Bengali society back home.

This gave rise to a lot of perversion among men. Prostitution was prevalent among women to some extent. The Algerians could not bring women to hotels because the police kept a close watch, so they looked for private apartments. Once a fellow whom I did not know well showed up at my place with a woman. I was shocked at such blatant liberty and forbade him to come again. But they were living in frustration and took advantage of every opportunity they could get.

But the women were no less aggressive. They somehow found your telephone number and called at odd hours to chat. I was lucky I did not have a phone, but Monique used to get calls like that and put down the phone quickly. Their favorite trick was to find out who you were they had called by mistake so you learned never to identify yourself.

The hassle with the Banque Nationale d'Algerie or BNA was a never ending problem every month, but they openly suggested that your problems with them would disappear if only you could... You just fill in the blank. One therefore learned to be wary of them quickly and treaded carefully. I was lucky to get to know Oultache the way I did, but I would have never met her on the street.

I was particularly bothered by their habit of never telling what they were thinking. If they promised to do something on Monday, they did not mean it at all, which was that I learned an Arab trait. I once asked a technician to fix my slide projector, which he promised to do within a week but kept me dangling for over six months. Every week he told me that it will be done next Monday, and I was stupid enough to believe him.

At about this time I decided to go to Ghardaia in the Sahara desert just to see what an oasis town looked like. The long bus ride can be very uncomfortable because they never stop for people to get down to pee.

Ghardaia turned out to be a beehive of a town built on a mound with narrow lanes and overhangs to keep out the relentless sun. At the top of the mound is the mosque. I found the architecture interesting because it was my first time seeing a desert town. Otherwise, it was a dirty, dusty and very dry place where most people kept indoors because of the heat.

There were some groves of date palms to break the monotony and lots of goat and sheep and nothing else. But the French Canadian girl from El Asnam was also visiting Ghardaia, and we were like long-lost friends again. She had in tow a French girl from Paris, who introduced herself as Catherine.

This Catherine was quite a girl who giggled all the time and made a scene at the open air movie that we went to watch. They were the only two females in the crowd, so everyone started looking at them. Besides, Catherine could not keep her mouth shut, so we left and went back to the hotel to do more giggling. Soon the manager arrived and said that he ran a clean establishment and did not wish any hanky-panky by weird foreigners.

All we wanted was to sit around, sip coke and talk, but this was Algeria and a desert town to boot. They also did not like the dark skinned Tuaregs from the deep south and often refused me a hotel room, thinking that I was a Tuareg.

I found it to be difficult to get to know the Algerians, especially the office mates. It was not easy to break the ice, although some of them did invite me to their home one time during the Id festival. But near my apartment there was the family of the janitor. The youngest daughter was fond of me and asked me to visit them. The mother was an ample woman who spoke some French, so I learned from them a little more about the Algerian culture.

The eldest daughter who had a problem with her husband lived with them and wanted me to take her photo, so one day she came out with all the gold jewelry she had to pose. She would not smile, as photography was a serious matter to them. The janitor was a smooth operator. He said that he wanted to buy my things but could not pay much because he was so poor. He got everything for a throwaway price and immediately sold them to a merchant for a high price. He told his sob story to all foreigners this way and made a killing each time.

I often had to go to the Hotel de Ville or the mayor's office to get some permit or some papers. There was another Mohamed who worked there. One day he invited me to his wedding but would not say where he lived. Later on I did get invited to a wedding in Mascara so it is worth writing about it here. The Algerians did not know that I was a part of their motorcade, so they honked their horns to get me off the road. They had never known a djellaba clad Algerian riding a big bike.

They liked to honk their horns a lot, reminding me of the American custom of tying beer cans to the bumper to make a racket. The idea was the same. But the Algerians did not quit there. They brought a band to play inside a small restaurant, where they made so much noise that you could become deaf. Then they went around and around the town, honking horns for quite some time. Even the poor had to have many cars in the motorcade.

Soon I found myself in the company of djellaba clad and turbaned Algerians, who paid scant attention to me until they started asking me questions. I do not speak Arabic so they now realized that there was a foreigner among them and became very curious. It was rare for them to have a Hindou attending a traditional wedding. Some of them pressed me hard to eat some oily food that I kept on refusing but finally accepted. This was a mistake.

Soon I felt my stomach heaving and came out to get some fresh air. Outside, a completely wrapped body was being lowered into a car, so I thought someone must have fallen ill because people were so serious. I was stunned and felt sorry for this disaster to happen on this festive occasion.

But a companion said that no one was ill. It was the custom of the father to carry the bride to the car. She had to be completely veiled, as the tradition demanded. Now it was my turn to feel awkward. I was so ignorant about their culture, although I had now lived in Algeria for quite some time. It was time to leave quietly.

The oily cookies took time to get used to. Once I was traveling by bus from Algiers during the month of Ramadan, when at 5 pm the mullahs announced on the radio that the fast was over. All the passengers then took out their food to eat. Some noticed that I did not have any food so they thought I was a very pious Moslem still bent on fasting so they pressed me to eat. Looking at my djellaba, they could not tell that I was not an Algerian. Again, eating those oily cookies made me very miserable indeed.

Just one week before my departure, the government paid me the back pay of 18 months which was considerable, so I went on a spending spree. The Dinars could not be taken out of the country, but it could be used to pay for the airfare and so on. I used the leftover dinars to buy a stereo and other things. I must say that The Ministry of Agriculture had treated me very well and fairly, and I in return had done my best to serve.

The country was beautiful, with majestic snow-capped mountains, green meadows, and Roman ruins. The beaches were magnificent, and the water was so blue and clear, you could see the bottom. But the country also had so many problems, some of them man-made and others not. I began to think about the man-made problems of wasteful agriculture and the social repression of women. There was also a naked problem of racism. They hated the black-skinned people of the desert and sometimes refused me a hotel room, I being a Tuareg. They also hated children, who were sent out early in the day and allowed in only at mealtimes. I had written about children earlier. I was amazed at their destructiveness and the complete lack of parental supervision.

When I tried to show affection to these children, they turned on me, and my affection quickly faded. They're not good for affection and they became vengeful when I was no longer with them.

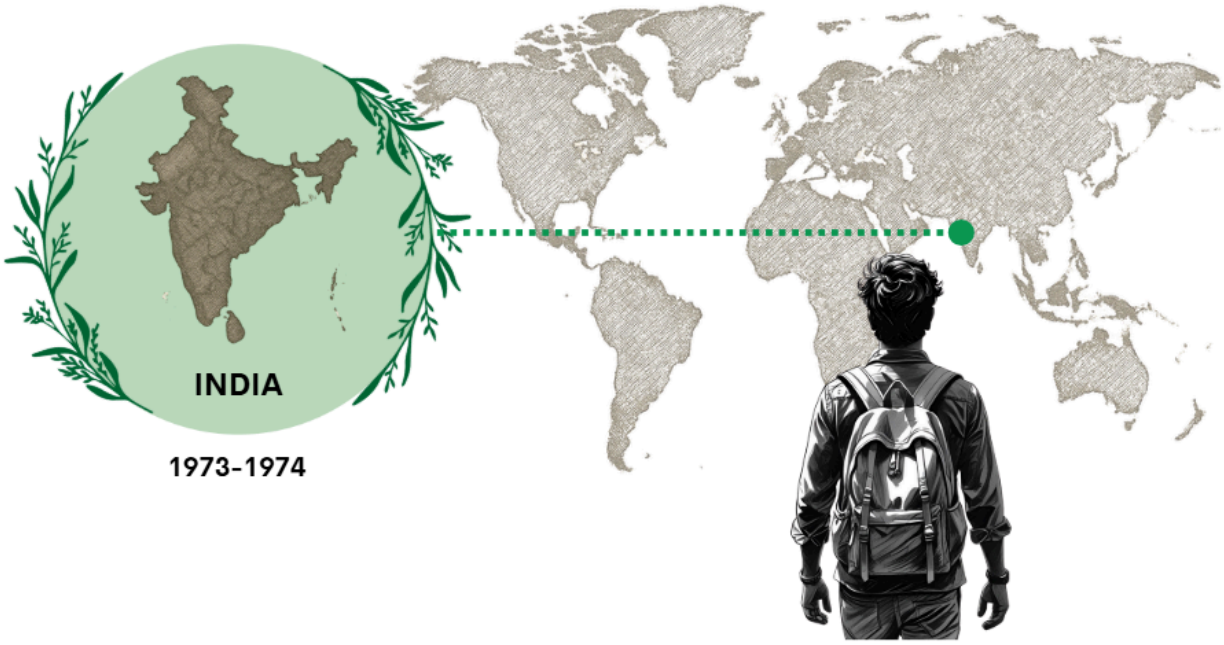
A delightful surprise was waiting for me one day when I received a letter from IRRI in the Philippines in which they renewed their offer of a scholarship they had previously made. So my future looked bright and I decided to leave Algeria. The deputy director who had found me to be a very serious agronomist urged me to stay on, but I said that I had to leave.

I knew I wouldn't return to Algeria, where I spent a lot of time working and knowing so many people, but I'm not sad to leave like I was when I left Vietnam. I was looking forward to landing at Orly. Charles de Gaulle Airport was still under construction at Roissy.

Thus, my stay in Algeria came to an end. I had gained some experience and learned a great deal about this beautiful country and its agriculture. I had also spent nearly 18 months in Mostaganem and can say that my time was well spent. But the time had come for me to move on.

The flight to Paris this time was first class, which was a bit of indulgence on my part, but who was complaining?

Chapter Seven: India, a transition period



Paris:

The flight to Paris was smooth. I was offered champagne and excellent food being in first class, but I was thinking of the country I just left behind, perhaps never to return to again. There were many friends there, and I began to reminisce about my two years there.

The country was very beautiful with majestic snow capped mountains, green meadows and Roman ruins. The beaches were so beautiful and the water so blue and clear, you could see the deep bottom.

But the country also had so many problems, some of them man made and others not. I began to think about the man-made issues of wastefulness in agriculture and social repression of women. There was also the issue of racism that was quite naked. They hated the black skinned people of the desert and sometimes refused me a hotel room, thinking I was a Touareg. They also disliked children who were shooed out early in the day and were allowed in only at meal times.

I had written about the children earlier. I was amazed at their destructiveness and total lack of supervision from their parents. When I tried to show affection to these children, they overran me and my affection very quickly. They were not used to affection and became vengeful when I would not play with them any longer.

I knew I was never going to go back to Algeria where I spent so much time working and knowing so many people, but I was not sad to leave as I was when leaving Vietnam. I looked forward to landing at Orly. The Charles de Gaulle airport was still under construction at Roissy.

At Orly, the first thing to do was to ship my stereo equipment to Delhi, so I grabbed a push cart and took the big box to the cargo section of the Swiss Air. Having completed the formalities, I took the metro to the place where Catherine lived.

Catherine and I had gotten along splendidly since we met in Ghardaia so it was a joyous reunion of sorts. She was very happy to receive the Beni Yenni silver jewelry I bought for her. Beni Yenni is a village in the Djurdjura mountains near Tizi Ouzou where they make very unique and nice silver jewelry studded with coral or lapis lazuli.

She took it upon herself to show me Paris the way only she could, like taking me to Les Halles where Sorbonne students hung around or to the FNAC record shop where I picked up a Jean Ferrat LP. We met many of her friends at the Halles in the smoke filled place where they all smoked the stinky Gauloises or Gitanes. I do not know why the French can not produce good quality cigarettes.

The French also liked to kiss each other's cheek a lot. Once I saw a girl who was obviously going away somewhere and her 20 or so friends stood in line to see her off. Kissing each one three times took a while. I watched from a distance, quite fascinated at this aspect of French culture.

However, the Sorbonne students were a bit more liberated and often just shook hands and offered their foul smelling cigarettes. I had to sometimes buy Gitanes or Gauloise for Catherine. She one day brought me to her mother, who lived alone with a cat as company in a Paris suburb. She was happy to finally meet a Hindou and learned that Indira was not the daughter of Gandhi. I had to explain to many that to call Indians Hindou was wrong because not all Indians were Hindous, but the French are stubborn people and can not be corrected.

Catherine was a sweet girl who had traveled overland to India from Europe, which must have been quite an adventure. We had some good time together in Algeria and in Paris, but my time in Paris was very short, so one day I said Au Revoir, but I doubted very much if I would ever see her again. She wrote to me once in India but would soon join the list of lost friends. I do not know what happened to her.

Visiting Sri Ram Pur

I still had over six months before going to the Philippines, so I decided to spend it in Sri Ram Pur. At this time, Nirmal was expecting me to start the construction of the second floor of the house, for which he had gathered materials and gotten the building plan approved.

My plan was to build the upper floor for rent, which would give my mother a lifelong source of income because I could not send her money regularly.

Nirmal was busy with his office work, so it was very convenient that I had some time on my hand to take care of this important work. The construction of a house is a messy job and requires someone to always look for cement and other materials. I was glad to help and gave Nirmal many new ideas which were then incorporated into the plan. It was hard work to look for cement, logs, bricks, iron bars and many other things, but soon the walls started coming up, and the masons started the preparation for the roof. It became a massive undertaking, to the wonder of many onlookers.

During this time I got to know my sister-in-law Sabita a little better. Her baby was small, and she was not too busy with her household chores, so we often talked. She said that she had a rough time adjusting to the family because Bengalis were a fault-finding lot, but now she was doing better.

I gave her a silver necklace from Beni Yenni, but she ignored it and left it here and there like a cheap trinket. Indian women do not appreciate anything that is not gold. I was learning a great deal about the likes and dislikes of Indian women, which had a great deal to do with the way they are brought up and led to believe in certain things. Art for the sake of art had no value for them.

My mother was very helpful at this time and gave me many ideas regarding the construction and spent hours sewing up yards of curtains to be hung in the new rooms. My time in India was well spent, and the house completed in six months' time, although Nirmal would continue improving it for many years to come. A new tenant soon occupied the ground floor.

Visiting Thailand

So I prepared to leave for Thailand, where I would spend a month before arriving in Manila. But soon received a cable from Stephanie who wanted me to go to Bangladesh to see a fellow who was being considered for the post in Algeria that I had just left. There is nothing remarkable about the trip to Dhaka and Comilla, although I did get to see the flat, featureless farmland of rural areas when I went to Comilla riding a motorbike. Also I met the gentleman and later found him unsuitable for the job in Algeria.

Now I was ready for some free time in Thailand. My vacation in Thailand began with Bangkok where I spent many leisurely days looking at various wats, pagodas and Imperial palaces. Often I just sat near the Chao Phraya river and watched the incessant river traffic. One could sit there all day and not feel bored. The Thais used the river as the main highway and brought their farm produce like fruits and vegetables, flowers and a lot more on small boats. One could buy anything from one boat to another, so it was quite lively. Near the river, the huge market sold food and drinks.

I tried unsuccessfully to look for Wiriya, a gentle Thai girl I had met long ago in Bangkok, but the phone numbers had been changed. Soon I got to the Atlantic hotel, which was a favorite of people living on a budget. It was a lot better than the hotels near the railway stations, where the prostitutes sat on the stairs or knocked on your doors and gave no peace of mind.

Here in the Atlantic hotel, the atmosphere was more polished and the residents more international. The joke at the Atlantic hotel was that one could not drown in their swimming pool because it was like the Dead Sea, so full it was of chlorine, but on the whole the hotel was a lively place where you met many young people from all over the world. I also tried to look for my friend Hubert, who I heard was somewhere in Thailand, but I could not find him. Bangkok was also the right place to apply for a visa to enter the Philippines, so one day I found the consulate to complete the formalities.

The Philippines consulate people were friendly and said that the IRRI scholarship letter was enough to grant me a resident visa, but they needed a complete medical check up and suggested the Camillean hospital nearby. The Camillean hospital nurses were very efficient and gave me a thorough check-up right away and the results the very next day.

Having obtained the visa, I was now free to go to Chiang Mai. It is a long overnight bus ride, but the buses in Thailand were good and comfortable. Chiang Mai is well known as the center for art and handicraft, specially silk weaving and carved furniture making. I also saw an artist make beautiful paintings with colored sand. He first brushed some glue on paper and then sprinkled colored sand on it to develop a painting. It was very unique, and I had never seen anything like it.

Chiang Mai was also known for its jade trade. The most valuable jade came over on a mule train from Burma and sold to Hong Kong traders here. There are some of the most notable wats of Thailand here as well. There was a great deal of silverware here in Chiang Mai. They sold embossed silver lighters and many such things by the roadside.

The YMCA was located in a quiet neighborhood where you could stay for only a dollar a day and the Thai food was delicious and cheap. In the restaurants, I overheard some people talking about a trekking trip up north, so I signed up. I wanted to see how the mountain people lived in the north. The Thai guide knew the hills and trekking routes very well so soon we made a group of 12 or 13 people mostly Americans and Australians and one Indian.

After taking a long bus ride and then a long motorboat ride on a mountain river, we arrived at a point, from where we started uphill trekking for many hours to reach an isolated tribal village. Here the women were bare breasted and men smoked foul smelling tobacco in their homemade pipes. Some smoked opium as well, judging from the smell. Women wore interesting jewelry made mostly of silver coins. Men worked on primitive looms to make very colorful strips of clothes.

We spent the night in their bamboo hut and ate some gruel they prepared for us. The wood fire burning in the middle of their long house filled the room with acrid smoke that stung the eyes but also kept the mosquitoes away. I took some slides that turned out very nicely, but life for these people in these remote hills was harsh to say the least. They were very far from medical

facilities or schools or any road here. People, although colorful, looked undernourished and lived a hard life.

Men and women in our group, mostly Americans and Australians, stripped naked to bathe in the mountain streams in plain view of the natives who were more modest, but the foreigners showed a lack of sensitivity to locals and their culture. They splashed in the murky waters, oblivious to their stares.

Then we trekked some more up the hills to the northern part of Thailand that was the abode of drug traffickers. This was the part of the golden triangle where most of the poppy was grown and opium made out of. It was also a dangerous territory where gun toting soldiers were seen lounging under the trees. I had no idea why the guide brought us there, but I was glad to move on. Often we had to get off the boat and push it through shoals or take a shortcut through the jungle to catch up with the boat downstream.

In one of the stops by the riverside, one Australian disappeared into the village. We found him soon enough in an opium den, where he was lying senseless. There were opium dens in all these villages, where scores of people smoked the drug and slept on the dirt, oblivious to their misery.

It was very shocking to see such degradation of human beings. We had to drag the Aussie back to the boat somehow. The effect of opium on the locals was devastating. Their hollow cheeks and emaciated bodies told volumes about the misery the drug was causing, but opium was cheap here and the future bleak. It was a powerful combination.

I knew of the drug problem in Vietnam, where thousands of American soldiers took the drug. Hashish, marijuana, opium, one could find them all in Vietnam where the supply was brought in from neighboring countries and even sent to the United States. The Orient Express was not a train, but a supply chain that brought drugs to the United States during the war.

In Thailand, these people were destroying themselves and no one seemed to care. I am sure some Thai Farmers made some money by growing poppies that produced opium, but they also ran the risk of getting arrested or hurt. The opium lords were the ones making money by exporting it to other countries. The drug problem was very serious here, to say the least.

We returned after a long journey to Chiang Rai and to Fang. I had never trekked in my life, but I learned a lot about the mountain people during this arduous journey, but the sore muscles and mosquito bites were the price to pay. I was happy to return to Chiang Mai.

I went to see the silk factories outside the town where young women were dyeing the silk in bright colours and some were weaving the silk in simple looms. The factory was small, where mostly women worked. It was interesting to watch them wind silk threads onto spools and do other chores. The quality was not as good as that of Indian silk, but it was just the same and the

colours were really very nice. I bought some silk shirts, although I do not wear costly shirts as a rule.

The wood carvers I saw on the roadside shops were very young girls who were deftly carving flowers and leaves on hardwood. Some were making paper umbrellas, while others were painting flowers and other designs on them.

I remember going up the hill to see a famous wat in Chiang Mai, but the name escapes me. There are many such wats in the area. But the most ornate ones are in Bangkok. The reclining emerald Buddha of Bangkok is really astonishing. Most Thais are Buddhist, and many wear jade miniature Buddhas around their neck. They paste gold leafs on sacred shrines, and Thai children are often seen in the saffron robe of monks. By nature, Thais are very gentle and sweet. I remember how a very sweet Thai girl in Bangkok once showed me the sites voluntarily.

But the Ashok pillar and the four lions that are the symbol of modern India could also be seen in Chiang Mai, reminding you that Thais were Hindus long before they became Buddhist. In fact, their capital was called Ayutthaya and their King Ram after the Hindu God Ram and his capital of Ayodhya in India. Now Ayuthaya is in ruins but a major tourist attraction.

Emperor Ashok, as the history tells you, was remorseful after the battle of Kalinga where he won but saw the Kalinga people annihilated. He then vowed to renounce violence forever and spread the words of Buddha around the world. His daughter princess Sanghamitra was then sent to many countries to bring the words of peace and love that are the basic tenets of Buddha's teachings. Thus, Buddhism spread to Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia and many other countries.

I had seen in Vietnam what a human hand could destroy, but here in Thailand I could see what they could create. Thai architecture is unique, their temples ornate, their handicraft superb and their country is blessed with natural beauty. Of course, the Vietnamese could also be very creative given half the chance, but no one gave them the chance yet.

I remember the Cao Dai temple in Tay Ninh that was so ornate and beautiful, where the silent monks showed you around the premises. Later that beautiful temple was damaged in the war. It is hard to understand why anyone would destroy a peaceful and beautiful place of worship, but such things happened.

The Australian girl from New South Wales whom I had met in Chiang Mai was also staying in the Atlantic Hotel in Bangkok, which was a nice surprise. I think it was she who was surprised when I treated her to dinner and a movie called "The Sting" on her birthday. But nice people came into my life and disappeared without a trace all the time.

Hong Kong

My next stop was Hong Kong before reaching Manila. I will just briefly mention that Hong Kong is always fun and a good place to visit. I went to see my old friend Kam Fat in Sheung Shui who drove a taxi there and had once invited me to his place for a superb Chinese dinner. I took the boat to Macau, but the officials there did not allow me to disembark, so I returned to Hong Kong in the same boat full of Chinese people playing Mahjong. I still do not understand why they have to bang the table with mahjong so hard. Nevertheless, it is a popular game among the Chinese.

The Chinese were noisy people no matter what they did. Sometimes it would appear as if they were fighting, but then they would smile through their gold teeth to completely throw you off. They also appeared to sit in their underclothes, or perhaps their clothes looked like underclothes to me because I was so ignorant of their culture.

But among them, one could find the most generous and friendly person one could meet anywhere. A simple taxi driver would befriend me and invite me to his home for dinner is an example.This world is full of surprises. I had accidentally met many such delightful people in my life and cherished their friendship. Most people visiting Hong Kong would never get to meet the common and good people there because they think there is nothing there but shopping, but I was always more interested in people and not shops.

I always welcomed an opportunity to get to know the people and how they lived. This gave me the feel for the country as nothing else could because no one could educate you more than the Kam Fats in any country.

There were many Indians in Hong Kong, but I was not interested in meeting them. I stayed away from them because I had a few bad experiences with the expat Indians. I remember once I was approached by an Indian at the Manila airport who wanted a favor. He said that it was very important that I bring a package to Hong Kong. I did not know what was in the package, but I took it innocently. A stern looking Sikh came and picked it up without even saying thank you, which seemed odd.

When I mentioned this to some American friends, they were surprised and said I was very naive indeed to accept a package from a stranger. Had there been drugs or other contraband inside that package, I would have been thrown in jail for life, unable to prove my innocence. I was very scared and did not understand why anyone would try to harm me this way.

Of course, it was always easier to harm an unknown person than a friend, but it took me some time to realize that there were many bad people in this world and some of the worst characters came from your own country who took advantage of your trust in them.

Nirmal was also a victim of such people once when his quick thinking wife saved him from disaster. A fellow came to the house claiming that he was my friend in Nigeria and wanted Nirmal to keep a package for the time being. His wife Sabita got suspicious when she heard the word Nigeria because she knew that I had never been to Nigeria and said Nirmal should not accept the package. Soon afterward, some plainclothes policemen appeared and asked if Nirmal knew this fellow.

They said that this fellow was a known drug trafficker, and they were tailing him from Bombay to catch him red-handed. It was a close call. So I learned my lessons and vowed not to trust foreigners implicitly, and specially Indians. Many Indians tried illegal means to get a toe hold in a foreign country and were not afraid to do so. If they were caught and deported, then they tried again somewhere else. It is the same as the Mexicans trying hard to enter the United States.

Such Indians were many and often dealt in loan sharking, black marketing and such to establish themselves. The locals disliked them and thought all Indians were like them, which is unfortunate because such people tended to discredit their countrymen by their behavior.

No matter where you went, people told you that they had heard of great poverty and misery in India. Why else would they come in such numbers and look for opportunities elsewhere? They heard that millions of cows roamed the streets and poor people slept on the sidewalks in India. Part of it is true, but India was not a starving country at all and was self-sufficient in food production. It even exported food to other countries.

It was a giant in industrial production and emerging as a leader in technology in many fields with tremendous growth in the GDP but the image of India in the minds of common and ignorant people was negative thanks to western news media that harped on the negative and rarely on the positive side of any country. India was no exception, but this would change later. At an

annual growth rate of nearly 10%, the Indian economy was the fastest in Asia. The middle class counted in hundreds of millions and was growing. But I am writing about 1974 when ignorance about India was widespread and most Indians did not know anything about others.

Most people did not travel and lived within the narrow confines of ordinary lives. Within India, people did not know about how other people lived in other parts. I tried to share my experience with them, but they showed little curiosity about other countries or people. They were not interested. They were only interested in themselves and their photos. A slide show on Japan or Algeria was boring to them, but they showed great joy when their photos appeared.

People in India lived in isolation and cared little about the outside world. This has not changed a bit in the 40 years since I left, although the CNN and BBC comes to every home through cable TV now. My family was no exception. They bragged endlessly about how great India was and her independence from foreign domination. Often the most important question of the day was what to cook.

I felt alienated and kept quiet. My desire to share my experience with photos, slides or other means slowly declined. The topic of weather or food did not take more than a few minutes, so my family remained ignorant. I could often talk to my German friend from Hamburg for hours, but at home silence prevailed.

I slowly began to understand another dimension to it. I felt that people who isolated themselves knowingly or unknowingly felt threatened when they encountered something alien like information, photos, music or anything that they identified as not their own.This defensive attitude was automatic and without reason, so no one could argue with them. The sense of ethnocentrism was very, very strong indeed.

Now the time had come to leave Hong Kong and move on, so on a nice sunny day in July 1974 I arrived in Manila. This visit to the Philippines was going to be like no other I ever made, and very profound changes were about to take place in my life that I was not even aware of.

Chapter Eight: Philippines, a great leap forward

I arrived in the Philippines in July 1974 with about 5 dollars in my pocket and no one to receive me at the airport from IRRI, but that was hardly a problem. I knew where the BLTB bus station in Pasay was, from where I got on a bus to Los Baños. The fare was less than one dollar.

At IRRI, a middle-aged woman told me that she was the dormitory manager. I was to stay on the third floor and share the room with a Nigerian fellow. The cafeteria was closing, so I should hurry. Although I felt tired, I went down to the cafeteria in my red Chiang Mai silk shirt and nice pants.

As soon as I entered the cafeteria, I noticed a Sikh with a bright-colored turban and quite a few other Indians. They looked at me with interest but did not know who I was. All new arrivals at IRRI were announced a week earlier, but they somehow forgot about mentioning me, so no one had a clue.

I paid no attention to their stares and fell in line with a food tray. A tall girl who served as food manager took immediate notice and asked where I was from and when I arrived etc. She was very friendly. The new arrivals were few and not often, so they were interested in knowing how long I was going to stay and what I was going to do. I said that I was at IRRI only for six months

to do some research on rice. The Indians could wait no longer, so the Sikh fellow came over to my table and introduced himself.

He said that he was Suranjeet from Rajasthan who was doing his Ph.D. research in microbiology. The other Indians came over and introduced themselves one by one, so I got to know Subroto and Laksman Lal. I would meet many others later.

Suranjeet was the most talkative one of the lot who wanted to know all about me at once, so I told them what I could as briefly as possible and attended to my food. But they were not to leave me alone. They noticed that I behaved as if I was familiar with IRRI which was quite true. That was unusual because they had come to IRRI for the first time and in fact had traveled outside India for the first time.

They were interested in the cloth bag I carried and wanted to know what I kept inside. The female secretaries were the worst of the lot. They inspected the bag carefully and wanted to know who were the people that autographed my bag, so I had to tell them about Sapri and my Italian friends there.

They would always ask the questions like "when did you graduate" instead of asking how old I was. Furthermore, they looked carefully to see if I had a wedding band or not. I always disliked telling strangers my life story, so often I answered very briefly or yes or no.

Back in my room, I found the Nigerian fellow playing very loud music. This was going to be a problem that reminded me of Mohamed in Tizi Ouzou. I would share the room with this fellow for six months, but we never talked and he never knew my name. It was just like the Wesley house in California. He would often go to Manila and buy some Mickey Mouse tee shirt or umbrella that he wanted to bring back to his home country.

The next day, I met Dr. De la Cruz, who was the deputy director general for administration and the person who would one day be responsible for making major decisions that would change my life forever. In fact, it was he who had written to me in Algeria, inviting me to come to IRRI. He was a short fellow who welcomed me and gave me some advance from my stipend right away.

I met a few other people who remembered me from my Vietnam days, but finally I got to the Agronomy department, where I was to meet the head. He was an Indian scientist called Dr. Singh who said that I was practically free to do any type of research I wanted but suggested that I look over a few ideas that he had for me. He also gave me a lot of reprints of his articles on rice research. He looked a bit impatient but introduced me to some other researchers in the department.

It was a small department where all the researchers and scholars and the Filipino staff worked in a small room called the scholar's room. I had already met Subroto earlier. The Filipino staff carried on research on rice on behalf of the senior scientists who gave them the ideas whereas

the scholars and the fellows like me pursued their own research for a degree like MS or Ph.D. I was to learn through my personal experience and many mistakes how to carry on field research, but the next six months were a trying period for me. I did not have any prior field experience in this type of research.

Dr. Singh gave me a very large experiment to conduct that required a lot of labor, but the IRRI laborers were a canny and devious lot. During weekdays, they often did not show up to work saying they were sick but showed up on weekends when the pay was higher. This created a lot of problems for all the researchers, who depended on the laborers to do the field work and collect data. I suffered grievously, and my experimental plots looked anything but experimental. Still, I struggled on as best as I could.

My Filipino co-workers were not very helpful and kept their distance. Often I insisted on getting more workers to do the field work, that also added to the tension. Everyone was affected by the shortage of laborers. My time at IRRI was short, and I was given a very large experiment that was not doing well, so I was very discouraged.I had no one to share my troubles with.

I had made many mistakes in laying out the experiment, so correcting them caused further delays. I worked seven days a week, but it was not enough. The Indian fellows had been there longer and understood some of the problems I was facing, but were unable to help. We made a routine of going out in the evenings to a place called Eva Lanes to go bowling or drink beer upstairs. I did not go bowling or like to drink beer, but one who persisted in trying bowling was a Filipina secretary working in the plant physiology department. Her name is not important.

The Indians were more interested in drinking beer upstairs, so eventually that is where I ended up with them. Upstairs, there used to be a band and two girls singing the same songs every night, dedicated to the same Indians. The girls worked hard in the heat and perspired, and the band players had the same bored look on their faces, but it was a routine for them.

They looked like they had never washed and all needed a haircut, but that was the style. They had to look like hippies.

The shabby place and the smoke filled atmosphere did little to add to the lure, and no one cared if the girls sang the same songs every night. Then there was the same old bent man carrying a basket full of eggs called a balut that he peddled. Balut is a 21-day-old duck egg that has a duck partially formed in it. Filipinos love to eat balut with feathers and all, but I could never bring myself to eat it. It reminded me so much of the green egg in Ba Xuyen. I sat through the evenings with just a bottle of beer, watching the show through the haze of smoke. Often the policemen or women came for their free drinks, but they meant no harm.

San Miguel beer was cheap, which the Indians and others drank like water and kept on shouting at the singers to sing this or that song. The empty street of Los Baños reverberated with the loud music.

Down the road was the competition called the Bamboo grove, which was just the beer joint but a favorite of many because there was no bowling alley to make a racket. The girls there were a bit more daring with their backless gowns or tight pants. However, it remained a small town affair where poor students spent their evenings because there was nowhere else to go.

The Indians were a canny lot and collected an equal share of the cost every evening, which turned out to be expensive for me. Suranjeet would always pull out his black book, where he kept accounts of who owed him what. They were having fun at my expense, so gradually I stopped going out. Besides, beer drinking was never my favorite pastime anyway.

The Filipina secretary noticed. She asked me to join her at meal time, which I often did, but she showed annoyance if I did not. She wanted me to wait for her at every meal. Now I began to be annoyed. I had never waited for anyone in my life except Suzanne, and that was already history. I was not about to start waiting for people again, so one day I told her that she should not expect anything from me at all. I was not that type of person. I did not open doors for women or wait for them at tables. They could very well open their own doors. Besides, she had absolutely no right to demand anything.

She kept quiet but did not give up. Then one day she asked me to show her my experiments, although I was not sure if she was really that interested in field research. So we passed by in front of the women's dormitory in plain view of the volleyball players to go to the field. The gossip had already started.

Then came her birthday when she invited me to go bowling with her gang to go bowling and afterward join her at a party at the dorm. I played for a while but felt bored and went back to IRRI. Later I remembered that there was a party, so I showed my face and went back to my room. I hate small talk and weather topics. She was very mad at me, but I did not care. More and more this girl was acting like I was her boyfriend, which I was not. This attitude annoyed me to no end. She was not pretty and did not have any qualities that I could appreciate, so I kept my distance.

But her resolve was enduring. She made me a gift of a carved wood name plate that she had worked on for days. It was a nice gesture because no one remembered my birthday. Still, I felt bad because I could not reciprocate her feelings at all. We had nothing in common, and she was used to frivolities. My Indian friends noticed but kept their own counsel.

The Indian researchers tended not to mix with the rest and usually went to drink beer at the Eva Lanes as a group. I tried to make friends with the Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans and other nationalities. Indians found it odd that I did not like to go with them every night. I had mentioned that beer drinking was not a favorite pastime of mine.

At this time, I thought it would be a good idea to organize a samosa party. Anyone could join who shelled out 20 pesos. We would then go to look for a goat and prepare samosas in the

forestry apartment. This idea created a lot of enthusiasm and money was collected rapidly. Then on a weekend, Suranjeet and I went looking for a goat. He was always game for anything out of the ordinary. It was funny because we leaped off the jeepney as soon as we heard a goat somewhere and thus ended up in Tanauan in Batangas province where Suranjeet convinced a farmer to part with his goat for 80 pesos. We returned to Los Baños triumphant with the struggling goat in the jeepney to the amusement of the passengers.

The rest was history. The IRRI kitchen staff took over the preparation of the meat and others went shopping looking for other things. In the afternoon the samosa making got started and no one really cared if the samosas did not look like samosas, or they were too big. The Iranians, Bangladeshis and Indians were having a whale of a good time. Soon some scotch appeared.

The next door neighbors joined in and prepared more food. Now the party really began in earnest and people fought over each other to get hot samosas from the frying pan, while Suranjeet kept on filling paper bags full of samosas on the sly for the late comers.

The party lasted all night with food, drinks and loud music. Now it was time to go back to the IRRI dormitory, but Subroto laid down in front of the auditorium and said that he had found his bed. He had been a bit too free with the scotch, so now we had a problem on our hands. But somehow we managed to drag a reluctant Subroto all the way to IRRI and get him over the fence because the main gate was locked. The great samosa party was still talked about 30 years later, but never repeated. It was the only time different nationalities came together and had great fun.

I think it was in December that one of the Indian fellows announced that he was getting married to a Filipina. I was to be his best man. He was finishing up his doctoral program, and others were not far behind. Subroto, Suranjeet and Laksman Lal would also finish their programs and return to India in the coming months.

Then one day Dr. Singh returned from his innumerable foreign trips and asked to see my experiment. The experiment was not doing well, as was quite evident to anyone, but he was not interested in the reasons. Sure, everyone had labor problems those days, but that should have made me try harder.

I was as disappointed as he was but said that I had learned something from this experience, and now I was planning to go back to India.

Dr. Singh said that he was not convinced that I did my best. He said that he saw a potential in me and thought that I could do better given the right circumstances. I listened to his sermons. After all, he was the head of the agronomy department. In research, no result is negative because one can learn also from negative results. Anyway, my stay at IRRI had come to an end, so I began to pack my bags.

But Dr.Singh kept on delaying my departure and one day said that I should fly to Naga City in the Bicol region and see the rice research potential in the area and mostly talk to farmers to see their reaction to on-farm trials. He knew this was my strong point because of my experience in Vietnam and Algeria. I didn't even know where Naga City was.

So one day I flew to Naga and from there went to Pili. It is the capital of the Camarines Sur province, which is a vast rice growing region. There I visited many farms and talked to many farmers about the possibility of doing on-farm research. They were enthusiastic and said they welcomed any help from IRRI in growing a better crop because they believed that IRRI was the center of new technology. I was very impressed by what I found and reported back to IRRI. Now the problem arose of funding the outreach program and the whole concept was put on hold for a while.

One day I went to see Dr. De la Cruz to find out if I was to stay or go back to India. He surprised me by saying that if Dr.Singh thought I was the right person for the program in Bicol then he will see to it that funds are made available. He was the second person to recognize my strength and said so. The first person was of course Dr.Singh. He said he had great plans for me and thought that I could do better working directly with the farmers.

I was a field agronomist and was at ease with farmers anywhere. There was no doubt that I felt happier working with farmers. The research station trials did not reflect the conditions and constraints faced by farmers.

Thus, the International Rice Agro Economic Network or IRAEN project got started, and I was to head the program in the Bicol region. The economics, entomology and the statistics departments were involved as well. This was to be the biggest outreach project in the country with many sites, so I was excited to be a part of it from the beginning.

So once again I left for Pili, but this time to look for a place to stay. I had met a girl called Myrna during my previous visit, who had promised to look for accommodation for me in town. She said there was a housing shortage, but perhaps the next door neighbor could give me a room.

This is how I met Jasmine. Her father was the retired mayor of Pili, and they had an old but sturdy house in Pili on the main road. Myrna soon left after the introduction.

I saw in front of me a girl of extraordinary charm and beauty. She had a perfect oval face, long shiny black hair, but what impressed me most were her deep penetrating eyes that touched your soul. I remember that she wore white shorts and a printed blouse. I got tongue-tied for the first time, but somehow explained to her that I was from IRRI and needed a place to stay.

She said that she knew about IRRI and visited the place once. Her father was against the idea of a foreigner staying with them, but she said that she will convince her father to let me stay temporarily until I found other accommodation. I remember her saying that in that house her

word was the command, so I should not worry. She smiled very sweetly and invited me to have some ice cream. She said that she was trying to set up an ice cream shop in front of the house.

I do not remember what we talked about. I felt myself in a turmoil of unquantifiable proportion. I was a man of the world and had been to many countries. I had known many people, interesting or not, but I had never met someone like Jasmine. There was a faint glimmer of hope in my heart that the long search and wait was over, and I had finally met my soulmate in this sweet and beautiful Bicolana.This was the dazzling Moment of my life, but I did not let it show on my face. Not yet anyway.

I did not dare to say anything lest I said something stupid and spoiled the Moment, so I mostly listened to her. She said that she had quit her job in a bank due to some disagreement with the management and was trying to set up an ice cream shop. She was a college graduate and majored in accounting.

Soon I moved in, but her younger sister did not like me and was indifferent. Her elder sister who lived elsewhere also did not like the idea that Jasmine let a Boombai stay in the house. Filipinos call Indians Boombai for some reason. The family was devout Catholic and never had a foreigner stay with them. This was made possible because of Jasmine.

She and I hit off splendidly from the Moment we met. One day she took me to Legaspi along with Myrna to show me the buried church in Cagsawa. The Mayon volcano loomed majestically but ominously nearby, spewing smoke. At other times, she introduced me to her friends in Naga City. I became more and more enchanted with her and spent a long time talking to her in the evening. I never knew I had so much to talk about. Besides, she always beats me in scrabble.

She said that she used to work in a bank in Naga where a jealous woman accused her falsely of something she did not do. When Jasmine demanded an apology and did not get it, she resigned, although the management begged her to stay. Jasmine was a girl of extraordinary moral character and would not back down. I was very impressed by this steel in her.

In fact, I had never met anyone like her. One day we went to see a movie in Naga when I put my arms around her shoulder. She said that I was behaving as if I was her boyfriend, so I quickly withdrew, feeling hurt. But she surprised me and smiled and held onto my arm. I never knew what the movie was all about. Something extraordinary had happened between us. I was head over heels in love with Jasmine. This news was not welcome by her family. Her younger sister said that the Boombais were not good people, so Jasmine should have nothing to do with me. Her elder sister was also dead against and showed open hostility.

The opposition was building up, so I had to find another place to live. Once again, Jasmine came to my rescue and found me a foster family who happily took me in. The foster family knew that there were problems but said that in time everything will work out fine. They were very kind and loving people.

Mr. Castillo liked me like his own son and told me how he had survived the death march of Bataan during the last war. Thousands had died on that march after the fall of Corregidor when the Japanese had rounded up Americans and Filipino fighters and forced them to march several hundred kilometers.

In the meantime I had written to Mom in Sri Ram Pur and asked her blessing for our marriage. The news must have caused a storm back there but my steadfast brother Nirmal came to my rescue and convinced Mom to let me live my own life. Finally after a long wait, I received her letter in which she wrote in English that Jasmine would be most welcome to the family. This was all I needed.

I rushed to the bank in Pili where Jasmine had found a job and showed her the letter. She read it many times but could not really believe that it was true. I told her that I was going to visit her family that evening and propose marriage to her and seek approval of her parents. She literally went red in the face and disappeared somewhere in the back room.

When I told Mrs. Castillo about it, she said that it was indeed very good news and there was nothing to worry about. She will handle everything. So in the evening we trooped to her house where a party was waiting. The marriage was a very serious matter that required very careful consideration. Jasmine was nowhere to be seen.

Now the interview began in earnest. The old Mr. Luis said that he did not like the idea of his daughter marrying a foreigner, and a non-Catholic at that. The non-Catholic part was the hardest nut to crack, or so it seemed. He asked if it was true that Indians had four wives, etc. Mr.Castillo interceded on my behalf frequently, and Mrs.Castillo said that she truly believed that it was a heavenly marriage proposal. Obviously, she had developed great faith in me. I had not known Jasmine for over four months when we talked of marriage.

Finally, a priest was called in to sort out the problem of religion. Her father said that he personally had no objection to this marriage, except that I was a non-believer, so I had to accept the Catholic faith first. The priest promised to make a good Catholic out of me in a short time if I so agreed. I did. There was nothing to stop me from marrying Jasmine. No condition was too great.

My ancestors must have turned over in their funeral pyres, but I had found my soulmate and had the blessing of my Mom.

I accepted to their great relief and at this point Jasmine was called in. She came down very shyly and sat in one corner, not even looking at me. Her father then told the gathering very eloquently that he agreed to our marriage as soon as I was converted. I asked to marry her on the 15th of July, but she said July 23rd was her choice. It was the year 1975 and in January I didn't even know where Pili, Camarines Sur was. This is what I call destiny.

So the date was joyously agreed upon by everyone and the cake and drinks were served. Jasmine was so surprised that I had agreed to give up my religion for her, but I said that it was a small price to pay. Besides, I had an appointment with the old toothless priest to keep.

The very next day, I went to see the priest and told him frankly that I was converting to Catholicism only to satisfy the condition Jasmine's father had imposed. In my heart, I was never going to be anything other than what I was, so I was not going to keep the Catholic routine of going to Church and reading the Bible etc. I had read the Bible anyway.

The old priest saw in me a very obstinate fellow and said that it was of no use being a Catholic unless I welcomed Christ in my heart. I agreed and said that I was being very honest upfront. I was now ready to be a Catholic if after all I told him, he still wished me to go ahead.

He shook his head and said "what's the use" and promised to talk to the father of Jasmine to convince him that we should be allowed to marry without any precondition. He finally gave in and asked us to prepare for our marriage.

I had never known such joy in my life. This news spread to IRRI like wildfire and was received by everyone there with a great deal of surprise. They could not believe that I was serious because Jasmine and I had met only a few months ago. At that time, Dr.Singh came to Bicol to see my experiments and said that he was very pleased with the results. I had worked awfully hard these 6 months, so all the sites were excellent. I expected a great harvest and data. But he also said that he had heard about my impending marriage and advised me to think it over.

He said that many of his friends who married outside their country and religion had ended in failures so it was a serious matter indeed. When I said that we were determined to get married, he said that he wished us well.

Jasmine and I now had less than one month to prepare for our marriage. Contrary to the Filipino tradition of lavish marriage and incurring debt, we decided that it was going to be a simple wedding, and we were not going to start our new life with debt. We were going to pay for everything. She appreciated my principle, She said that our wedding was going to be unique because we will not seek sponsors. It was the Filipino tradition to round up as many sponsors as possible, who would then contribute financially.

We did not need sponsors. Whatever money I had managed to save from my IRRI stipend had to suffice. I had a gown made for her that I designed, including the embroidery, which a gifted lady in Ba Ao town made for her. She also made a Barong Tagalog for me and embroidered a sheaf of wheat in the front that I had drawn for her. We had promised that our wedding will be unique in every respect.

So we carefully planned everything. Now I understood why she wanted us to get married in the middle of the week instead of traditional Sunday because in a Sunday wedding many people

would have shown up invited or not. We restricted our guest list to 100. Her father was worried because he knew that we had no sponsors. Whoever got married without sponsors?

Jasmine and I designed a very unique wedding invitation card that simply said that my mother invites you to the wedding of her son to Jasmine, daughter of Mr. Luis at the Pili Church on July 23rd 0f 1975.

Nothing else. There was to be no flower girl and maids except Myrna who carried the veil and Subroto who was my best man carrying the rings. No one had seen a wedding card like this. It was simple and elegant, but it broke all the rules that no Filipino could dare to break.

Jasmine carried a bouquet of rice plants, showing the golden sheaf of grains that my farmers had made for her. It was a total departure from any tradition, local or not, but we were ecstatic. She had insisted that I shave off my Ho Chi Minh beard and mustache, so on the appointed day I showed up at the old Pili church in my Barong with wheat sheaf embroidery, and she came in her dazzling white gown holding the bouquet of rice. The peeling paint and leaky roof of the church with its shabby furniture and plastic flowers faded away as I had my eyes only on the beautiful girl in white who showed heroic courage to marry me.

She came in on her father's arm and did not look at me. She was lovely. She walked slowly to the altar where I waited for her, and together we kneeled in front of her classmate priest. The ceremony was not very long, although it may have seemed that way to us. Finally, we were pronounced man and wife. At this point, I took out a pearl necklace and put it around her swan neck. The cameras clicked and she beamed with a smile. Jasmine was my wife at last.

I think it was the best achievement in my life. To find her and marry her in six months' time when in January I didn't even know where Pili was in itself nothing short of miraculous. Everything changed forever from that day for both of us. She was the dream girl I waited and searched for so long.

They tried to get me married in India. My sister Annapurna was persistent, but I said that I was not ready. I said that someday I will find my dream soulmate I do not know where, but she will be everything I wished for in a life partner. They laughed derisively, hearing my daydreams. Jasmine would prove them all wrong in time.

Our relationship was founded on trust and understanding. We instinctively felt that we were right for each other, so waiting further was a waste of time. Her friends were surprised.

The day after our marriage we took the train to Manila from where we took the bus to Baguio up in the highlands. The week in Baguio was the best part of our life, full of romance and love. We went to see the beautiful sites, took endless photos and bought some souvenirs, spending all of our money. I was confident that the IRRI will soon give me the stipend.

But when we arrived in Los Baños, the IRRI cashier had a surprise waiting for us. He said that the stipend would be delayed due to bank holidays. Now we were in trouble because I did not have enough money to return to Pili. At this time Subroto started passing the hat around to collect whatever the poor scholars at the end of the month could come up with and somehow collected the train fare. He was really my best man.

By the way, Subroto would soon finish his doctoral program and return to India, where he would later become the vice chancellor of the famous agricultural university in Bengal. He would rise very high indeed. But sadly I have lost contact with him.

Dr.Singh welcomed Jasmine and gave a very nice party at his house in her honor. She looked lovely in the pink embroidered gown that I had designed for her, and charmed everyone with her beauty and sweet nature. We were very warmly received by everyone, although at first some people had shown some reservation.

But I was the third Indian to marry that year. The second person to marry was a close friend of mine called Surendra who married a nice girl from Los Baños. The fourth person was an American who had arrived in the Philippines at the same time as I, so in that sense, the year 1975 was a remarkable year for the IRRI scholars.

I had only begun to understand a wonderful girl called Jasmine. She lived up to every challenge we encountered and did it with grace, like when one day I told her that I wished to continue studies at the University of the Philippines for a doctoral degree with or without IRRI support, she agreed and said that she will find a job to support me.

I was getting disillusioned with IRRI at that point. I had worked for over one year with them doing extensive and very promising research in rice, but it did not get me anywhere professionally. Surely I had picked up some valuable experience but no one cared for just experience. One had to have a degree like Ph.D. to get anywhere. In September 1975, IRRI asked me to help in the training of some people in agronomy research for a month.

So Jasmine and I set up our first rented house, just a one room affair with big spiders and cockroaches thrown in to liven up our shabby room in Los Baños. We just had a small one burner hot plate, an old bamboo bed and a rickety table to begin with, but we were happy. She took everything in stride and set out to find a job immediately. I had been in the meantime accepted by the graduate school to start my coursework in November of that year.

I knew that the Ph.D. was a long struggle and probably longer when we had no sponsor to pay for all the expenses, but there was no backing off now. Dr.Singh at IRRI had closely followed the developments and was worried. One day he asked me how I was doing and how I was going to pay for a Ph.D. degree with a new wife and all the responsibilities that entailed.

I just shrugged and said that somehow we will try to manage it all, although I really did not know how. I was determined not to ask for anything. I had never asked for IRRI to send me to Bicol and did not ask for any extension to my fellowship, so I was not going to ask now. It was my pride.

But Dr. Singh was a very kind-hearted man and genuinely believed in me and what I could achieve as a researcher. He had seen the excellent research fields in Bicol where I had toiled under the hot sun for months, and he wanted to do something so one day he called me back to his office and said that IRRI was very pleased with my ability to do superb research and was ready to offer me a full fellowship for a Ph.D. program.

I was naturally very surprised because I was not expecting anything from IRRI so I asked if there were any preconditions. Dr.Singh smiled and said that actually there was a condition. IRRI wanted me to go back to Bicol to continue the excellent work that I had started there after I had completed my coursework at UPLB. I was very happy. This is what I loved most.I loved to work with farmers and was eager to return to the Bicol region so I gladly accepted the IRRI offer after consulting with Jasmine.

Soon she found a job at a bank in Los Baños and I got very busy with my graduate studies. We were newly married, yet I found little time for her because the graduate studies were very demanding. She was also busy with her new job in the bank. We by the dint of luck found a better house and a good maid and were very glad to leave that rat, spider and cockroach infested room. Things were certainly looking up for us.I still consider 1975 as the best year in our life.

We set up the new household soon and put up colorful curtains. She turned out to be an excellent homemaker. We bought a TV and IRRI loaned us a big refrigerator and stove. It was really nice to live on our own. I found the load of a graduate student heavy but managed to get good grades and made steady progress.

Surendra was also a student now and made quick progress in his doctoral studies. Others had left for India and one fellow went to Nigeria as a postdoctoral fellow, so only Surendra and I would be left at IRRI. We had a great deal in common. We came from the same state of UP in India and we both had married here and now were studying for our doctoral degree under IRRI sponsorship. We bonded easily and would form a lifelong friendship. We both ended up living in Los Baños thanks in no small measure to him, but I will get to that part later in the story.

There is not much to write about those days in Los Baños except that we made a few friends like the Rosenthals of Germany and others, but mostly we were busy doing our own things and did not have much time for anything else. I did not get to spend as much time with her as I would have liked, busy as I was with studies, but she never complained. We knew that each semester was bringing us closer to our goal.

Then the day came for my comprehensive exam. My American friend Robert Springstein had warned me that the comprehensive exam was the most difficult part of the program, so I should prepare for it well. My soil science professor who was also a member of my advisory board suggested that I ask for a written test from each of the board members and then go for the viva. It was excellent advice. Although only three out of four members agreed, it was not bad at all.

I took the exams and did as best as I could, but it was not good enough for one of them. During viva he asked me again the same question, to which I promptly answered correctly this time and showed the equation on the blackboard. He was surprised and said how come I did not answer in the written test. I just smiled sheepishly and said that the exam was a few days ago, and I had enough time to find the answer since then.

All the members broke up in great laughter. The rest of the viva was a piece of cake. They all congratulated me and said that the great hurdle for me was over. Jasmine soon showed up with a huge can of ice cream to celebrate. This was also the tradition in the scholar's room. She obviously had more confidence in me than others and said that she knew I was going to pass my exams.

Now I was free to go back to Pili and start the research for the dissertation. Jasmine began to have a glow on her face and one day confided that she was going to be a mother. It was the most thrilling news we could have had. It was also high time for her to quit her job and return to Bicol where she could get complete rest.

So I returned to Pili and soon found a nice house to rent. She was happy to have a nice house and more rooms in a quiet neighborhood. I fixed up the mosquito screens on the windows and hired a maid. Soon I put up a fence around the house and planted some flowers and fruit trees. It was a lovely house compared to the ratholes we had lived in Los Baños.

Soon I started in earnest the grinding routine of field work, but luckily IRRI had provided me with a jeep this time so it was easier to move around. The farms were quite far from each other, and I did not have to stand by the roadside with my sprayer and sack of fertilizer for the buses. I thoroughly enjoyed the work although it was tiring. This is what I loved doing in Vietnam and Algeria and now here in the Philippines. It is no secret that one does a good job when he enjoys doing it. The results were superb, making everybody happy, most of all IRRI.

I felt very happy with my work and blessed because of Jasmine. Then one day in June 1977, she went into labour and soon our first child was born. We called him Ashis. He was healthy and perfect. He was long for a child and had silky brown hair. Mind you, I said long because we could not measure his height yet, but later he will grow into 6 feet 2 inches lad. It was a new experience for both of us, and often we just looked at him while he slept. He did not look like Bill Cosby's lizard at all and grew steadily into a lovely child day by day.

We called him Ashis, an unusual name for a male child in the Philippines, but it meant a blessing. My folks back in India did not like his name and said that a child should be given another name but for us, it was Ashis.

He grew almost too rapidly, but he was lucky to have a full-time mother and unlucky to have a part-time father. My work was very tiring, but I got excellent data that somehow made up for the hard work. From planting to harvesting to data tabulation to planning for the next season was an endless cycle that drained my energy, but I kept going. The terrible heat of the scorching and relentless sun made it worse, but I found very good laborers who often worked late to finish the job.

Without these boys, I would have never been able to do so much work. They worked hard and seldom complained.IRRI paid them low wages, but I fought hard to get them a raise. My farmers were the main partners. They worked hard and were very pleased with the high yielding rice varieties that I was testing. They were my friends and had greatly enjoyed being invited to my marriage.

In the month of March 1978, I went back to Los Baños to begin the arduous task of data tabulation and the writing part of three years of field data, but first I had to find a suitable house to rent. This time I was lucky and found a decent house in the San Antonio part of the town. Soon Jasmine came and was very pleased that I had found a nice house so soon and got busy setting up the house again. She did not know that this would be the trend for the next 25 years, and we would often uproot from one place to settle somewhere else.

Ashis was beginning to stand up in the crib and say a few strange words, but mostly he played by himself and seldom cried. The maid knew the trick to play Andy Williams Moon river or O Danny Boy on the tape and soon the kid would be fast asleep. In fact, Moon river made me sleepy, too.

I had arrived back at IRRI at a bad time. Dr.Singh asked everyone to pitch in to complete the annual report that was overdue, so I helped, although I had my own work to do. I had bought an old motorbike and stayed late in the department writing the draft of my dissertation on an old electric typewriter until the wee hours of the night. Often Jasmine came and read the draft or dictated the tables or figures.

She cross-checked the data and helped me hour after hour while I labored. She looked over my shoulder to correct spelling mistakes, and I was grateful.I knew it would have taken longer without her help. She could be defined in two words as the ideal partner.

One day the Filipino staff of the department decided to organize an excursion to Dagupan beach and Pangasinan up north, so we were happy to get out of Los Baños for a change. We needed a break from the monotonous and boring work of writing scientific theses. Dagupan beach was clean and very nice, but the hot sun burned my skin that later peeled off like a big handkerchief.

The hundred islands were also very nice. There one could have his own island for the day if only a boat was available. The water was blue and clear. On the way you would meet the divers who brought up conch shells of various kinds and sold them to tourists.

Then the next day we went to Pangasinan where the farmers raise fish in their backyard ponds. One pond was drained for us to catch some fish, but we caught more mud than fish as the Filipinos pelted everyone with mud. It was like Holi, but more messy. Still, it was fun. The Pangasinan farmers kept neat houses and planted all kinds of shrubs and decorative plants around their houses. They are very hardworking people, like in Bicol.

Back in Los Baños I invited some of my colleagues to an evening of fun, which was fine except that a thief walked off with my motorbike while we were toasting each other. There is an epidemic of thievery in Los Baños and I had my expensive Tissot stolen twice, first in Pili and recovered, but this time it was gone forever. Now it was my motorbike.

Jasmine went to the police station and reported the theft, although I had little hope of seeing my bike again. But the next morning a fellow showed up with my bike and said that the thief had hidden it under a culvert where some kids had spotted it and reported it. It was amazing. I was glad to give the fellow a case of beer.

Jasmine gave me the wonderful news one day when she said that our second child was on the way. We knew it was a girl and named her Jayanti long before she was due.

Soon a telex arrived from Ottawa. I had applied for a position as an agronomist, so an organization in Canada now invited me to go on an extended tour of West Africa, where I was to visit Mali to see for myself the living conditions and meet the Malian counterparts.This was in July 1978 when I was getting ready for the final defense of my dissertation, so the timing was bad. I just could not go anywhere at that time. They were gracious and said they will wait for a more appropriate time.

Now the day arrived when I defended my research work successfully and was pronounced a doctor of philosophy, although believe me when I say that an agronomist is far from being a philosopher. We all rejoiced that day because it meant an end to years of studies and hard work, term papers and exams. Now we could get on with our lives properly with a job and a decent pay. The Canadians obliged, and soon I left for Dakar, Senegal.

But my first stop was Nairobi, where I had to spend two days catching up on the Pan Am flight to Dakar. Upon arriving in Nairobi, I was told that they had left my luggage behind in Bombay by mistake.I had no change of clothes or even a toothbrush but found a hotel room on the road to Kampala for the night. If you have never been to Kenya then you will only think that it is the safari country which it is, but there is abject poverty everywhere.

The hotel provided a plate of mashed potato mixed with boiled dent corn, hard peas and slices of raw onion and called it their main dish. The dent corn is not called dent corn for nothing. It will dent your teeth even if you boil it for hours. So I had a miserable dinner. The dirt hovels where they sold foul smelling beer in dim light were not very inviting either, so I went to look for some food downtown and found a place selling samosas.

This was another mistake. They gave me a plate of french fries dripping in oil and a little beef filled samosas also dripping in blackish oil, so I left the whole plate to someone who appreciated it more. It was disgusting.

The very next day as I was walking somewhere, a fellow suddenly dropped a bundle of something that landed near my feet and walked away, so I put my foot on it and called the fellow. Perhaps he did not know that he dropped something. Something turned out to be a huge bundle of banknotes wrapped in dirty rags. A kid of indeterminate age suddenly appeared and grabbed the bundle, but I was faster and grabbed the kid instead. Now a tussle began, and a crowd began to form around us. The kid kept on saying that I should let him go because today he got lucky.

All of this happened very fast in a matter of seconds. I still held on to the kid and called again the fellow who was now distant. The kid said that he would split the loot with me if I cared to go with him to the public toilet, so I did some fast thinking. Whoever carries so much money and casually drops it? If I called the police, they would arrest me for complicity and pocket the money. It was probably stolen and passed on to the gang members in passing. I just happened to be on the scene.

If I got greedy and went to the toilet to share the loot, I probably would meet others waiting there who would promptly shove a knife in my stomach. This was Nairobi and I was an Indian. The Police did not like the Indians. So I let the kid go. I did not want the money. It was probably the wisest thing I did. Who knows what would have happened if I had become greedy?

The Nairobi to Dakar flight is a long one, but I was able to get on it with my luggage that had finally arrived after a few terse telexes saying that the passenger was very irate, please expedite etc. One could see the vast Lake Victoria and dry African savanna from the air. The stops were many like Lagos, Robert's field in Monrovia, Conakry, Gambia and finally Dakar.

This is where I met the representative of the Canadian firm and traveled to other parts of Africa with him. He arrived punctually, and together we started on our first leg of this long journey. Bamako is the capital of Mali where they hoped to set up a farming system's project in the southeast corner of that country, and I was supposed to be their agronomist.

So one day we drove from Bamako to Sikasso which is the project site. It is a 400 km long road, but one must remember that Mali is a big country. We drove through featureless brush country

with a few villages here and there until we came to Bougouni nearly halfway on the road to Sikasso.

Bougouni is the only town between Bamako and Sikasso so we stopped here for a few minutes. It was a shabby and dirty town with a few shops and a poor restaurant run by a Lebanese. People in rags wandered around or squatted listlessly under trees to get some shade. I began to wonder what Sikasso was like. I was to soon find out.

Sikasso is a small town near the border of Upper Volta, which they now call Burkina Faso. The Ivory Coast border is some 70 kms away, and just south of Sikasso is the border of Guinea. I would have more time to know Sikasso and its inhabitants later, but from what I saw in a day, it was not very reassuring, and I started thinking if it would be wise to bring Jasmine and two kids here.

From there we went to Ouagadougou and on to Niamey in Niger. We met and talked to a lot of people who did agricultural development work there. All these countries looked miserable, with dirt roads and poor people in rags. Only a few foreigners drove around in fancy cars, but the locals just sat around under the trees to escape the heat or swam in the Niger River that looked inviting but full of larvae of a fly that caused blindness.

Women wore tie-dye colorful clothes with embroidery but could not hide their goiters or signs of malnutrition. Men wore homespun cotton robes. In Dakar, Bamako, Ouagadougou or Niamey one always saw Africans selling small handicrafts near the hotels where the foreigners stayed. They even called me blanc to my surprise, but to an African you were a blanc meaning a white person if you did not have kinky hair.

There were some women in provocative dresses lounging in hotels and looking at guests, suggesting they too were selling something. I was a bit discouraged by what I saw in Senegal, Mali and elsewhere, but that is why there was this project that would bring some help to the poor. I had lived in poor countries before, so misery was nothing new to me. Only the scale appalled me.

In Montreal, I found that once again my luggage was left behind by the airline, this time in Paris. It was cold in Ottawa, but I had to stay a few days to complete the formalities of appointment and medical check up. The Canadians were thorough on formalities and legal size contract papers, but finally all was done, except that no one bothered with the fact the salary was very low and well below the international standard for a Ph.D. I suppose I had to start somewhere, so I signed and flew back to Manila.

Back in Los Baños I made preparations for us to leave for India where Jayanti was to be born. Some of my luggage was sent to Bamako and we soon left for India. My stay of over four and a half years in the Philippines thus came to an end but think of the accomplishment !

I came to the Philippines only for six months and ended up staying four and a half years. I met Jasmine and got married, obtained a Ph.D. degree in agronomy under scholarship and had a beautiful boy named Ashis and waited eagerly for our daughter Jayanti to arrive in January 1979. My parents would have been proud of me. My dad died a long time ago, but I was not so sure about Mom and others. I was to soon find out.

This was the first time for Jasmine to travel abroad, but she adjusted well in spite of her pregnancy. Now she was visiting the country of her husband and was about to meet with his relatives. I did not know how she felt, but I am sure she was apprehensive, not knowing anything about India or Indians.

My concern was to give her as much rest as possible before Jayanti decided to arrive and provide her with the best medical care available because Jayanti had decided to come to earth with her feet first as the ultrasound photos showed. So one fine day we landed at the small municipal airport of Sri Ram Pur.

The reception at my parent's was restrained by Indian and certainly Bengali standards, specially for a new bride. Clearly mother was disappointed that I had decided to marry a foreigner and outside my religion, but soon they were all charmed by Jasmine, except the sister-in-law Sabita. She became jealous because Jasmine was now getting all the attention in the family, where until now she had reigned supreme.

Jasmine was magnanimous to her and tried to help her in the kitchen, but she remained aloof and often compared Ashis with her daughter, saying that she had better potty habits and eating habits. But Ashis was adorable and people could not have enough of him. His puffy rudy cheeks and his effort to speak a few words charmed everyone to no end. He also had very good potty habits and ate his food without any fuss whatsoever.

He became the darling of the family, but this did not endear him to Sabita. I was not expecting a miracle because after all I did marry a non-Bengali and a non-Indian, so a bit of upheaval was expected. I assured Jasmine by saying that soon after the birth of Jayanti we would leave India for Mali.

Sabita was a very ignorant woman and did not believe Jasmine when she told her that we knew a long time ago that Jayanti was coming and that she had a breech position. The Filipino doctor had calculated almost precisely the day she would be born, but had warned that breech delivery was a bit dicey.

She would laugh to Jasmine's face and said that no one could tell the sex of the baby until it was born and that the kids must “cook” inside for 10 months and 10 days before coming out. She had never heard of ultrasound and other developments in the medical field. We often encountered such attitudes among Indians. What they did not know, they did not believe because they believed they knew everything there was to know.

I told Jasmine not to say anything. Sabita was a classic case of ignorance, superstition and low education. It was a bad combination. Jasmine was a college graduate with extensive experience in accountancy, but I admired her humility. She was everything the other woman was not, so the contrast was not lost on others. However, this created more problems than it solved.

My Mom was an astute politician and seldom said what she felt or felt what she said. On the surface, she welcomed Jasmine and gave her a gift of a gold bracelet and a necklace. Jasmine was surprised because in the Philippines such gifts were considered luxury, but the Bengali tradition called for the gold ornaments for the bride. She also received several exquisite saris that she gradually learned to wear but never could manage well, reverting to her long gowns.

The language was the main barrier because no one spoke English except Nirmal although Sabita could somehow express her feelings through broken language, so Jasmine felt lonely and isolated. My job was to get her out for a walk every evening, even though she hated it but went along anyway. The exercise was necessary.

Finally, on January 6th of 1979, baby Jayanti decided to come with the help of an expert lady doctor. We were delighted that she was so perfect, with a pert nose and curly wisps of brown hair. She was a bit underweight, but she puffed up rapidly. The comment was very predictable. She said that the kid is dark and may not turn out to be better than average looking. This was a very cruel thing to say to new parents, but she was a cruel woman who had decided long ago that she did not like Jasmine.

She also said that she did not like the fact that Jasmine came to Sri Ram Pur pregnant because this meant extra work for her. But we did not impose in any way on the family. I paid for all expenses and took care of her and the babies. I gave them a bath and made them sit on a potty and fed them spoon by spoon the baby food. They never cried in the middle of the night as most babies do, and were wonderful and perfect babies. No parents could be prouder. Jasmine was regaining her health and looked lovelier.

Jayanti had an aquiline nose and a wide forehead. She was a very pretty baby with pencil sharp eyebrows and tulip red lips. Her hair was curly and became darker after a month, and her fingers even at that age looked slender and long. Ashis was no less and already a pet of the family. Jayanti slept a lot and took to bottle feeding when she got lazy to breastfeed. She gained weight rapidly and was something to watch.

But our time in Sri Ram Pur was not exactly pleasant due to the constant clash of cultures. I found the atmosphere stifling that I had broken out of a long time ago. I went alone to work in a dangerous country like Vietnam, had gone on to get more education in the United States at my own expense, had worked in Algeria they knew nothing about and had now returned to Sri Ram Pur with a doctorate degree and a beautiful family and a job waiting in a country they had never even heard of called Mali. I could not readjust to Sri Ram Pur again.

They also knew that I made my own decisions and decided what was best for us. I could not ignore the nasty comments of Sabita, but we were going to leave soon and perhaps not to return, so it made little or no difference. I tried to protect Jasmine as much as I could but often I found her misty eyed.

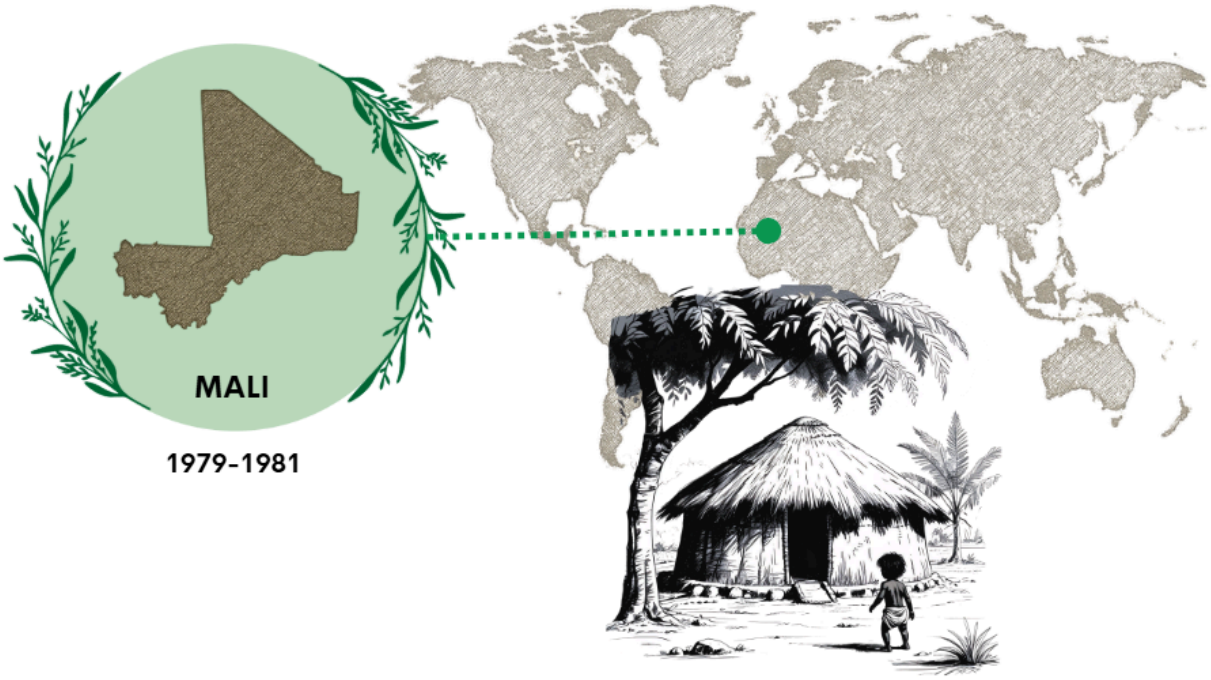
Annapurna liked Jasmine but insisted that the kids must be called Buntee and Milli. I explained to her one day that there was nothing wrong with their name, but she sulked. She had vowed to make a Bengali out of Jasmine and insisted that she wear a sari and put on sindoor which is a vermilion powder Hindu women put where they part their hair. She said to me that I should buy her more jewelry because a wife reflects the wealth of her husband, but it was not Jasmine's style. She is a simple girl and I love her for it.

Likewise, Mom started calling Jasmine by the name of Jyotsna which means moonlight, but Jasmine could never pronounce it so Jasmine she remained. Her first visit with my folks lasted three and a half months and I can not honestly say whether she enjoyed it or not, but she did get good medical attention and Jayanti did arrive without any problem. This was my sole comfort. If Jasmine was a mismatch for the traditional and superstitious Bengali society, it was no great loss on our part. They missed the chance of getting to know a wonderful girl whose heart was pure and who only wanted to be accepted.

So In the month of February we flew off to Paris and then on to Bamako. Jayanti was 40 days old but an angel. She slept in the hammock in the plane most of the time. Ashis was too young to enjoy flying such a long distance but did not give any trouble. Jasmine had regained her strength and braced herself for the new life in a new country, trusting solely her loving husband.

On the plane I began wondering how she would cope with the primitive life in Sikasso taking care of two infants, but I had underestimated her gift of adjustment and sheer resolve to live through almost anything. She did manage Sri Ram Pur, so perhaps Mali would be better. I certainly hoped so.

Chapter Nine: Mali, embracing village life



Getting out of the plane at the Bamako Senou airport in Mali, we were hit by the heat wave like a blast. Jasmine was certainly worried and covered up Jayanti some more lest she start dehydrating. We were all very tired after the long journey from Delhi via Paris and eager to reach a hotel.

The hotel we reached in Bamako was the Amitie Hotel, an old albatross of a featureless, drab but huge hotel that dominated the landscape. It was the biggest building in town, not too far from the placid Niger River. The thing that one never failed to notice in the Amitie hotel was the elevator wrapped in boa skins. I do not know how many poor creatures were slaughtered to obtain all the skins, but I assure you the elevator was big.

We were met by a fellow called Jeff who was a middle-aged person who never could decide whether to smile or frown, so I suppose he tried to do both at the same time. But he was helpful in settling us down temporarily and had my personal car driven up from Dakar the next day. We had to stay in that hotel for a few days because it happened to be a Moslem holiday that closed all the offices in town where we had some business.

So patiently we waited and took all the food in the shelter of our air-conditioned room. Ashis at that time a small baby himself ran around the room and often got a shock by touching the door knob due to built up static on the rug so he soon learned not to touch it.

The official tour guide book describes Bamako as a dainty town, but we saw nothing dainty about Bamako, with open sewers, garbage piled up by the roadside and obnoxious flies everywhere. However, people were not obnoxious like in Dakar and women selling beautiful tie-dye clothes in rainbow colours smiled innocently. Kids smiled too but for a different reason. They often hung around the few department stores where the foreigners did their shopping of imported chocolate or ice cream.

It was shocking to see the priorities in a desperately poor country like Mali, but the foreigners did not care. They had to have their chocolate and ice cream. The kids often picked pockets if you thought they were just innocently smiling at you, but the worst were the gas station attendants who distracted you while pumping gas and quickly set the meter to zero, telling you that your tank was full.

Just behind the Amitie hotel, we found scores of weavers squatting in the dirt in the shade of trees who made colorful strips of clothes on their looms made of bicycle spindles and wood. They never could make the strips wider than about 4 inches, so they had to stitch the strips together to make a bigger piece. These weavers sat there in the heat sweating it out on their primitive looms day after day to make a living but judging from the rags they wore or the houses they lived in, it was doubtful if they made a good living.

Only the blanc made a good living in Mali. I felt a bit ashamed for the first time being in the category of blanc, although my salary was low by the international standard.

Mali is a huge country with a land area greater than France and Germany combined but with only about five million people. The northern half of the country was deserted with little or no rainfall and was inhabited mostly by the nomads tending their herds of cattle, goat and sheep. The southern half was greener due to more rainfall, but we were to go to Sikasso in the south-east corner of the country, some 400 km from Bamako. I had visited Sikasso previously and had some misgivings about bringing my family there, but we had to make a start somewhere.

The drive to Sikasso was boring and tiring, but the road was straight and flat with a great number of potholes that cut through the featureless African brush country. Large herds of cattle could be seen crossing the road, with Fulani herders not far behind. Scattered villages could be seen where the mud houses were either rectangular or round with conical grass roofs clustered together under occasional baobab trees. Some villages had crumbling mud walls around them as fortification.

The only fair size town, if it could be called a town at all, was Bougouni halfway down the road. Jasmine was disappointed, as I could see it in her eyes, but she put up a brave front. Women with goiters, children with swarms of flies on their faces and people in homespun cotton rags were all around us to liven up the spirit, but it did not help much. I had written a bit about

Bougouni previously so I will not add to it except that outside the town one saw the signboard of a Missionary compound. They were there to bring the light of Jesus to the heathens.

We would later meet many of them in Sikasso as well but more on them later. We stopped in Bougouni to get some gas and food, but the former was easier. The only restaurant in town was owned by an old Lebanese. It was dirty and full of flies, but we sat there trying to ignore the outstretched hands of beggars who appeared as soon as the car stopped. But they were not aggressive like in Bangladesh or India and left after a while.

One could not fail to notice the mango trees everywhere. Mali was known for mangoes, and those who never had tasted good mangoes before said that it was the best in the world. We found many roadside village markets where Fulani women sold milk and butter and others sat with piles of vegetables and meat. We stopped at one of them just to see what was available. It was not much as compared to Asian markets, but Mali was Mali.

Sikasso was not any better either as we settled down in the only hotel in town, chasing the cockroaches and rats in the room. Soon the word got around that I was a doctor, meaning a medical doctor, so many people came around asking for help. The very next day we started hunting for a house and took the first house we came across to the disappointment of Jeff who had lined up a few houses for us to look at. But we were living in hotels too long and were anxious to settle down.

Our house was a concrete pillbox type of house, but it looked better than a hotel room, so we unpacked, and she was soon busy cooking. The yard was big and a few mango trees. The wonder of wonders, the house had electricity and a hand pump for water. We also had a night watchman living in the yard. British people are horrified when you say yard meaning a garden, but it was more like a yard full of gravel and no garden.

The night watchman had a young wife and another woman who looked like his mother, but Jasmine after observing them for a few days declared that she was his first wife. Most Malians are Muslims and practiced polygamy. The first few days were spent looking for the things we needed to set up our household, so I found some crude furniture made of trunks of palm plants and held together with leather thongs.

To our dismay, we found the only grocery store stocked with old cases of Heineken beer and not much else. They also had champagne, but we did not know who drank champagne in Sikasso and were not eager to find out.

The local market assembled once a week on a Sunday, where farmers brought in their produce of fruits and vegetables etc. to sell and buy what they needed in return. Mostly it was a women's affair. They came in their colorful clothes and some wore headbands or a turban of sorts. Men wore boubous or homespun cotton clothes.

We were warned that Sikasso was a Malaria zone, so I fixed up the wire screens on doors and windows and bought mosquito nets. We also started taking Nivaquine tablets and gave the kids the powdered form as prophylactic. Jayanti and Ashis were miserable because of the heat in the pillbox of a house that we had, and soon their tiny bodies filled up with rashes.

We were helpless because the voltage was too low to run the air conditioners we had installed, so we just sweated and tried to cool their bodies with wet towels. We were all miserable but felt sorry for the babies.

Furthermore, we were lucky if we had electricity more than a few times a week, so we bought a few kerosene lamps and a lot of candles. It was not very reassuring for a new family like ours with such small children, but somehow we managed.

Our first job was to get domestic help, so soon a boy was found. He was called Abou which is a common name, but his sense of propriety offended Jasmine. He walked around the house in his brief and did not know how to babysit, although he made an effort. In Mali, such tasks are always given to girls or women. Jasmine was baffled when he started doing some strange calisthenics everyday sitting on a mat, so I had to explain that he was a Moslem and had to pray five times a day. She had never met a Moslem in the Philippines and was totally unaware of their religion or culture.

But calisthenics or not Abou had to go because he was totally hopeless. He also did not know how to count, so I had a difficult time explaining his wages. Soon we found the White Fathers who were mostly French, Belgian or Spanish priests who ran a Catholic mission and the only church in town.

There were also White Sisters or nuns who ran orphanages and taught women some skills in homemaking. They were very friendly and loved Ashis and Jayanti. We soon found a maid through their help. Baby care came naturally to women here, so we were greatly relieved.

She carried Jayanti on her back in the African style and went around the neighborhood, where Jayanti soon became popular. Ashis was a toddler and could walk around the house by himself, but we had to watch him all the time because of his propensity to put anything in his mouth, food or not.

By this time, Jasmine was learning the word patience by heart. We had to make do under the circumstances, which must have been hard on her with two small kids to look after round the clock, but at least we were settled and found a maid. It was not a bad start, considering…

One day we found the new maid crying but not knowing the Bamanakan which is their language, we could not understand what her problem was. The white fathers said that she was suffering from Malaria, so I took her to the hospital and proper medication was given. Many

Malians suffered from malaria but could not afford the medicines. They did not know what preventive medicine or measures that they could take.

We were amazed how quickly the kids responded to medication of any kind. Often we found them with scabs or some festering wounds to which we attended and they recovered fast. We noticed that their parents did not care much about tending their kids, so simple sickness went uncared-for until it developed into something more serious. Often children died.

You could see kids with huge belly buttons the size of your fist, which they explained was natural because everyone had it. Malians did not agree that it was due to faulty severing of the umbilical cord at birth. I soon found out that the Malians seldom accepted that they did not know something, but then are the Bengalis or the Arabs any different?

The goiter was another example. Their food lacked iodine, so something as simple as iodized salt was the cure or prevention was beyond their comprehension. They thought that goiter was something most women had. They took great pride in dressing up in embroidered boubous and certainly looked very elegant in them, but they ate only cornmeal or sorghum gruel and little else. Dry catfish smoked to last long was a delicacy, but it stank to high heaven. Meat was a luxury for the most.

Men too wore boubous of colorful silky materials with a great deal of embroidery, but the emphasis was more on show and less on substance. The once a week Sunday market in town was a riot of colours as even the poorest showed up in their finest, making the scene a photographer's dream as long as you did not look too closely at the mountain of garbage left behind or the sores.

Most of the buying and selling was done by women in Mali, as elsewhere in Africa. They came from outlying villages with huge bundles on their head, walking for miles. They sold their produce in order to buy what they needed, but some barter also took place as money was in short supply.

The few toubabs as we were called were an oddity in town. Women often touched Jasmine’s shiny long hair to admire, But we found the Malian kinky hair beautiful which they braided in many different ways. A young Malian girl with beautifully braided hair was a person to behold. Many top models in Europe were West African girls who had a grace and a poise unseen elsewhere. But often they did not appreciate their own beauty, like their almost silky and shiny black skin. To them, being of fair skin was better. Just like the Bengalis or the Filipinos.

Part of it was due to the introduction of Christianity and Islam in a country that was to a large extent animist. They were told that being bare breasted was uncivilized, so they wore bras with wire that cut into their breasts and developed festering wounds. They were told that singing unholy songs or dancing was sinful, so some women covered themselves up entirely with a

black veil in case of the Wahhabi sect of Islam. But you could also see young bare breasted girls pedaling bicycles carrying a boy in the front.

On the whole, the Malians loved to sing and dance and were exuberant people. We would get to know them more closely when we moved to a village later, but the pressure of religion, whether Christianity or Islam, was relentless, so perhaps it was a matter of time before they lost their exuberance. Certainly, the mullahs and the missionaries were working overtime to change all Malians.

It was quite apparent in Mali that the spread of Islam was faster than that of Christianity. Mosques were sprouting up in every village like mushrooms. The mullah from the big mosque in Bamako could reach every corner of the country on the radio five times a day.

The Catholics were no less lacking in their zeal and at one time provided the Malians the only occidental education in math, science and social studies in their church run schools until they were closed by the government. Now the Catholic Church was providing health care, running orphanages and teaching women how to sew or embroider. They often organized sport activities and helped the community in many ways, so a small catholic population was slowly growing.

Not to be outdone, the Protestants also set up their shops run by the North Americans, but their activities were restricted to a lot of singing hymns and chanting in their crudely built churches or translating the Bible into the local language, which was a very difficult undertaking. There were also Canadians in Bougouni and elsewhere running missions. The pastor in Bougouni was a very friendly and outgoing person, but his wife was suspicious and very unfriendly.

In many rural areas, people remained rooted to their animistic past and fetish worship. They enjoyed the freedom of singing and dancing to the sound of balafon which is a xylophone. The Malian balafonist is a true artist, but they also made many homemade musical instruments from tin cans, sinews and animal skins that they played exceedingly well. In fact, one of the best known vocal artists in Africa was a Malian who also gained fame in Europe.

In Sikasso we settled down to the routine of living and caring for baby Jayanti and Ashis who were growing chubby day by day. Jayanti enjoyed her piggyback ride to no end, and Ashis joyously pedaled his tricycle around the house, often with Jayanti sitting in the back. But they had no other children to play with. Every Sunday we brought them to the church where the nuns would fall in line to cuddle Jayanti and Ashis. They also came to the house if we failed to visit with them. Jasmine did not speak French so remained outside the conversation but welcomed the friendship of the religious community.

I still waited for the project to start. I did not know who the co-workers were or where the office was going to be. There were some Dutch people who worked in one of the villages near Sikasso collecting data on sociology and would later superficially integrate into our project but

they remained aloof to us. We always felt that they remained apart willingly, so we never got to know them in the three years we spent in Mali.

I do not know what I can attribute their indifference to, but perhaps they were uncomfortable with us being a married couple and them being bachelors. Or perhaps it was something else. We never knew. One Chinese French was a bit more friendly at first, but later we hardly ever saw them. Among the two Peace Corps volunteers, one would later move elsewhere and die of some causes while the other, a young girl, remained in Sikasso where she did animal science projects. I do not remember any of their names.

I had learned over the years not to expect any friendship or social mixing from the few foreigners who lived in isolation so it was no different here. In fact, the smaller the town and fewer the toubabs as the foreigners were called, less likely it was that they would say hello or want to get to know you. Do not ask me why it is so. This pattern repeated itself in many countries where I had lived. The European missionaries were the sole exception.

The Malian counterparts did the same. They came to our house often, but never returned the courtesy. In the three years that we spent, we never knew where they lived. Perhaps they were hesitant because they lived in poor houses, or there could be other reasons. We just did not know.

There were many dangers of living in Mali, but one that we were unaware of was right in the house where we lived. One night, Jasmine dropped the bottle cap and bent down to pick it up in the dim candlelight when the cap squirmed in her hand. Her very quick reflex spared her from the sting of an African scorpion. We were horrified. What if the kids had stepped on it?

We started searching the house everywhere for more scorpions and found several of them. They were also found under rocks in the yard. It was a very disturbing development that I was not at all prepared for.

Then there were rumors going around the town that there was a fanatic fellow who was cutting off the ears of unsuspecting people, so everyone was scared and alert. It so happened that one morning just near our house we heard a woman scream in distress, so people came out quickly and found a fellow with a knife in his hand and beat him senseless. Soon the policemen came and took him away to be shot.

It was learned that a marabout that is a Moslem priest or hermit had ordered the fellow to collect the ears for some secret ceremony, but no one really knew the truth. Mali was a dangerous country. People came from the Ivory Coast to collect heads to be buried whenever some important village chief and such died there. I heard that there were regular suppliers of such things for a price because the business was brisk. Many Malians who worked in the Ivory Coast as farm hands disappeared whenever someone old and important was about to croak. They did not take any chances.

The number of heads buried with a person signified the importance of that person. I had seen very gaudy mausoleums of people, where reportedly many heads were buried. It was scary. No one could say that the Africans were not enterprising. But in the old days it was worse. We saw many villages with crumbling mud walls that in the old days protected them from marauders and bandits. Slavery was still practiced here not too long ago, and people were abducted by the enterprising traders. People still knew who the former slaves were or their children, and looked down on them.

The Fulani people who were racially different from the rest could be always seen walking with their herds of cattle and their women wearing big gold earnings that were so heavy that they had to support them with heavy cords tied to their heads. They did not believe in banks and carried their valuables on them. Such women would not last ten minutes anywhere in Asia, but in that respect Africa was safe. Or perhaps their men and folks defended their women and their gold with all their might.

They also loved amber jewelry and one could see the biggest amber beads on them which are quite valuable. Amber is petrified resin, and it takes a few million years to make amber by mother nature, so it is quite valuable.

They stained their face around the mouth black with some permanent dye to make them look beautiful, although other Malians did not share their sense of beauty. These were the nomads and cattle herders of West Africa. They never settled anywhere and made crude temporary grass huts outside the villages.

They sold milk and butter in the market on Sundays, so we had abundant supply. The Americans were very prejudiced and warned us that the milk probably came from cows with tuberculosis, but it was just a prejudice based on ignorance. We never had any problem with the milk or butter.

However, I did encounter a problem buying fresh mutton. The butchers whacked the meat anyway they wanted and mixed intestines and other unsavory parts with it. Malians were not particular, but we were. One day, the matter came to a head when the butcher refused to weigh the meat and charge me the correct legal rate, so I took the matter to the mayor's office.

He was a very nice gentleman and promised me that justice would be done swiftly. He then sent two of his assistants to fetch the butcher, his meat, and took him to the office of trade that regulated such matters. There my purchase of meat was weighed, the over price refunded and the balance and the rest of the meat confiscated. The poor butcher sat there the whole day trying to sort out the mess he had created himself.

The result was that from that day on, he always sold me meat by weight and charged the correct amount. Later, some foreigners complained of the same problem, so I said that they should just mention my name. I always tried to fight injustice. I had earlier written about the

problem I had in Saigon when a dishonest shopkeeper had sold me a faulty camera. I also fought injustice in Washington when that language school was ripping off Nicole.

The Peace Corps volunteer was a young girl who had great trouble buying eggs in the market because most of the time she found them spoiled, so I suggested that she let the eggs in a bucket of water. The ones that sank were the good ones, but the next time we saw her she said that this time all her eggs were spoiled. She said that she followed my advice strictly and picked the ones that floated. So much for the advice. She had majored in animal science.

She used to come to the house, so Jasmine finally had someone she could talk to. One day she took us to a village where there was a cave. This was the village where the fanatic marabou had come from so we were a bit apprehensive going there but what was interesting was that the mountain had an unmistakable silhouette of Richard Nixon. I am sure Richard Nixon would have been very pleased to know that mother nature did not forget him, even if the rest of the world did.

The caves were not interesting at all and stank of batshit so we got out fast, but the infernal flies kept following us until we ran back to the car and rolled up the windows quickly. Maybe they suggested that we needed a bath, but the heat in Mali was oppressive, and you sweated no matter how often you took a bath.

There was no place to go in Sikasso, but soon we found a mudhole near Farako where we went to swim once in a while. The British had built a small dam there to tap water for the town, but we were not reassured when we saw the source. Our landlord had in the meantime put in water pipes, but they rattled like machine guns at night due to high pressure, scaring the babies a lot. Nothing was perfect here, but we had water. I bought a water filter and Jasmine started boiling the filtered water. It was a very wise thing to do.

Near Farako there was a tea plantation set up by the Chinese in spite of the misgivings of the French who had misgivings about anything that they did not suggest themselves, but the Chinese proved them wrong and produced tea. Now, no self-respecting tea drinker will say that the Malian tea was good, but the Malians couldn't care less. It was their national drink.

Now let me explain how they made their tea so that you may have an idea. First they boiled the tea and drank the first cup with a lot of sugar so that it looked like syrup. Then they added more water and boiled some more and drank their second cup with more sugar. Then they added more water and boiled some more for their third cup, adding more sugar. By this time, the tea was bitter and tasted like quinine. I wondered what would be their reaction to taste a cup of first class Darjeeling tea, but they had never heard of Darjeeling and couldn't care less. They had their tea thanks to the Chinese.

We longed for pure Darjeeling, but it was not available. Malian tea was prohibited in the Ivory Coast, where they saw it as a threat to their coffee, but some tea was smuggled anyway and

fetched a good price there. But smuggling was not restricted to tea by a long shot. We often saw captured herds of cattle or sheep in the custom's office, but for every one they intercepted, perhaps nine got away. The border between Mali and Guinea was porous and had a myriad of trails running through the bush that the cattle rustlers were very familiar with.

At this time we had spent nearly one year in Sikasso, but more and more we were unhappy there because our yard became the communal washing ground for the neighborhood. Women brought their kids, their wash and their infernal radio that they played constantly while making tea under the mango tree. On top of that, we found out that our night watchman was making money from them by selling our water. This was too much, so I started to look for another place.

Then the idea came that we should find a village near Sikasso where we could build our own African style. So soon a village was found at a distance of 10 km where I met with the village chief whom they called dougou tigi and asked his permission to build a house there. He in turn called the village council meeting, but after long discussions nothing was decided because it was so unusual for a toubabou to live in a village.

Toubabou is a term they used for all foreigners. They then went to see the governor to seek his advice. The governor was a military man who received us warmly and said that it was a splendid idea and would like to see the house once completed. This was then settled, so we began in earnest to draw plans for the house and the location in the village. Finally, a wonderful site was given to me for free because no one buys land in Mali. It belongs to the village and the chief decides who makes his house where or which field to cultivate. The site was surrounded with mango trees loaded with fruits.

I then drew up a plan of five round huts in a semicircular fashion and interlinked by passageway to make it one house.This was never done before, but the masons with my encouragement and guidance built five perfectly round huts and joined them with wide passageways. They were very proud of their accomplishment and showed off the house to everyone.

The walls were coated with shea butter to give it a hard coat and the roof was perfectly conical made of straw of golden color. All the rooms had cross ventilation and screens on Windows, and the semicircular arrangement made a perfect inner courtyard, which was then enclosed by high walls. The toilet was a deep dry well covered with logs, and the bathroom next to it had huge clay jars that were filled with water drawn from a well nearby.

The floor was hard packed earth that Jasmine coated once a week with cow dung to give it a hard dust free surface, while I decorated the interior walls with Khajuraho figurines that I had brought from India. The kids room was adjacent to ours. Then was the living room, kitchen and a spare guest room. I put the more erotic Khajuraho figurines on our bedroom wall, but the visitors insisted on seeing them anyway. You should have seen the expression on the face of the nuns who peered at them closely.

In short, it was a sensational house that Malians came from great distances to see. They did not know that round huts could thus be joined and made fly and mosquito free. Women came and wandered from room to room and finally laid down in the living room to sleep.This went on for about six months. We were amused and did not disturb their sleep.

We planted papaya trees and an orange tree in the inner courtyard, but Jasmine and I planted peanuts in the front of the house. That was the best peanut patch one could find anywhere. It was planted in neat rows that we kept weed free. We also planted pigeon pea as a fence. I cemented the bathroom floor and the toilet only. Near the main door, I fixed a stone statuette of some African style and told the kids that it came alive during the full moon and guarded our house. They were afraid of their shadows, so to speak, so the idea of an ogre coming alive sowed endless fear in their hearts.

We even had a baby deer and a very naughty monkey called George as pets but the deer died of strangulation by turning around the cord during a fierce storm, but the monkey stayed and destroyed plants and papaya leaves for fun. He also looked for lice in my hair while I slept under the mango trees.

Girls went crazy during full moon and always ran around our huts giggling and chasing boys or boys chasing them, hence the idea of the stone ogre near the front door. That cooled their ardor drastically, but not totally because some of them older girls did not quite believe my ogre story.

Ashis and Jayanti wandered off somewhere, but we never worried about them because the old people sat under the mango tree keeping a watchful eye on the kids. One old man called Tiecoura was very fond of Ashis and Jayanti and came every morning to wake them up by calling ini sogoma meaning good morning.

Jayanti rode a piggyback that she really liked, and we often found traces of food on her mouth because the village women fed her something. Jasmine was really very happy in our new and spacious house that was cool during the summer and free from insects. We enjoyed living in the village because the villagers sort of adopted us and invited us to their festive occasions as well as funerals.

I brought them to the hospital in case of an emergency day or night, and often I gave them rides into the town 10 kms away. In return, they would bring me a chicken or a basket of oranges as a sign of gratitude. We bought fresh milk, eggs and vegetables at our front door. We also had a constant stream of visitors, but the foreigners were the most nagging type who would look for a refrigerator or generator. Furthermore, we explained that we did not need a ref or a generator and were perfectly happy with our five kerosene lamps that I lighted and placed in rooms. It burned all night and the yellowish light was very soothing to the eyes, but they did not believe us.

I was happy to see that Jasmine was so well-adjusted and obviously enjoying the village life. She was happier than she had been in that awful house in Sikasso, but some people could not accept that we were happy. They surmised that Jasmine must be going through terrible hardship and told others that it was a shame because we could afford better.

One of our well-wishers was a fat and ugly American woman who had arrived in Sikasso to join her husband. He was working in our project and had one day arrived with his huge dog totally uninvited and moved in with us in the village. Jasmine was very annoyed by this unwanted intrusion and had to feed his big dog as well, although the fellow kept on saying that he had some dog food somewhere. I am sure we could never move in with an unknown American family without invitation, but they felt condescending towards Asians, as I had earlier mentioned. We were taken for granted.

We did not know how long the fellow was going to stay because he kept on saying that his house was not yet ready. The fact was that he was not used to taking care of himself and the dog so he stayed until one day we decided to go to Mopti in the north and left him to fend for himself and his dog. That did it. He finally moved into his own house, where he impatiently waited for his huge wife to arrive.

Soon after her arrival, this woman declared that Sikasso was a great village. I do not know how many Malians were offended to hear that the second city in Mali was a village, but the woman was totally ignorant and full of prejudices. She walked around in tight shorts exposing her gigantic thighs to the dismay of Malians who took a dim view of women showing legs. She would also say "I am not home" to visiting neighbors, who were baffled by this expression.

This woman became a pain in our neck as she told everyone how poor Jasmine was suffering, living in a hellhole like that. Soon a Swiss woman arrived in our village carrying a basket full of food and canned goods because she had heard of the poor Jasmine. When we explained to her that we enjoyed living in the village in our own house, she was clearly embarrassed. We insisted that she take back her food basket.

Then I went to the husband of this fat woman and told him that we are doing quite well, and they should mind their own business. We had never been friends, but now the break was complete. She made a great deal of her own trouble by ignoring the Malian culture and her rude behavior toward them, so we avoided this family like plague and predicted that she would not last long.

She complained about just about everything from day one, and one day finally packed up and left the fellow and the country for good.

She was not the only misfit, though. There was another American woman who lived across our street in Sikasso. Once I saw this woman with painted lips, nails and high heels and predicted that she would not last long in Mali and was looking for an excuse to leave. The excuse was given one day when her black cat wandered off and was promptly beaten to death by the kids.

In Mali, a black animal is considered evil. It mattered little whether it belonged to someone or not. It was cultural, and culture is always based on beliefs and superstitions. Like in America there is a superstition about the number 13 so they do not have hotel room number 13 or the 13th floor in the elevator etc. Mali was no different. Here it was a black animal among other things. But this rattled the woman, who promptly packed up and left her husband high and dry.

The American missionaries were a tenacious lot, although they went through a great deal of culture shock and built in prejudices. They looked down on the native culture and took a very patronizing view of everything. Their sole mission was to convert the heathens to see the light, which they firmly believed only they could show. I began to form a very negative impression about the American missionaries.

I had made no attempt to learn the Bamanakan other than saying Ini Tie or Ini sogoma, although the language is not as difficult as Vietnamese. There simply was no great need to learn the language as my colleagues all spoke French, and they interpreted for me if I needed to talk to farmers. Malians took great pride in telling you that they spoke French correctly, although it was not true. They also showed great contempt for the uneducated and illiterate peasants, although our project was set up to work with farmers.

In a farming System's project there was no getting away from the farmers, but no one in the project showed any great concern for the rural folks and hated to visit the villages that were remote and far from Sikasso. They were a product of the education system dominated by the French teachers who molded them in one way while the situation in Mali demanded otherwise.

They were very proud of their methodology of selecting farmers based on how many hectares of cotton they grew, although the project had nothing to do with cotton. This made the choice of Gladie, Monzondougou and Sakoro logical in their mind. These villages were hundreds of kilometers from Sikasso and some in very remote areas, so to do any meaningful work, we had to go and stay in those villages from Monday to Friday.

During the rainy season, the goat tracks we used to follow in the featureless bush country were covered with very tall grasses that made driving very difficult. We never knew if we were on track or off, and sort of went by guesswork towards the villages. Often we bogged down in deep mud and spent hours extricating the heavy Land Rovers only to get bogged down again down the road. There was always the danger of sharp spikes or roots that could puncture the tires.

At first, the village chief provided us with a shelter and the women prepared hot water for our bath and cooked our meals, but the food was mostly dry catfish and rice or corn gruel. The farmers ate a porridge made of pounded sorghum dipped in a slimy green sauce, but it was always mixed with some sand, or so it seemed to me. Perhaps they added a bit of sand to make it taste better. I do not know. We often survived on this porridge called To.

I could never eat the dry fish that stink to high heaven, so prepared my own meals on a small kerosene stove. Jasmine packed me a provision of vegetables and other things for the week, so I managed to prepare a simple meal, but the effect of such a primitive regime started to show after a few months in the bush. I had to leave her in the village to fend for herself and the kids, but I had no choice. The work came first.

After a year or so I decided that each village should have our own quarters so that we would not impose on the villagers and held meetings with the village chiefs on this matter. As a result, the mud houses were built in two villages for us but never occupied. Do you know why? The project leader who was a Malian said that there should be a feast to properly inaugurate the lodgings, but never gave the money to organize the feast. He in fact never got around to doing much of anything and was often absent. He did not like to mention where he was going and how long he was going to be absent, and seldom visited the project sites. He was supposed to be my counterpart, but he wasn't.

I was left alone. The project was filled with people who did not know the first thing about agriculture, although it was a farming system's project, meaning agronomy and animal science. They collected data on genealogy which had no relevance to the project, but they would not listen. These volumes of data collected at great expense collected dust and were never analyzed or put to any kind of use.

Many thousands of questionnaires were filled by these people who often did not know what they wanted to know and what to ask the farmers, but to admit it was out of the question. They discussed for hours what should be the coefficient for a child, a woman and a man doing the same work and never could come to any conclusion after 5 hours of meeting. They were great talkers, but it did not help the project or advance the cause.

The Dutch went a step further. They wanted to know each and every franc the poor farmer spent and for what purpose every day of their life and piled up massive questionnaires that they said will be analyzed later in Holland. They said that an agronomist like myself did not know anything about social science, and only they were qualified to do such work. It did not matter to them that I had training in agricultural extension methods at a graduate level. They also had nothing to do with the farming systems project in the three study villages, but they always sat in the meetings that lasted no less than 6 to 7 hours each time and contradicted anything I proposed or discussed. They, however, were very defensive about what they were doing. I found that nobody wanted to do any agronomy work that was supposed to be the primary focus of such a project because no one was an agronomist.

They also loved to talk. I had never known people who could talk for hours and say nothing. They never could agree on a single agenda or topic. The decisions were always put off or hedged, like organizing a simple feast for the villagers who had helped build the houses for us in two villages due to my sole effort. I often went home angry and tired due to my inability to do the

work I was supposed to do. The employer also felt disappointed, but the project was run by the Malians so we could do nothing.

The Malians always had a pat answer. They said that they had to first understand the problems of the farmers before they could do something about it, so more questionnaires were made to collect more data. This was the dead end. Jeff often came to Mali and brought with him some "experts" in order to brainstorm as he put it, but a Malian brain could not be easily stormed. He said that I should visit other international centers of research but did not approve when I was invited to a Farming System's symposium in Tanzania. Professionally, it was going nowhere.

At least our personal situation had greatly improved since we moved to the village, where Jasmine felt happier. The village life was unhurried and peaceful. Our bare breasted maid did most of the chores but proved difficult when we did not give her gifts all the time and told others that we did not take care of her, and she did not get to eat what she wanted etc. which people who knew us did not believe. So we had to find another maid. This one was a bit younger and preferred to play most of the time than to work.

One day she came running saying there was a sa in the well. Sa means a snake, so I went to see what kind of snake was in the well. It turned out to be a baby boa, so I pulled it out and let it loose. A few days later, the boa was back because the well had many frogs. Again I pulled it out and drove to a dry river bank to let it go. Perhaps it would survive, as the boas usually did in the brush country. But there were many dangerous snakes in the village.

We often saw their tracks in the dirt, and I was worried. One night I went out behind the house and saw a huge spitting viper and chased it into the hollow of a tree and called some farmers. But they all ran away when they saw what it was. People are very afraid of this particular snake that spits venom into your eyes and causes blindness. The trick is to corner it so that it can not stand up and take aim because it is too late once it stands up and takes aim.

Jasmine was worried that I was messing with this venomous snake. Anyway, the farmers later killed a spitting viper near our house, but I do not know if it was the same one I saw. No wonder Malians girls made so much rackets during the full moon. I think it was their strategy to scare off snakes.

In December, we decided to have a Christmas party, so we invited the balafonists. A balafon is a xylophone that has the calabash or the African gourd as the resonance chamber, filled with spider webs that they hang below the platform. It produces a wonderful sound. The African balafonists are great indeed and can play for hours by rote. They are illiterate and do not have musical scores, so they play by memory.

Jasmine decided to cook some meat and rice while I blew up hundreds of balloons for the kids that made my cheek hurt for days. But the bigger kids lost all self-control and pushed and shoved the younger ones to get to the food first, as a result of which the food turned over into

the dust. The kids then fought over the food and ate the dust covered meat and rice like animals. It was truly pathetic. Jasmine was shocked to see such chaos. All our efforts were in vain. The smaller ones got trampled and kicked in the process and wailed.

Later, when I gave them the balloons, they quickly removed the air and put them in their pockets. I still had a lot to learn about their culture. In Mali, you have to always ask the elders to discipline the kids when there is food. They did this with a long cane. It was our mistake that we did not ask the elders. The balafonists came in the evening and played for hours and the whole village gathered under the mango tree so that part went well.

Some of the villagers were expert dancers who showed us their traditional dance in which they mimicked the movements of animals or insects. It was wonderful, but the younger boys and girls did not like the traditional dance. They preferred shaking their buns to the sound of cassette music.

We also noticed that the women took scarves from their heads and put them on some male dancers, perhaps to show appreciation. Some women danced with babies tied to their back to the sound of fast balafon. The babies were thus shaken like rag dolls by a dog.

The crowd got thicker as the hours got late, and they danced all night. The balafonists never quit. After a while you got the feeling that the sound was monotonous, but it was very traditional and very Malian. Balafonists demanded a lot of money, so we could afford only twice, but there were other distractions in the village as well.

Once we heard the muted drum beats late at night and went out to see what it was all about. I found hundreds of people under the tree making a tight circle, in the middle of which danced a magician or sorcerer and his sidekick. These itinerant black magicians, as I was told later, were feared by people because people believed that they could do many bad things. They danced around in the circle singing and often stopped to peer into a small mirror intensely. Villagers said that they could see the future or the past in the mirror. Perhaps they were clairvoyant.

They wore outlandish costumes studded with small mirrors and feathers in their headgear and paint on their faces. No one in the crowd smiled or even talked as they watched the ceremony intently. Even the normally whimpering kids were silent. I felt something sinister in the whole affair that made me uneasy and left. Jasmine did not bother to see it.

It was true that the Malian rural society had many secrets that remained secrets to foreigners no matter how long one lived among them, so I never pried to learn what these secrets were. I had a feeling that some of them were quite unpleasant. I had heard rumors that some people were cannibals, but there was no way one could know such things. I did not want to know, and we learned only about the nicer aspects of their culture.

On another occasion in another village called Sakoro, I happened to see the mysterious bird dance in which a fellow was completely covered with feathers and chirped like a bird, which his sidekick then translated. No one was supposed to know who was the person under the feather cloak because it was a strictly guarded secret. Photography was not permitted, although the village chief allowed me to take a few shots.

But normally a village dance was a jolly affair and was held around a campfire in the village square. During such dances the village griot or the bard danced around playing his homemade musical instrument singing about crops, weather or village happenings and entertained people. They were very good at improvising as they went along. The griot was followed by a string of apprentices or future griots who repeated everything the master said and played the cymbals or other instruments, creating quite a racket. The villagers enjoyed such dances enormously and often joined in verbal duels or songs themselves.

But the musical talents were not limited to griots only. In fact, there were many farmers who were very good at improvising, singing and dancing. Once in Monzondougou I remarked that the village was very quiet, so something should be done. Soon some musical instruments appeared, and the crowd gathered in the square. One old woman brought out a basin full of water on which she banged her calabash making a booming sound while others rattled cowry shells. They could make do with simple things to make sound and have a good time. Distractions were rare in the villages, where life was hard, especially for women.

They had to get up before dawn to pound the millet or corn, then fetch water and fire wood which often meant a walk of several kilometers, then prepare meals all the while carrying babies on their back or suckling. Then they had to go out and work in the fields and bring food to their men folks at noon time. The fields were often very far from the village. They also had to gather shea nuts in the forest to extract butter, which was their cooking oil so to speak. So women indeed had to work very hard.

They looked old at the age of 30 due to constant child bearing and overwork without rest. You could never tell the age of women by looking at their withered breasts, although most of them were young by Asian standard.

They nursed their young as long as they could because they knew that a weaned child was a malnourished child. Their basic food of corn gruel or sorghum was lacking in protein, and meat was a luxury.

I saw their fingers permanently crooked because of the way they held the heavy pestle to pound the grains every morning. Men seldom had toenails, and kids often had festering scabs. Medicines were hard to find, so they searched the forest for herbs and roots to cure minor ailments. Anything serious was indeed serious because the medical facilities were hundreds of kilometers away and the remote villages were hard to reach even during the dry season, let alone the wet season.

Many did not have money to pay for medical treatment in faraway hospitals, so many people died of infections or wounds. A kid could be accidentally gored by a cow and die before help could be found in such villages. But their major problem was lack of water during the dry season. The Swiss people had installed some hand pumps in some villages of an Indian design that were sturdy and popular, but the need was far greater than the resources.

Jeff was a very insensitive fellow who would often ask the villagers what their problems were as a matter of conversation, not realizing that the villagers pinned great hope on such queries and were disappointed. Jeff did not mean to do anything about their problems. He would also take the Africans for granted and made them wait needlessly when they had done him a great favor. He said that he did not want to meet with some people whom he had asked for an appointment and kept them waiting because it was a waste of time. He ignored lunch, saying he ate too much so you could go hungry if you were with him. Canada hired such people as program officers.

We lived in Mali for nearly two years now but the project was not doing well and not a single agronomy trial had been set up anywhere, so I was getting more and more irritated and this showed. I had no one to share my troubles with except Jasmine. She listened and often said that we should return to the Philippines because she also felt that our stay was not as meaningful as it should have been.

We listened to the BBC every night and enjoyed the play of the week, or we just sat around playing with Ashis and Jayanti. Ashis had memorized a great number of rhymes, which Jayanti also listened to and picked up. Our favorite was this little pig who went to market which Jayanti finished by saying all weli home instead of all the way home.

We found great joy in watching them grow up day by day, but they also caused problems once in a while. Like the time when Ashis playing with a Lego set thought it would be a good idea to insert a piece up his nose. This was late at night, but we rushed to the hospital and woke up the Chinese doctor, who took out the piece with a pair of long tweezers.

Or the time when he came home bleeding from his head because he had been hit by a bicycle in the village. The wound was superficial, but we were worried and cleaned up the mess with hot water and disinfectant. He was accident-prone and would cause more trouble later on in Mexico and in the Philippines, but I am getting ahead of my story.

We had to be always alert and ready for such emergencies, but on the whole they adjusted well and were healthy. Jayanti loved spaghetti and forked it up into her puffy cheek, making a mess on her bib, but Ashis liked other food. Later they would reverse their roles when Jayanti would become the fussy eater.

Many people often visited us in the village, but none returned the courtesy except the white fathers and the nuns who came in their mobilities or 2CV. We often picked up people in distress

and brought them home for a meal. Others just came and stayed a while because they had heard of our hospitality to strangers.

Once I saw an English woman walking down the road with a bag and asked if she needed any help. She was on the verge of tears as she narrated her tale of woes. She spoke no French and was trying to get to the Ivory Coast, so she bought a ticket to ride in the taxi de brousse that plied between Sikasso and Korhogo. The driver promised to leave soon, which he told everyone in order to sell more tickets but left only when the taxi was full. This could take the whole day as the few passengers trickled in. She, not knowing Africa at all, believed the driver and had waited since dawn until noon already.

So I brought her home, where she washed up and rested. Later I brought her back to the taxi that was still waiting to fill up and in no hurry to leave. At the station there were small children who sold water by the glass, but the English woman thought that the water was for washing, so she started washing her hands in it. The kid let out a wail because she had fetched the water from quite a distance for selling to thirsty passengers and although the water may have looked a bit unclean, it was perfectly potable so far as the Africans were concerned. I asked the woman to compensate the kid.

Another time in Sikasso we picked up a Zulu with his German wife or girlfriend, I never knew which. He said that he could not cash his traveler's checks, so needed to go to Korhogo in the Ivory Coast. We were also going that way, so gave them a ride. At the border, the drunken border guard gave them a hard time because he did not like black men going around with white women, so I had to placate the man somehow. The fact that he was a Zulu and from South Africa did not help the matter much.

In Korhogo more trouble was waiting. I managed to get them a room in a hotel, although the manager was very reluctant and wanted to get paid upfront because he said many such people left without paying their bills. Jasmine said that the poor fellow had no money for anything so we should go and give him some money, so I went very early the next day to the hotel. The room was empty, so I tiptoed out too. Who knows what their story was, or whether the Zulu had in fact told me the truth?

Once a Swiss fellow came to my office and said that he needed a place to stay for a few days. He was pedaling his bicycle from Dakar to Europe via Mali, Niger and Algeria. I greatly admire the courage of such people and brought him home. He sent me a postcard from Algiers saying that he had crossed the Sahara without problems and was on his way to Morocco.

Jasmine has a golden heart and jumps to help anyone in trouble. She never asks questions and tries to help as much as she can, so soon the word gets around that we always help no matter where we live in the world. Some people have taken advantage of this hospitality, like that American with his huge dog, but it has been our policy to help and not ask questions. I hope someday our children will also learn to help others in distress if they can.

The project was another story. They were in distress but accepted no help. Worse, they did not even acknowledge that they were in distress, but Jeff knew that something was wrong. That is when he brought in some" experts" to brainstorm the Malian brains, but that had no effect, although it lasted a few days and even nights exhausting everyone. I had never heard so many people who could sit around and talk so much that could be said in a few words, but they were the experts who wanted to prove their worth.

The Malians always said that they did not understand the problems of farmers.This was sad, but it should be understood in the context of their education, which required a lot of rote and little practical experience. In a country of illiterates, it was a great privilege to get some education, so the so-called educated Malians never let anyone forget that they were privileged people. I called them pseudo-intellectuals.

Their problem stemmed from the fact that France that had colonized Mali for so long exerted strong influence on their educational system that they had in fact devised and encouraged Malians to go to Montpellier or Dijon for further education. They did not learn the hands-on approach of the American or Western education that I had gone through in the States, India and the Philippines.

The Malian Franc was tied to the French Franc, and they were the buyer of the Malian cotton at a cheap rate to feed their mills. They heavily financed the cotton company called the CMDT that was the monopoly in Mali. They often bought first class cotton and gave the farmers a low price by saying that the cotton was not first class, it was dirty etc. The cotton farmers had no choice because they borrowed money from the CMDT to buy the seeds and fertilizer etc. and were obliged to sell the cotton to the company.

Cotton was the only cash crop for the Malian farmers and the Malians had no other buyer other than France, so they could not get away from France no matter how hard they tried. The Malian franc was weak and caused rapid inflation. Eventually, the Malian franc was abolished and the CFA reintroduced, which was controlled by the central bank of France.

Agricultural research was no exception because one could not get away from the French and their methods that they had insisted upon in their schools. It made little difference whether a Malian was educated in Katibougou or in Montpellier because they learned the same thing. Such graduates felt very ill at ease when they were asked to solve a practical problem in the field, like calibrating a seed drill or adjusting the depth of ploughing. They only learned the theory.

Their classical approach to research was always to start off with questionnaires, but that was not helping the farmers at all. A great deal of project money was being spent on collecting useless data that had no direct relevance to the problems the farmers faced.

In the third year I was able to do some work in three study villages, where I introduced the cultivation of upland rice, which was greatly appreciated by the farmers. I also tried to build a cheaper plough with a wooden beam to be drawn by a pair of bullocks, but I did not succeed due to lack of time now.

I also looked after a weed infested research station at Tierouala where 30 hectares were worked by few laborers and fewer resources. People who came to visit the station often said that it did not look like a station, but never increased the manpower or the budget to fix the only dilapidated tractor. When I tried the Chinese to manufacture the broken part for the tractor, the project leader refused to pay the bill. He also dilly-dallied about fixing up the residence for the manager of the station until one day I put my foot down.

Although the project was funded by the Canadians, and I was their employee, it was tightly controlled by the Malians. I never had funds for anything and often had to argue for it to buy a sack of fertilizer or seeds.

Mali is a destitute country. You have to live in their villages to understand the gravity of their situation. They not only have no roads, no schools, no health clinics or potable water, they also have no money to pay for the medicines if they got sick. They do not eat what they do not grow, so their diet is very limited, leading to malnutrition in children and also among adults. Their agriculture is totally rainfed so very risky if the rains fail or do not come in time or not adequate to grow crops.

What precious resources they do have are poorly used and managed, like hundreds of hectares of perennial weed choked rice land in Mopti where they once had good irrigation systems. Their waterways are in disrepair and in need of thorough rehabilitation. It is a big country with a small population, but most of Mali is not suitable for agriculture. Only the south and south-east corner is where they can grow crops, but they have to clear the brush manually to do so. That is very, very hard.

People live in round houses with thatch roofs in villages and suffer from malaria and a host of other diseases like river blindness or TB. Skin ailments are also common, as is goiter. Many children die at a young age due to lack of medical care. The untrained midwives do not help the matter that so many women develop complications after childbirth.

But the Malian researchers met once a year in the Amitie Hotel, where they read their research papers and made resolutions after resolutions to do this or do that to improve the lot of the poor. The minister came in his flamboyant boubou and made speeches and agreed that the resolutions be implemented, but it just remained a futile exercise. The resolutions passed the years before still were not implemented because there was no budget.

The farming system's project was designed to help poor farmers in agriculture by testing new varieties of crops, introducing new crops and technology to increase crop yields. How I wish I

could bring some of these farmers to the Philippines to show them what was possible, but it was not the farmers who needed a tour. It was the project manager, so he was packed off to see the latest in technology at IRRI and elsewhere in the world. It was he who attended the conferences in Tanzania, but that did not help much either.

I participated in a meeting in Dakar, Senegal where I discussed my results on rice and other crops like peanuts with the international scientists, but what was needed was a drastic change in attitude on the part of the Malians.This did not happen while I was there, so my frustrations boiled over. The project people instead of helping the farmers became an impediment to the progress, so I realized that my time could be better spent elsewhere in the world.

The Malians thought that I had landed another lucrative job somewhere, but it was not true. I had no other job, but I could not stay there any longer. The Canadian employer could not object because I had stayed the three years that I had signed up for, but they asked if I could suggest a replacement for me. I did not know anyone who could speak French and deal with the obstinate Malians, and said so.

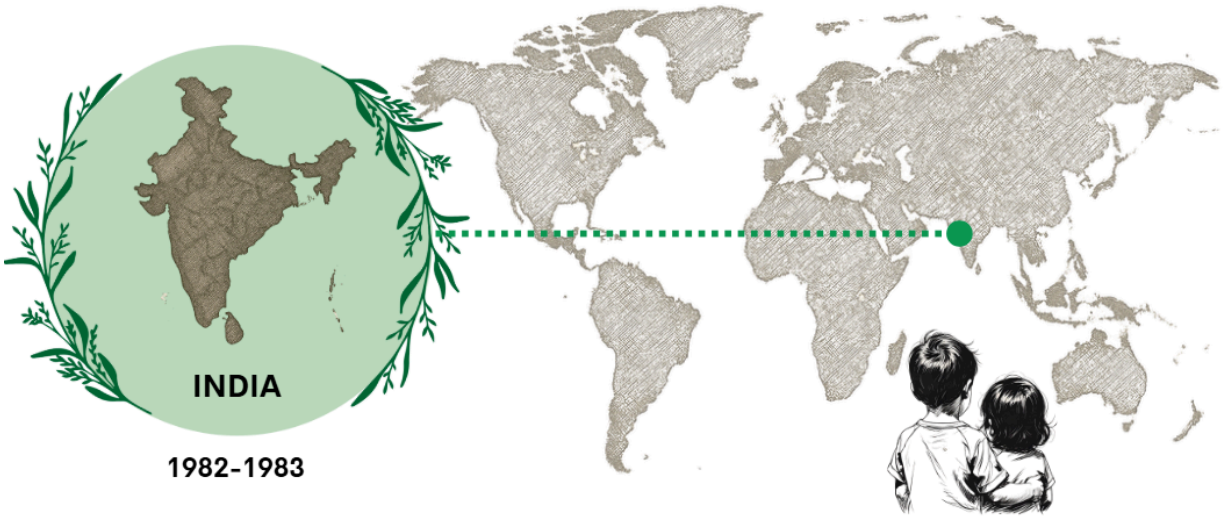
Now, the Malians were very eager to buy my things cheaply or get it for free. Jasmine gave away most of the kitchen things to the village women, and a few things were sold. No one asked for our address to keep in touch, that in itself speaks volumes about people. We made a few friends in Mali, but they were not Malians. The packing and getting ready to leave was a hard job, but one day it was all done. Jasmine managed it wonderfully.

My employer had some difficulties paying for our shipment, so we shipped at our own cost. The last part was also tragic. One American fellow who also worked on the project asked us to have lunch with him, to which we agreed, but on the appointed day we found to our surprise that he had forgotten about it and asked why we had come to his house. This was the ultimate in uncivilized behavior, but we had to move on, thankfully never to meet these people again.

It was amazing how little we felt for the country or its people now that we were leaving for good. Mali was already in the past for us. There was no nostalgia, but we did like the village where we lived, so we donated our house to the villagers to do what they would with it.

Jasmine and I would never return to Mali and never look back. I suppose one day the Malians would be able to solve their own problems in their own fashion. I just did not know when or how.

Chapter Ten: India, a strained return



It was the month of December 1981 when we left Mali for good. My old friends Pierre and Monique lived now in a small village called Domremy aux Bois, a few hours north of Paris, so we decided to see them on our way to India. I had not seen them for over 8 years or so, but we had kept in touch while Pierre and Monique lived in Daloa in the Ivory Coast. I wanted Jasmine to meet some of my friends, and they too were eager to meet with my family and children.

We had arrived in Paris in the winter, but were not very well-prepared for the extreme cold weather. My first job was to quickly find a hotel room, which we found near the rue de Bac downtown. It was not a good hotel, but the location was good. Jasmine went to the church nearby, where the body of St. Catherine Laboure was preserved in a niche. This belonged to the Order of the Daughters of Charity, to which her sister belonged. The Pili high school of Camarines Sur in the Philippines was named after this saint, so Jasmine was very happy to visit the place in rue de Bac.Jayanti and Ashis were very surprised to see a Santa Claus in the supermarket, handing out the grocery bags that we had paid for. They thought that Santa was giving us Christmas gifts. They were innocent and did not know about the commercial Santas in Europe and America. They also saw some Portuguese or Spanish people dressed as Three Kings of Biblical times begging for money in the streets. It was all very new to them.

I had other problems to worry about. The airlines had not confirmed our seats and were reluctant to do so, citing Christmas rush and full bookings, but I found the Swiss Air more sympathetic. They sent telex to their Geneva office to request four seats, citing two small children and demanding priority. I was still wondering what would happen, but the good news was waiting for us when I returned to the hotel. The Swissair had called to say that they had confirmed our seats, but they could only fly us to Bombay. I did not care. We were going to India via Geneva and Zurich.

Now we were free to proceed to Ligny en Barrois where Pierre would pick us up. He had not changed a bit and still had his scraggly beard and the old beat up BMW. We were glad to see each other after so many years and soon left for Domremy which was some 12 kms away tucked in a rural area.

Pierre had bought an old farm house there that he was renovating slowly during weekends. Monique was still the same beautiful and vivacious Monique I had known in Mostaganem, but the kids had grown up. They instantly adopted Ashis and Jayanti and would not let them out of sight.

It was a novel experience for Ashis and Jayanti to see the snow fall like combed cotton and cover everything. We lit up the fireplace and reminisced about the good old days and caught up with the news about people we knew. Monique had taken up weaving and made beautiful clothes on the loom that Pierre had assembled for her. Kids were going to school where Pierre taught.

Their house was full of artifacts they had collected over the years in Africa. There were precious ivory and ebony carvings and masks from the Ivory Coast, but Monique sighed and said that the village folks were farmers who had never gone anywhere and failed to appreciate finer things in life like art or museum collections of African handicraft.

I went around anyway to see the village and meet with some folks who enthusiastically coddled their piglets to show me and one farmer even showed me his milking machine. He knew about poor India, where they had probably never seen such machines. I knew exactly how Monique felt. She was a sophisticated woman of art and culture, living in an unsophisticated village where the most important news of the day was the birth of piglets.

The village was picture-pretty with meadows full of brown cows, streams full of fish and deer could be found in the forest nearby, but it was very rural and definitely not a place for the likes of Pierre and Monique, but they stayed and improved their farmhouse bit by bit. She told me that one day she went to the village church and sat in the front row, not knowing that it was reserved for the rich farmers, whether they came or not. They gave her dirty looks and made her feel that she was out of place and stopped going to the cold stone church.

But his house was nice and big. He had installed a nice bathroom and the fireplace made the house seem cozy. I noticed that one of his chairs needed fixing, so together we shaped a new leg for it while their dog kept leaping at us to my great annoyance. But it was good to see them and sad to leave not knowing if we would ever see them again. Probably not.

We were lucky once again because at the New Charles de Gaulle airport in Roissy they told us that they may have to shut down all flights due to heavy snowfall soon, but our flight to Geneva left on time. We had to change plane there, but the computer malfunctioned while we waited impatiently to get the boarding cards, which were finally handwritten by the agent. We boarded

the plane to Zurich in the nick of time, but the Zurich to Bombay flight was on time, and we arrived in India without any hassle.

Now we had to get on a flight to Kolkata, but there was a nasty surprise waiting for us here. The agent said that our names were not on the list.This was the last straw. I had brought my family all the way from Bamako and had confirmed tickets, so I made a great fuss and insisted. Soon another agent appeared and said that there was a mistake and gave me four boarding cards. All's well that ends well, so now we headed for Kolkata where Annapurna was to meet with us, and together we would go to Darjeeling for a vacation. I wanted to show Jasmine and the kids the majestic Himalayas and the snow covered peaks of Kanchenjunga.

Nirmal at that time was posted in a small town in Bihar state, so we decided to visit with him there after our trip to Darjeeling. Annapurna arrived in Kolkata on the dot, so soon we left for Siliguri from where we would take the toy train to Darjeeling. This toy train is really like a toy train in that a small engine pulls up the steep gradient huffing and puffing while an attendant sits in front of the engine sprinkling sand on the tracks to get more traction.

It is a relic of the British past and a great favorite of tourists, but we were out of luck. The train was not running so we took a taxi all the way to Darjeeling, passing through and slowly climbing all the time lovely green hills full of tea plantations, pine forests and cute red tiled houses. This is the place famous for tea in the whole world. We could now smell the crisp mountain air laden with the scent of pine trees and see the deep blue skies full of cotton like clouds. It is truly beautiful.

At 7000 ft above sea level, Darjeeling is always cold and cloudy, but we found a nice hotel. The clouds would come in through the windows and soak your clothes if you forgot to close the windows tight. It was a novel experience for all of us, but especially Jasmine and the kids. Only poor Annapurna hated going up and down the hills to go anywhere because she was obese and easily tired.

Still we had great fun and went to see the famous sunrise on Kanchenjunga that tourists from all over the world came to see. It is spectacular, but only if there were no clouds obscuring the peak. As luck would have it, we did not see anything spectacular at all due to heavy clouds, but the touts always said it was fantastic the day we did not go. They practically broke down your door trying to wake you up at 4 am and bring you to Tiger Hill to see the sunrise of course for a hefty fee. The ruddy cheeked hill women made hot tea by the roadside for the tourists and put cardaMom in it.

CardaMom and many exotic spices grew abundantly in these verdant hills, but the most valuable crop was the tea that the British had introduced long ago. It not only grew well here,it produced the aroma that was unmatched anywhere. It was the number one export of the country and employed thousands upon thousands of hill people who worked in innumerable plantations picking tea leaves and tending the gardens.

We were told that the best quality tea leaves were the tiny leaves that only small children with nimble fingers could pick. They had never heard of anti child labour laws here, but mostly it was a women's job who carried an enormous basket on their backs and picked tea leaves while singing hill songs together. The cool climate, the white clouds and the emerald green manicured hills where colorfully dressed hill girls and women wearing silver jewelry picked tea leaves and sang their eternal songs was out of an Arabian night storybook.

But there was a dark side to Darjeeling at this time that we soon saw in the insolent and arrogant behavior of Nepalese people who had settled here. There was an undercurrent of tension here that would explode in a few years to cause widespread unrest among these people. I still do not understand what was their main complaint, but it destroyed the tourist trade that was the mainstay of Darjeeling and brought poverty and misery to people.

I understand that the situation has improved since then, but we felt uneasy and after staying a few days left for Kolkata. We visited the Buddhist monasteries run by Tibetan and many such sites like Mirik lake where the government was developing bungalows and parks for the tourists, but some local visitors were dirty people who threw garbage around and did their toilet in public places. It was disgusting.

The Batasia loop, the Tibetan handicraft center, the mountaineering institute set up by Tenzing Norgay who climbed Everest with Hillary were many places we visited. We also visited a tea garden and Jasmine saw the tea being picked, dried and processed there. The air was full of the aroma of dry tea that they also sold there at half the market price, so we bought some.

The road passed by very close to the Nepal border, where the tourists went shopping for illegal umbrellas and other cheap things. Why anyone would get excited about umbrellas or trinkets was beyond me, but Indians were crazy about anything imported, even if of shoddy quality. The taxi driver had many hidden places under the bonnet to hide the contrabands from the prying eyes of the customs officers, but we were not impressed.

Back in Kolkata, we decided not to visit the birthplace of my father in the village about 40 km away and went to Bihar to see Nirmal. The train ride from Siliguri and from Kolkata was exhausting in the heat of the plains, but we arrived in the small town where Nirmal and his family were staying. Mom was also with them, so we all rested for a while before heading towards Sri Ram Pur. Nirmal was a gracious host and arranged for a picnic, but Sabita was still the same and looked unfriendly.

Annapurna liked the warmer climate of the plains and disliked the cold weather in the hills, where she often complained of dizziness, so she was happier. We were thinking about what to do now. The kids needed schooling, and we needed to stay put in one place for a while. I sorted out our future, so Sri Ram Pur seemed like a logical place.

This was perhaps the most trying period for Jasmine. Visiting the folks for a few weeks was one thing and staying in Sri Ram Pur was another. Sabita had never liked her and was openly jealous of her. I was there to protect Jasmine from hurt and told her that it was a blessing that she did not speak Bengali. Sabita was poor in English so that too helped but not that much.

In Sri Ram Pur we got Ashis admitted to St. Joseph school where the headmaster was impressed by his English, not knowing that it was his first language. Jayanti was too small to be admitted there, but she went around the table chirping baa baa black sheep and other rhymes, oblivious to the smiles of the headmaster. She was adorable. She too was eager to go to school, so we got her admitted to a nursery school, where she learned to sing a few Hindi rhymes and other things.

The first day of school was difficult for both of them, and they cried, but soon got used to going to school and greatly enjoyed it. Ashis started learning the alphabets and slowly but steadily developed beautiful handwriting, while Jayanti mostly sat with Hindi-speaking children trying to understand a strange language that she could not fathom. Ashis's classmates did not speak English either so he felt isolated but his teacher, a young compassionate lady, took him under her protection and care, realizing that he was a special child.

At home Jasmine felt the same isolation as before and longed to return to the Philippines, but I tried to make her stay in India as comfortable as possible and converted the old kitchen into our bedroom, the room next to it renovated for the kids and bought new furniture, electric fans and many other things. But lonely she remained, as no one tried to be her friend. She tried hard to please Sabita and Mom but did not succeed. Our living quarters were separated from the rest of the house by an iron door that was locked at night by them, making our isolation seem more complete.

I busied myself with painting the house and fixing mosquito screens. We were not used to mosquitoes and flies, although the others did not care. My aim was to make Jasmine and the kids comfortable because it was their first prolonged stay with my folks, but she often cried silently because they misunderstood her. The great cultural barrier seemed greater now. Mom was aloof to Ashis and Jayanti, although she caressed Sabita's daughter. One day, Ashis eagerly tried to show his grandmother his new school uniform, but she put it aside, ignoring him. He was only a 4-year-old child who was baffled.

My heart cried out for the innocent children, but it hurt Jasmine the most. She became pale and sickly, making our family doctor very concerned, and one day gave her tablets of valium to make her sleep and less tense. I bought her vitamin tablets and energy drinks, but that too did not help. I had brought her and the lovely innocent children into this nightmare, so I felt terribly guilty and desperately tried to get a job somewhere so that we could all leave.

But no one cared in India for a person of my background. You did not get a job in India because you were qualified. You got a job because you knew someone.I did not know anyone. I no

longer understood this country, where I was a complete stranger now. My folks in the past had complained that I never tried to find a job and settle in India because I did not want to live in India, but that was not true. I came and was trying hard.

I shielded Jasmine and the kids as much as I could, but often that was not enough. The summer months were the only respite we all got, but it worsened once Sabita arrived in July from Bihar. Only Annapurna showed sympathy to Jasmine and loved the kids, but she had to go back to her job in another town. Even Parvati showed callousness towards Jasmine when she refused to sew her a blouse. Jasmine's fault was that she wanted a blouse that covered her stomach completely. Indian women wore blouses that looked more like a bra.

We were shocked at this attitude of Parvati but kept quiet. They were hurting a saintly girl who was innocent like a child and was trying hard to please my relatives. What was worse was that Sabita often compared Ashis and Jayanti with her daughter, who was better in every respect according to her. She even wondered aloud what I saw in Jasmine to marry her. It was in Bengali, so Jasmine thankfully never knew what it was that she said.

I began to hate Sri Ram Pur. I had lived away from Sri Ram Pur for nearly 14 years, but now realized that we had absolutely nothing in common with them anymore. They did not understand us or even try. I could not talk to Nirmal any longer because he showed open contempt for the western ways that he thought I had picked up by speaking in English etc. but felt very defensive about India, good or bad. He was like those super patriot Americans in DC.

He often flared up when we said that the people defecating openly by the railway tracks in plain view of the passing trains gave bad impressions to foreigners who came to India for the first time. He said it was better than the half naked women lying on the beach in America, although the analogy failed to clear up in my mind. We had really grown apart in every possible way, and there was no meeting of the mind based on logic. The point was that they felt ill at ease with us and our view of the world that they could not share, being tradition bound. It was the typical us vs the rest syndrome.

We had traveled to many parts of the world and had lived in many places, but it did not mean anything to them because they lacked curiosity. They said that it did not matter to them what happened outside India, but I suspected it did not matter to them what happened in India as well. They lived in the small confines of their homes and a few people they knew. Politics never interested me and one could not discuss weather for long, so we fell silent and slowly, but definitely an invisible wall came up.

What was very surprising was that no one wanted to know anything about Jasmine or about her family. They did not know that she was a college graduate and had majored in accounting or that she had worked in banks holding important jobs. They did not know anything about her family and did not seem to care. Sabita did not believe that Jasmine was knowledgeable about

child-rearing or their health care, but Sabita was as ignorant as a door knob on any matter let alone child care but never admitted.

Jasmine waited patiently to be asked, but they never did. Later I began to understand that the root cause for this aloofness and jealousy was perhaps the fact that Jasmine was beautiful,tall and educated and now well traveled, so in her presence Sabita felt inferior and tried to hide it by showing negative feelings. Our children were also beautiful with very good manners, and that too grated on her when she compared her daughter to them. There were many reasons, but none of them are important now.

My mother walked a tightrope. She could not be seen siding with or favoring her younger and obviously rich son because she was taken care of by Nirmal and his hateful wife, who would do so until she died. I think Nirmal was less concerned about such things, but his wife was not, and it was she who controlled Nirmal totally.

Their marital relationship was very different from ours. Nirmal being a peace loving person by nature had surrendered to his wife long ago who now dominated his life by deciding everything for the household, but she had no such control over us. I think she resented it. She seldom spoke, but we all felt that she was behind every decision ever made. I had seen what had happened when Nirmal voiced his objection. She simply packed up and left for her father's house nearby. Then Nirmal had to go and placate her in order for her to return. This is what I suspected happened in arranged marriages where women tried to get the upper hand. Their relationship was not based on love and mutual understanding

I remembered Nirmal being interested in playing guitar and had bought for him a magnet for his electric guitar in Kolkata, but now it collected dust. He liked music so I bought an expensive stereo from Algeria that was the first in the community and had given him a Kodak carousel slide projector and many slides from many countries to enjoy. They, too, collected dust. He used to paint and make beautiful clay figurines because he was an artist, but now he sat in one corner reading a newspaper. His wife had killed the artist in him as surely as the Sunrise. It was sad.

He sometimes mused that he regretted not having a companion to his heart who could understand and appreciate finer things in life. Sabita was a devoted wife and knew his daily routine and what he liked to eat. She cleaned his shirt and prepared his meals so that he could leave for his office on time. She waited at the gate at 5.30 pm for him to return every day. She was devoted, of which there was no doubt.

But whenever I tried to get him interested in doing things that I knew he loved most, his eyes sparkled for a while before they dimmed again. He had paid a price to have marital peace, but he was often very irritable and showed it over very simple reasons like a missing button from his shirt or a hole in his sock. He was the lone male in a household full of females, and often felt his

frustrations. A Bengali household full of women even though related could be a tense place as they never openly fought with each other but kept their differences simmering over many years.

I learned that they remembered what one had said twenty years ago and made an issue of it if they wanted to. Their vindictiveness had no end, which was hard for me to understand. Jasmine was innocent like a child and was often baffled at the simmering of tension that needed only a slight excuse to come to the surface.

She was also very surprised at the two facedness of Sabita who would hug a visitor in obvious delight and start cursing in vile words when the visitor left. In fact, it turned out that she had very few good things to say about anyone, making us wonder what she said about us to others behind our back.

The Sri Ram Pur household lived for only one reason. It was to serve the needs of Nirmal who was the bread earner, so everything else became secondary. For example, we had to wait until 10 am to get any breakfast until Nirmal left for his office and the daughter left for her school. She did not care if Jasmine and the kids were hungry because her first duty was to her husband and daughter.

I therefore bought bread, jam, jelly etc. so that Jasmine could have early breakfast. She was not allowed into the kitchen to help herself. If I bought sweets or fruits for everybody, Sabita would ignore it because it did not come from Nirmal. She even ignored the pooja sweets that I brought from the Holy temple of Viswanath in Banaras that I had gone to see once. No Hindu worth his salt dared to ignore the offerings from the Temple of Vishwanath, but Sabita did not believe it. She did not consider me religious enough to offer worship to Shiva.

She openly said that she did not like guests who stayed because it meant extra work for her. It perhaps included us, although she did not say that openly. Jasmine learned that she had to be self-dependent if we were to stay in Sri Ram Pur. So she prepared the kids for school early in the morning and their lunch boxes. Our lunch was still served at 1.30 pm or later, but we learned to cope. We always reminded ourselves that it was not our home, so we had to adjust to others as best as we could.

I kept fixing the house and looking after the needs of Jasmine and the kids. Only my cousin and his wife came once in a while to talk to Jasmine or invited her to their house. I took her out for long walks when she poured out her frustrations and difficulties, but I was also helpless.

I had written to many potential employers, but they did not reply. The New Delhi office that offered employment for returning Indian scientists like me gave me hope and said that they were processing my application and would soon answer. In fact, one day a policeman came to tell me that my appointment was due soon because my police clearance had been sent already to Delhi. I became hopeful. It was our way out of this mess.

Some people began to talk to us in a condescending manner saying that I was indeed on a prolonged vacation, so all these experiences finally laid the groundwork for the ultimate decision that we would soon make of leaving India for good, but we were still a few months from it and did not know it.

It was a period of trial for the four of us and specially so for Jasmine who endured it more bravely than us. It made me appreciate her more. We became closer to each other since we understood that our bond of love was also our protection against hurt feelings.

Then one day in October 1982 we received a telegram from the Philippines. Jasmine's father was in the hospital and in a very serious condition. Her sister wrote that he had only days to live and wanted to see Jasmine. She cried a lot and wanted to return to the Philippines immediately. But Mom thought that Jasmine was using the telegram as an excuse to leave India and perhaps her father was not sick at all.

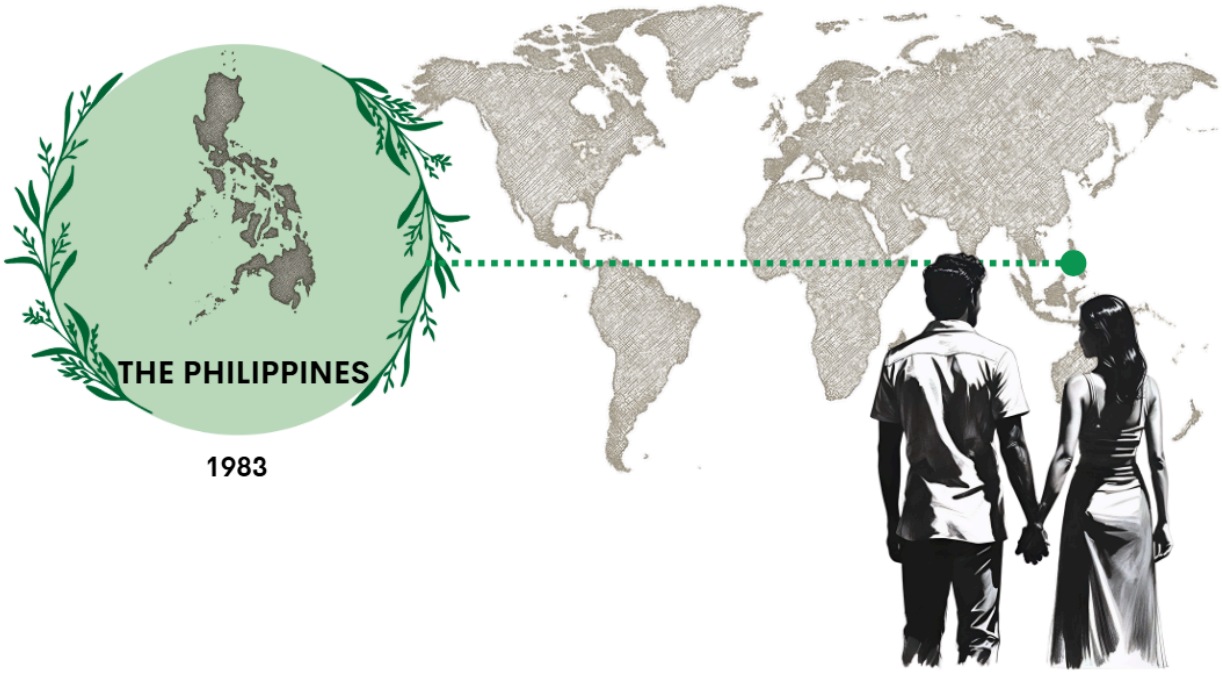
It was truly shocking. I did not expect it from my mother, but had a suspicion that it was Sabita who had sown the seed of doubt in my mother's mind. I did not take long to make my decision. Jasmine was surprised when I told her that we were all going back to the Philippines immediately. The same night, we boarded a train for Delhi via Meerut, although I had a fever. Our family doctor gave me some medicine to take on the train. In Delhi the very next morning, we went straight to the Philippines consulate and Jasmine convinced the consul to issue the three of us visas right away.

Then we went to the airline and confirmed four seats on a flight from Kolkata, which they did after sending urgent telexes to Hong Kong. We were cleared to take off in three days. Then we went to the passport office to get a clearance for the kids, which they stamped right away. Then we went to the income tax office and got a clearance for myself because any Indian who stayed over three months had to get a clearance. We accomplished all of these tasks in a few hours that normally took many days and took the train back to Sri Ram Pur right away.

The next day I got the transfer certificate for the kids because they were now going to study in the Philippines and never coming back to India. Jasmine started packing right away. Our stay in Sri Ram Pur thus came to an abrupt end and we soon left for Kolkata by train, from where we would fly to Manila via Hong Kong. It was the wisest decision I would ever make. This time there was no doubt that we would never come back.

It was clear that our children could not grow up in India and Jasmine could not stay. The government of India finally offered me a job, but it came too late. I could not accept it. The Sri Ram Pur folks sensed that it was a definite departure for us but kept quiet. I think my mother realized that we faced an impossible situation in Sri Ram Pur, although I had tried my best to settle. But that was not to be. Our destiny lay elsewhere.

Chapter Eleven: Philippines, new roots



Soon we left India and the bad experience behind forever and flew towards the Philippines for possibly a new life and a new beginning. We had no plans other than reaching Pili in time so that Jasmine could get to see her dying father. But in Manila there were some formalities to complete. I had to apply for a resident status, so we went to the Immigration office and met with the bureau chief who handled the process.

He was an old lawyer who finally agreed to expedite my case and asked a junior lawyer to do the paperwork immediately. I had convinced him that we needed to reach Pili soon and were traveling with two small children who were tired and needed rest, not to mention Jasmine, whose father was very sick. So all the paperwork was done, and we arrived in Pili the very next morning.

This is remarkable because the Bureau of immigration and deportation in Manila was not noted for efficiency when it came to the cases involving Boombais as the Indians were called here. The word deportation was often emphasized in case of aliens, so by and large it was an unfriendly place full of unfriendly people who were very prejudiced against the Boombais.

That is why I said that it was truly remarkable. The lawyer chief was friendly, and they handled my case with compassion and speed.

The Boombais were a sad lot in the Philippines. Many came as tourists and stayed on to do business of loan sharking, although the local pawn shops were better at gouging people than them. They hid in the provinces from the immigration sleuths, but sometimes got caught and deported. The term Boombai included anyone who looked like them, like Bangladeshis, Pakistanis or others. Children were taught rhymes that went like that." there is a Boombai, there is a Boombai hiding under the bridge" and the local TV and radio were full of deprecations about the Boombais who were called five sixers. The transvestites made jokes about them on TV.

You could often hear Filipinos talking among themselves belittling Boombais, so the prejudice was widespread. They had read in the Reader's Digest how poor India was and people there starved all the time. Nothing you could say or do could change their mind because their belief was very strong. This would later change as the cable TV came via satellite and brought BBC and CNN and with it wide coverage of India but only among the educated class. The grassroots did not have satellite TV or understand English, and it was they who would continue this tragic prejudice.

When Jasmine defended by saying that India was a misunderstood country, they just laughed and said she said it because she was married to a Boombai. The fact was that very few Filipinos had ever traveled to India and most knew absolutely nothing about it because their knowledge of other countries was limited to the United States where the streets were paved with gold and where every Filipino wanted to go and live the good life.

Even those Filipinos who had immigrated to the United States lived in close Filipino communities like in Daly City near San Francisco and did not mix very much with the mainstream Americans. They had their own TV programs piped in from Manila and shops where they could buy the native food. The ones in the Philippines envied them and wanted to go there.

There were historical reasons for their affection for America or anything American. The Philippines was colonized by America for a long time, and they came to its aid during the last war when the Japanese occupied the country and treated the locals roughly. Many Filipinos like Mr. Castillo had served in the USAFE which stood for US army in the far east and many war veterans were later allowed to immigrate to the United States. They number now in millions there and constantly petition for their relatives. The USA is also the main trading partner of the Philippines.

Filipinos imitate anything American good or bad and consider them as their role models. They have historically looked to the east and not to the west because the east is where they all wanted to go. In their schools they were taught American history but not much Asian history. The American fashion, American music, American food, movies and hot dogs were better in their mind. There were many other reasons.

But their prejudices against Indians came primarily from ignorance, as most prejudices are. The ragged looking strange people wearing funny turban and bracelets riding motorbikes and hiding

in the provinces did not create much of an impression on the Filipino mind. They thought that if India was such a great country, then why did these people come to the Philippines selling umbrellas? Their logic was hard to beat.

The local newspapers did not help the matter either. When a giant warship of the Indian Navy made a courtesy call to the port in Manila, they printed a badly taken photo and the article in very small letters also in faded ink and shoved it into the 13th page. As if they did not believe that India had a very modern navy, including carriers and sophisticated submarines.

Many Filipino women saw that marriage to a white American was their only ticket to the promised land to escape from their misery here and were very surprised that we voluntarily returned to settle down somewhere.

People were often surprised that I had a Ph.D. and was not selling umbrellas or hiding under the bridge. It made them uneasy and at a loss as to how to react. Most had never met an Indian who was so educated and who did not wear turban or bracelets. Some even asked Jasmine what made her marry an Indian, when they did not rate so high in their mind. Remember her sisters? They were typical Filipinos. Ignorance and prejudice goes hand in hand.

Most Filipino girls if asked to rate in order of preference whom they wanted to marry inevitably said that the first choice was a white American and last a Boombai. The African Americans were not even considered. They could not believe it when we said that we found the Philippines a very nice country because they tried so hard to leave, where opportunities were few. Most would go to the Middle East doing menial labor jobs, but they came from the grassroots or grp as we called them. The educated ones tried for the United States.

Anyway our journey had come to an end at least for the time being. Her father was in the intensive care in Naga City hospital and indeed very sick. It took him some time before he could recognize Jasmine, but finally showed signs that he was happy to see her. He could not speak and was fed through the nose. His hulk had shrunk to practically nothing, and he had terrible bed sores. His eyes were vacant and the body emaciated. It was even harder for us to watch, but I was glad we were able to come quickly because he died two days later.

The death of a parent is always very hard on the children, as I knew from my experience when my father died so painfully of cancer in 1966. It was naturally very hard for Jasmine and the rest but I think they were also relieved that his sufferings were over.

Her younger brother was at this time about to be ordained as a priest, which was a great moment in any Filipino family, so they got busy preparing for the funeral as well as the ordination. I was just a passive observer in these family rituals because here too remained a barrier between me and them.

I was here to give Jasmine moral support, who was undergoing a good deal of emotional turmoil after her harrowing experience in India. This was the time she needed me the most, so I was glad to be by her side.

I noticed that no matter how distant people were to each other, they all showed up during a funeral. It was a time to show their solidarity. It was the word Annapurna did not understand because we did not have such solidarity in our family. In India, even close relatives often did not attend the funerals. It was because the Hindu tradition dictated that the body be cremated within 24 hours of death, so the relatives living far away could not reach in time.

But in the Philippines the body remained in the coffin for a long time to allow distant people to come and join the funeral, so a constant stream of people came and ate and drank beer to my great amazement. As if it was a festive occasion and not a wake. Such are the traditions of different countries. Here people wore black but in India and also in Vietnam the color of mourning is white not black.

Ashis and Jayanti, still very young, watched everything with curious eyes. They could not speak Tagalog or the local dialect called Bicol so they remained outside the conversation. Most Filipinos were very poor in English, although a few made a valiant effort for a few minutes until they ran out of vocabulary. The children did not bother.

The cultural differences between the Philippines and India are very remarkable. In fact, they are so great that I often wondered if other than religion, there are some common grounds. How could these two people develop even a modicum of understanding of each other given such differences tainted with prejudices? Of course, no one was trying or interested.

Soon after the funeral and the ordination, we decided to find a rented house in Naga City where the kids will now have to start their schooling because here too, living with the in-laws was tiring. So a small dilapidated house near the school of Jayanti was found, and we quickly moved in. Ashis was to go to school just across the street, so it was perfect. The transfer certificate helped them get to the higher grade right away, so the transition from India was smooth. Jayanti was a bit underage for kindergarten, but she charmed the teachers with her fluent English and baby talk. She would remain the baby of the class all through college, and so would Ashis. Filipino children started schooling at a later age than in India.

We set up a new household once again in the Jacob street apartment and looked after the kids and their education. They had started well and in fact were far ahead of their classmates in every respect. Jayanti became the darling of the sisters because she was not shy and could recite many rhymes by rote.

She started to learn the alphabets and made rapid progress. She learned many songs and dances and showed them to anyone. Ashis was also getting along well and started to learn

many things. They clearly had an advantage in English, which was their first language, but also because they had lived in different countries and traveled.This experience set them apart.

This cross-cultural exposure was an asset to them, but their classmates had no idea what Ashis and Jayanti talked about in Mali, France or in India. They had never heard of Mali and what they knew about India or Indians was not very favorable, but our kids got along wonderfully and adjusted well to their new surroundings and schools. The trouble was that their classmates did not speak English and our kids did not yet learn the local language. This would change later as they grew up. They started to pick up Bicol words.

I was not as well-adjusted as I appeared to be. The rented house was on a very noisy street that made me very jumpy because I am sensitive to noise pollution and can not stand it. The trimobiles and motorbikes without mufflers made the matter worse. I longed for a quiet place, but it was not to be where we lived. I think at this time the idea of either building a house or buying one started to take root.

Jasmine had inherited a lot in town where we could build our house, but I soon discarded the idea. A new house meant dealing with the corrupt city hall people, so we started to think about a suitable ready built house somewhere. It is really amazing how fast the word spreads in a small town like Naga.

Soon some real estate agents started hounding us with their endless proposals, but we turned them all away until one day I said to Jasmine that we should go with them and then say no so that they will leave us in peace.

The house we went to see was an unfinished house in a subdivision which the old woman wanted to sell because she could not pay the bank the monthly amortization. She was a widow and lived alone. I liked the house right away because it was just right for us. It had a big living room and two bedrooms. The bathroom was small, but that could be enlarged, and the kitchen needed some work, but on the whole it was a good house that had a garage and some space in the front and the back.

We agreed to buy it to the great joy of the agents and the old woman and I got very busy for the next month or so to fix up the house properly. It had to be ready before Jayanti's birthday in January when we planned to move in. We no longer had to live with in-laws anywhere and finally had our own place.This was to be our home, and a lovely home at that. I made sure of it.

We tore down all the plywood and built solid brick walls. We enlarged the bathroom and put in a flush toilet, shower and beautiful blue tiles. Not only that, but we put in a fence and a steel gate and had all the walls plastered with strong cement. I bought a pressure operated automatic water pump and had a deep well sunk in the back garden. The floor was to be red. The new tube lights were installed in all the rooms and the house spruced up with paint in and out.

We put in balusters outside for the garage, which would soon house our VW Brasilia that we bought. In fact, I was in the mood of spending and fixing up everything because I really liked the idea of our first real home. Jasmine was ecstatic and gave me many ideas. We planted roses in the front and fruit trees at the back. The front door was of a heavy duty carved Narra wood.

The metal gate bore the letters of our surname in bold style that we painted white with a blue background. In short, we got everything done in time for us to move in on the 5th of January 1983. Jayanti was to celebrate her 4th birthday in the new house.

I bought a very nice Akai stereo with tape deck and record player and set it up in our newly painted huge living room, where we set up the sofa set that Jasmine had purchased long ago. We brought all her stuff from Pili, including the Narra divider. I bought her the Singer sewing machine, ref and gas stove, pots and pans and everything she needed. We set up the TV and the dining table on one side of the big living room, so it was perfect.

Only the curtains remained, but that too came shortly. For Ashis and Jayanti we built double-deck beds because the bedrooms were not large, and we occupied the front room. Soon a maid was found, and we had a regular brand new household going in no time at all.

I started to enjoy life again, truly relaxing with good music and playing with our lovely children, or just sitting in our new garden talking to Jasmine. I put two easy chairs in the lawn where we usually sat, savoring it all.

We talked about how Momentous our decision to leave India had been because one thing led to another. I had been given permanent residency by the Manila Immigration office, and our children were recognized as Filipino citizens. What more could I ask for? We had everything.

Our new maid waxed and polished the floor like a mirror while we just sat enjoying it all. Due to our good luck, the kids went from one grade to the next and never missed a single school year since we had gotten them started in India, so the transition was smooth. Now they had their own bunk bed and their room. People marveled at the beautiful house that took shape so quickly. We now had a car, and it helped a lot in bringing the kids to school and running errands.

Her younger sister who had opposed our marriage now had a change of heart and moved in with us. Often her mother came and stayed, so it was nice for the kids to have a grandmother here. Their experience with their grandmother in India was nothing to write about, and we hoped that they did not remember her. The best news was that Jasmine regained her health and was the jolly and lively woman I knew in Mali.

Soon I received a letter from Robert Springsteen who now worked in the United States. He asked if I would like to work on a project in Haiti, to which I said yes. The offer of a job of professor in the Visayas state college of agriculture that had been recently made did not interest me because I had been to that place. It was isolated and full of religious fanatics. The

Americans were anxious to have me in Haiti so one day in the month of February 1984, I left for the United States for the orientation program and then for Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Jasmine and the kids were to stay behind until I could find a suitable house and schooling facilities in Haiti. I really did not know anything about Haiti, so I had to first find out.

I met the team leader in Arkansas and many others. I was assured that Haiti is a nice country and I should get ready to go there for four years. He was bringing his family there, so I started hoping that soon Jasmine and the kids would be able to join me. We had never been separated before, so I really wished us to be together in Haiti. Thus, a new chapter was about to begin.

Chapter Twelve: Haiti, amongst a people about to revolt

I was met at the Port-au-Prince airport by a Haitian employee of the AID, who took me to the hotel called Castel Haiti up on a steep hill and helped change some money in the local currency called gourds. It was indeed very nice of her to receive me and fix me up in a hotel, although I was quite used to be on my own anywhere.

Port-au-Prince is partly in the plains and partly up the steep mountains that rise just behind the waterfront. From the airport to the town, we passed by the most horrible bidonville I had seen anywhere. This is where the multitude of very poor people lived in the capital of Haiti. The streets here were strewn with garbage and gutters overflowed. People in rags were everywhere, reminding you that you are now in one of the poorest countries in this part of the world.

Near the bidonville which is a French term for slum made of tin can house, there were scores of minibuses preparing to leave for the provinces or arriving from somewhere. People were on top, loading or unloading charcoal and bananas or firewood, among other things. Live animals like goats were also carried this way, not to mention a basket full of quacking chickens.

There were a lot of women selling food by the roadside and trying hard to keep the flies off. People seemed not to mind the filth, flies and the sewage that flowed and went about their business. I could see little cardboard cubicles everywhere painted with gaudy colours and called borlette where they sold lottery tickets. It displayed a sign called mariage meaning wedding, so I thought that they were perhaps some kind of marriage offices, wondering who could get married in such offices. Why were there so many of them?

The answer was that it simply meant a marriage between the lucky number and the jack pot, which they assured every lottery ticket buyer. I noted that the poorer the country, the more desperate the people were to buy lotto tickets, hoping that their luck would change. This was Haiti.

The airport is modern and set back in a vast plain, but as we approached the town, we saw shanties and ramshackle buildings everywhere and the streets were choked with traffic. The main artery was called Boulevard Jean Jacques Dessalines, although such names did not mean anything to me. I had only heard that the dictator of Haiti was called Papa Doc Duvalier, who had left his son in charge after his death. His name was Jean-Claude Duvalier, and he ruled the country with the same ruthlessness as his father.

One never failed to notice the brightly painted buses or mini buses. Most of them showed some paintings of a religious nature, although once in a while the artist got carried away and painted big breasted women in skimpy clothes in provocative gestures. It was technicolor and very visible and also very crude, but then a fine artist did not waste his time painting mini buses. It was done by amateurs who, not knowing the sense of proportion, made funny drawings that no one paid any attention to.

The changing of dollars into the local gourds was easy and could be done anywhere, and you could get 10 % more than the going rate as the AID girl explained, but she forgot to mention if it was legal or not. I suppose it was not by the sound of it. Later I learned that there were many things illegal in Haiti, but no one appeared to worry too much about them.

It was for example illegal to bring in luxury goods like tape recorders and cameras without paying duty, but I saw at the airport people passing through without any problem. How much money changed hands under the counter was hard to tell, but obviously the policemen were in cahoots.

Huge Haitian women called “Madame Saras” plied between Port-au-Prince and Miami every week and brought suitcases filled with contrabands that they sold at high price in Haiti.

The taxi drivers were no different from the ones I knew in Marseilles or Delhi. Their meters never worked, and they tried to bring you to your hotel for twenty dollars when the fare was only two. These people only tried to make some money from the unsuspecting. If you wanted to pay the minimum fare for example in Manila, you said you were going to Saudi as a carpenter or mason. It was the same everywhere.

It was warm in February. People wore colorful light clothes and women usually wore a piece of colorful cloth wrapped around their head. Many women wore fine straw hats they called panama. They were tall and walked with a certain grace. We saw people dressed in carnival costumes and feathers and dancing in the streets to the beat of drums, flutes and cymbals.

Their faces were painted, and they frequently sipped from bottles that were not coke by the looks on their faces. Women dressed in very colorful and low cut attires, displaying a good deal of their body and danced in a sexy way. Men wore outlandish costumes as well and cavorted with women.

They were the Ra Ra bands who were warming up for the upcoming carnival called Mardi Gras for which Haiti was famous, although the event was many days away. Carpenters were busy fixing up roadside stands. There was an atmosphere of gaiety, although most people paid little attention to the Ra Ra bands and the loud music some people played using loudspeakers.

I saw brightly painted artwork for sale on the sidewalk, but they did not look to be of good quality. What impressed me most was the profusion of it. There were other handicrafts for sale as well near the traffic bottlenecks. Shiny wooden boxes with Haiti carved on it in big letters, brown or black jars, figurines, bowls and many such things were sold on the streets. They knocked on the car windows to show their wares, but were not persistent.

I did not speak Creole but understood many words as it was close to French that I spoke well. I noticed that they addressed each other with "my dear or darling or mama or papa "even if they did not know them. It sounded very nice as compared to "hey you there" in some countries. I did not know all these things on my first day, but I was a keen observer.

The hotel where I stayed was on top of a hill overlooking parts of the town and the wharf, but what struck me most was the cemetery and the sheer size of it. I was given a complimentary bottle of Haitian rhum in the hotel as well as a straw hat and was told that the Haitian rhum was very good and was exported to many countries. The restaurant had conch meat on the menu called lamby in Creole. I had never tried Lamby before, so soon a plate appeared. It was like India rubber, but the Haitians chewed it like cows chewed cud and said it was good. I was not so sure.

I did not like the Haitian rhum either, although an American fellow from Naples that is in Florida urged me to drink it glass after glass to the great dismay of his wife or girlfriend. Americans also have Athens in Georgia and Delhi and Madras somewhere. The Castel Haiti was not a very good hotel for the price they were charging. I learned that the cost of living was astonishingly high, although the country was very poor. It was like in Mali or Senegal where the same thing happened.

Like in many countries, the population was divided into the minority rich and the vast majority poor people. The small minority of rich people lived up in the cooler mountains called Petion-Ville in fancy villas, while the vast majority of Haitians lived in the sweltering heat of the plains below, many in bidonvilles or vast slums that surrounded the capital.

The rich were very ostentatious and drove around in fancy European cars, while the poor swarmed around their cars trying to sell them something. Then there were the mulattos. They

were the legacy of the French or other Europeans, like in many countries in the Americas. These mulattos considered themselves superior to the natives and looked down on them.

I had lived in Mali where the poverty was very real, but here in Haiti it seemed to point to you very directly. The contrast between the rich and the poor was very visible indeed, even on the first day. I wandered around the town on foot and found that people always asked for money if you asked them for directions. The beggars and street urchins followed you everywhere.

The large number of vehicles were mostly either government vehicles or belonged to projects that displayed their stickers on the side like Foster parents or UN etc. The poor people just walked or rode in mini buses called Tap Tap here. There were also some jeepneys like public transport that plied certain routes. Haitians often quarreled in jeepneys over something minor and fist fights broke out, so the driver stopped and waited until the matter was sorted out on the street. Once I found myself in the middle of such a quarrel and tried to be a peacemaker, but it was much later when my Creole had improved.

The Presidential palace is a gleaming white building with the background of green hills, which gives it a good contrast. In the front there is a statue of a Haitian slave raising a conch shell to his lips to blow and had shackles.

Not too far from it stands a statue of a Carib Indian in loincloths and feathers. I was told that the name Haiti came from the Carib Indians, who named the country. The other half of the island of Hispaniola is the Dominican Republic or in short DR.

To learn more about the country, one had to read Graham Greene, but I was learning as best as I could by observing and talking to people. Just outside the hotel, I met with a group of Haitian boys and girls who asked me to find work for them and then asked for money. The girls suggested that they were also selling something else. It was the same as in many African countries. Only the degree varied. Here there was not much of prostitution because of their strong Catholic beliefs.

Yes, there was no doubt that the Haitians were very religious. I had already noticed the religious paintings on their tap taps as they were called. The churches overflowed on Sundays and on many other days as well. There were many grottos in Port-au-Prince where the Catholics prayed, but now there were Protestants as well thanks to the North American missionaries everywhere in the country.

The AID people who had approved my appointment made it clear to the new team that they expected good work and would not hesitate to "kick us out" if we did not perform. It reminded me of the Algerian Agricultural ministry, but Americans were cruder people and did not mince words. They showed no respect to a person's qualification and background. Some of them, however, invited the team to their house once as a part of the routine and mentioned casually that I had a friend in Port-au-Prince.

I was naturally surprised. It was the old friend Hubert of Ba Xuyen. He was now working here as the head of a pig repopulation program and came over to the Hotel. He did not look like a scarecrow anymore, but I still did not trust his driving. The last time I had seen him was in Washington, DC in 1971 so it had been many years. He said that he was very busy with the project because all the pigs in Haiti had to be slaughtered due to the African swine disease, so now he had to replace them with American pigs from Iowa.

Later the Haitian farmers told me that it was a great conspiracy by the Americans to sell their pigs to Haiti so they invented the swine fever theory to kill off the native pigs, but it is hard for me to know the truth.

Anyway, Hubert and I talked endlessly, trying to catch up with the news about our mutual friends. He said that one of them was working at the US embassy and I should go and see her, but I never found the time.

He then took me to a Chinese restaurant where we ate with chopsticks like in the good old days. I wrote to Jasmine that I had met an old friend of mine here. She had heard about Hubert before, so sent her regards. Another American also invited the team to his house, but I knew it was merely a formality and never went back there during our long stay in Haiti.

One day we drove to Jacmel to see the project site. I did not like the idea that people decided for me where I should work before I had a chance to assess the situation on the ground. Jacmel is about a two hours drive from Port-au-Prince over steep mountain roads that zigzagged through very eroded hills. It was a small town on the coast with a small market and few houses. We drove up to Haute Cap Rouge and other places to see how the rural folks lived and how or what they cultivated on these mountain slopes.

Most of the road to Jacmel is in bad shape and steep. People planted coffee and manioc everywhere. They lived in sturdy but simple box-like houses on hills and worked very hard to grow food. They painted their crooked doors and windows in bright colors. Women carried water in jars on their heads, which they must have fetched from the valley below and slowly climbed up the hills with the load. People carried everything on their head, reminding me of the hardship of rural Malian women.

The Haitians smiled easily and said hello in Creole. The hotel in Jacmel was on the waterfront called la Jacmelienne and was pleasant, but the Canadian manager was greedy because it was obvious that she was losing money. There were hardly any tourists staying there or anywhere in Haiti for that matter. They were scared of AIDS, although it was not true that Haiti was endemic. There were more AIDS patients in the United States per thousand population, but the label stuck.

So the tourists stayed away, although the beaches were lovely and people were so friendly. At the Jacmelienne hotel lobby, people sold ceramics and papier mache handicrafts as well as masks and little figurines, but the price was high.

After Jacmel I went to Les Cayes in the west. It is some 200 kms from Port-au-Prince on the lower arm of the country. If you look at the map, the shape of Haiti looks like a crab with two arms. Here the road is excellent and passes through the scenic coast of Zanglais. It was a small town with a jetty and old houses with rusty tin roof, unpaved gravel roads and a small Catholic Church in the center of the town with a park where old people sat on benches and looked at newcomers with interest. There was a statue of someone in the park with peeling paint and terrible eyes.

From the waterfront one could see the distant island called Isle a Vache and a few rusty hulls of boat wrecks and very few boats. There used to be brisk sea trade here in the past, but now the port was closed and the custom's office looked dilapidated facing the small post office. But Les Cayes was in the plains and in the middle of an agricultural area where the farming was intensive. They grew rice all around Les Cayes and had some irrigation.

I could sense that some wonderful work could be done here and decided that it was going to be where I lived.

The next thing to do was to look for a house to rent. Again I was lucky to find a beautiful beach house built like a Swiss chalet just outside the town, but we had to ford a few streams through bad gravel roads to get there.

But the house was new and had water, electricity and even a phone. You could sit on the front porch and see the ocean 50 meters away and feel the constant breeze. The smell of the sea so close was exhilarating. The house was set back on a huge expanse of lawn of blue grass which is not blue at all but thick green Korean grass. I liked the house right away and took it.

Now the next item on my agenda was to look for a school for the kids so I met the American Missionaries who lived up the hill where they also ran a small school for children. These people told me that my kids could not be admitted there.It was meant only for their children, which I found very odd and unfriendly to begin with, but the school administrator told me that my kids would be welcome. They needed more children to pay for the cost of a teacher. So with the housing and schooling problem solved in a short time,I wrote to Jasmine to prepare to come to Haiti right away.

A school meant the difference between having my family here and spending the 4 lonely years alone. Why were the Americans so unfriendly when they needed more children in their school? We would get to know these people better in the future and understand them better.

Now it so happened that my landlady worked in the telephone exchange in Port-au-Prince, so one night I tried to call Jasmine and told my landlady that she did not have a phone but her cousin Ramon who lived nearby did.

Could she ring up Naga City and ask the operator there to look up his number and give him a call? This she did. Naga is a small town where people know each other, so Ramon was contacted this way, and I told him to send a car to fetch Jasmine right away. The long distance was costing me an arm and a few legs, so please hurry.

Jasmine was very surprised to hear Ramon banging on the gate late at night. She finally came to the phone after what seemed like a long time, and was very happy that we could hear each other clearly over a vast distance of oceans. I said that she should pack up and come to Haiti because I had found a beautiful house and most importantly a school for the kids.

She said that I should fetch her from the Philippines, but I could not. Then she said that I should meet her in San Francisco, but that too was not possible, so finally we compromised. I said that I will meet her plane in Miami,Florida, so she agreed on a date. I then called the office to wire her the tickets to a Manila Travel agent we trusted, and I also called the travel agent to know the exact date and time of her arrival in Miami and flight number etc. and told them to call Jasmine in Naga.

When I asked the landlady who was listening how much I should pay, she said it did not register on their exchange computer. She laughed and said that working in the Phone company had certain privileges. She had many long distance operator friends.

I now had to go back to Port-au-Prince to send her a few documents by DHL so that she could be granted a US visa by the Manila embassy. The Haitian visas could be obtained in Miami. Then I had to look for the furniture and all things Jasmine would need. The project then ordered a house full of furniture and appliances from a factory outside Port-au-Prince, which promised to deliver in a month. I had accomplished a great deal in just a few days' time and felt really good.

My Haitian counterpart who lived in Les Cayes kept the project jeep so I had to walk back and forth from the house to the town, but this was later resolved, and I got the Jeep. He was not very friendly, but that too would change later. In town, I met a Chinese American who was a very nice person and often invited me to his big house where he lived alone. He was a fantastic cook as well and gave lavish parties that the expat community enjoyed at his expense. He introduced me to all of them, that included mostly the missionaries who lived uphill in Cite Lumiere but also some Haitians.

The Ideal Guest house in town served meals to people who had not found a house yet.This is where few expats met for meals every day. I got to know the French Canadian and his Bolivian wife this way, but their cross-eyed brat was intolerable. I had never seen children so ill-behaved. I later helped find a house for them in town, but they were aloof.

Soon I returned to Port-au-Prince, where the carnival was about to begin. On the road, you could see a number of Ra Ra bands beating drums and dancing in the middle of the streets. They also stopped cars and demanded money for their rhum that they sipped constantly. It was dangerous to pass because in their drunken state they took offense quickly and were not above stoning passing cars, so we had to wait. It was prudent to pay these people and move on. The band included women as well.

In Port-au-Prince, the carnival fever was reaching its climax. Now the streets were full of people in colorful attire dancing to the beat of drums and other instruments. We met an American woman who said that the best place to watch the Carnival from was the balcony of the Holiday Inn, so that is where we went. The crowd now was elbow to elbow, but we somehow managed to squeeze through.

The floats were numerous and some of them well-made, on which sat pretty girls throwing candies to the wild crowd. There were many foreigners who mingled with the crowd and danced with abandon. It seemed that everyone was having a good time dancing and drinking. Bottles changed hands freely and once in a while some fist fights broke out but were controlled quickly.

The policemen were out in great numbers to control the crowd, which in general was orderly and moved on slowly in the long procession passing the Holiday Inn. The bands played so loudly that it hurt the eardrums, but I enjoyed watching the crowd from the safe distance. It was also to be my last carnival, but I had no idea at that time what lay ahead in Haiti. Judging from the way people danced and sang, one got the impression that the Haitian people had nothing to worry about in life and were very happy-go-lucky people, but this was only the appearance.

People said that the carnival was the only outlet for the repressed masses, whose problems were many to say the least. It was a country where there were no civil liberties and the blue denim clad militia were the dreaded Ton Ton Macoute who were the main instrument of repression in the hands of Duvalier. Their ruthlessness would have shamed Idi Amin.

In Les Cayes, I shared a corner of the district of agriculture because we did not have an office of our own. The agriculture office was a very dilapidated building with a leaking roof and was full of huge rats and spiders. The agriculture chief resented the project because he had no control over it or its finances. But luckily we did not have to stay in that awful office because our field work had started with the reconnaissance survey in the plains of Bereault and the hills of Maniche. The roads were bad. We often had to ford the streams in Maniche and Bereault that damaged the jeep, but we carried on the work in spite of the difficulties.

Soon we got to know the rest of the team that worked in Jacmel and Port-au-Prince, but Les Cayes team worked somewhat independently of others because the rainfall pattern and the agriculture was different from Jacmel, so the priorities were different as well. Rice and sorghum, corn and beans as well as sugarcane were the important crops here. They grew a great deal of coffee in Maniche up in the hills.

I think it was the 10th of April 1984 when a truck was found to bring all the furniture that I had ordered from Port-au-Prince. I loaded up six motorbikes for the project as well, arrived late in Les Cayes and dumped everything in the house. I had no time to unpack and arrange the furniture because I had to return to Port-au-Prince with the truck.

Jasmine was arriving the next day in Miami, so I had to reach Miami before she did. Hubert was also going to Miami, but he disappeared into the crowd soon after arrival there on his way to pick up more pigs somewhere, so I stayed near the airport. I had to find a department store to buy a few things before Jasmine arrived, but here I started experiencing the bad side of America.

The bus driver yelled at me because I was too close to him to ask a few questions, and the kids in the streets on roller skates tried to push me off the sidewalk, shouting something in Spanish that did not sound pleasant. A huge dog tried to chase me and possibly bite, that scared me because I could not find anything to defend myself with.

I knew nothing of Miami, but from what little I learned, it was not a pleasant place. People spoke Spanish more than English, and one could see the Cubans everywhere. They ran hotels, motels, shops and tour buses. They drove taxis, and they ran Miami, or at least that is how it seemed to me. Furthermore, they were impolite people who took offense if I did not understand their poor English. Miami did not look like an American city except the big wide freeways and incessant traffic.

What annoyed me most was the arrogance of the Cubans or the Hispanics. I had lived in the United States where I had not known this sort of arrogance, but then I had lived in a mostly white town of San Luis Obispo in California. Now I was seeing another side of this country, although to be fair, one must not judge a whole country by the behavior of a few odd Cubans.I didn't.

Anyway, Jasmine and the kids were arriving that night, so I went back to the airport and asked the Pan Am agent to let me go to the arrival lounge. This he would not do. He said that there were restrictions due to security problems etc. but I insisted.I said that my wife and kids were arriving after traveling a very long distance, so they would be very tired and needed my assistance.

He still did not relent. Finally, I said, how could I get inside? He said that I needed a pass, so I asked him for a pass, and he gave it to me. Americans are very logical people.

The arrival lounge was deserted at 5 pm. The announcement board said that her flight was delayed and would arrive late. I had a long wait until 11 pm, when finally the flight arrived, and I saw Jasmine emerging from the plane holding Ashis and Jayanti and looking absolutely fatigued. She was also very surprised to find me there right near the plane and obviously very relieved. The kids came running and kissed me, showing great joy.

We went to the hotel nearby and after giving the kids warm milk and some food went to sleep. They did not need any prompting. Their little bodies had taken a pounding on very long distance flights and showed. I really felt sorry that the plane journey was so awful. Jasmine was probably more tired than them because she looked ready to fall apart.

The next morning we went to the Haitian consulate to get them visas and then to the airline office to get them tickets to Port-au-Prince because the office had sent them tickets only up to Miami to my surprise. Then it was time to relax a bit. I thought a trip to Disneyland in Orlando would be fun for the kids. The Cuban hotel manager of course had a tour bus leaving the next day, run by who else? The bus driver was impolite, but we tolerated it and arrived at the Disneyland, passing through some place called Kisseeme. Jasmine asked me if most Americans were like the bus driver, to which I said I hoped not.

Disneyland and the Epcot center in Orlando is a very big place that tires adults. I could see from the faces of Ashis and Jayanti that they were still tired but enjoyed being photographed with Tigger and Mickey Mouse and Fowl fellow. They knew all these characters by heart and were delighted. Jasmine and I strolled holding hands and enjoying watching our children.

They pulled the tail of Tigger and hugged Mickey and played with Winnie-the-Pooh. We took the moving carousel to enter the caves full of witches who lived in castles and brewed frogs in giant cauldrons to make their potions. We took the toy train ride through the wild wild west and mining towns, roller coasting through caves and waterfalls. Then there were paddle boats and the Nautilus of Captain Nemo. The attractions were too numerous to count and see in one day. The Epcot center itself takes a long time.

We took the carousel ride through its dome to see world history through figures, scenes and animated models. It was all very well done. Their computer room was enormous that controlled each and every aspect of Disneyland, but was far beyond the comprehension of the kids. It was time to go back to Miami and rest.

The crowd was very thick and lines were endless, but it was a good break for all of us. On the way back, we ordered some hot dogs and french fries but were surprised when the waiter brought us enough food for an army, which we left nearly untouched. It was too much and a waste.

The flight to Port-au-Prince takes only about 90 minutes, making Haiti seem like the back door or the front door of the United States, which it probably is. Jasmine had lived in Mali where she learned to like the black people, so she felt at home in Haiti. For the kids, it was a new experience. Soon we drove on to Les Cayes through Petit Goave, Miragoane and the beautiful coast of Zanglais. The Zanglais coast is spectacular with white sand beaches and azure blue waters with small islands dotting the ocean. The tall eucalyptus and pine trees line the highway and there are white or pink blossoms of some plants by the roadside, making the scene breathtakingly beautiful.

One could see the fishermen and women pulling nets from the ocean, while others in little dugout canoes paddled in the water. People sold steamed lobsters by the roadside along with a variety of other foods and smiled in a very friendly manner. After Miami, it was a welcome sight. Jasmine was very pleased with the beautiful countryside and said how different it was from the drab and colorless rural Mali full of jungle.

For one thing Haiti was very small compared to Mali with as many people making Haiti very densely populated. There was no virgin forest of any consequence in the country because people lived everywhere and cultivated even the uncultivable land. At one time the country was very green and covered with tall trees everywhere, but that was a long time ago. Now people have chopped down all the trees to make charcoal or burn them for fuel. I had seen the Tap Taps in Port-au-Prince loaded with charcoal and firewood. The effect or denudation of the hills everywhere was very shocking indeed.

One could see the heavily eroded hills on which people planted beans and other crops. Sisal was also planted on some slopes, but on many hills we could see vetiver growing. Haitians extract its oil from the roots to make perfume. We drove through many small villages where people dried corn or other grains on the roadside. One could see enormous crowds of children in neat school uniforms carrying their books in bags or in their hands.

We arrived late in Les Cayes and found the house a complete mess. I had no time to fix anything before I left for Miami so we decided to eat downtown that night and locked ourselves out of the house by mistake. Now we had to find a locksmith and bargain with him to come and help.

But Jasmine in the next day or two made wonders and arranged everything neatly and made it the most wonderful house while the kids ran around on the beach making sand castles. The Cite Lumiere workshop fixed our stove, so soon we were cooking good meals.

The ocean was just in the front, where the fishermen pulled the nets and women and children milled around. Their hands were raw because pulling a net was a very hard job that yielded very few fish, but they tried day after day. Ashis and Jayanti loved the ocean and ran around everywhere reveling in the new surroundings while we sat on our front porch in easy chairs savoring the sea breeze. The kids had a long summer vacation because their school in Cite Lumiere was to start in September, so we took them to swim in the ocean often. They loved catching small crabs.

They also tried to make friends with the Haitian children who lived nearby and tried to imitate their language. But our house was too far from the town and isolated. Jasmine often walked to the town but said that we should look for a house there. This happened when the Chinese American gentleman told me one day that his house will soon be vacant as he is moving to Port-au-Prince. This was a good opportunity, so we moved to the rue Gabion house.

It was certainly very convenient for us to live in town because now she could walk to the market nearby or to go to the post office. She also attended the Sunday church service regularly and the kids started their schooling. It was a very small school of about 9 or 10 kids of various ages and one schoolroom with one teacher who walked around barefoot, but it was better than no school at all. In fact, the small size of the school meant that Ashis and Jayanti got individual attention and personalized learning. Their classmates were the children of the missionaries and one or two Haitians.

The emphasis in their school was on religion, but they were taught other subjects as well, so it was ok with us. The missionaries, who at the start were so pessimistic about our children attending their school, remained aloof and unfriendly, but it did not matter. One of them refused to teach our kids piano saying that they only taught American children but shamelessly tried to borrow our video camera. We, too, refused.

I had a great deal of experience dealing with the American missionaries in Mali and formed a very poor opinion of them. It did not change here and was probably worse. When we invited them to our house, they all came and watched video movies after the sumptuous dinner Jasmine had prepared, but never in the four years returned the courtesy. It was also true in Mali.

One woman in particular was very offensive, who would invite Jasmine and later cancel the invitation. Once would have been enough, but she did it many times, so we remained apart from them.

It was perhaps not difficult to understand their attitude towards us. We never attended their prayer sessions or other religious activities because they were Protestants and always used such times to do a bit of Catholic bashing, which offended Jasmine being a devout Catholic. They were also not interested in the heathens of Africa and found excuses to leave when I showed some slides on Mali one day.

Their naked intolerance to other people and culture had to be understood in the context of their mission to convert Catholic Haitians into proper Protestants and weed out the voodoo culture they hated. They were also very ignorant people who went around telling people not to buy Proctor and Gamble products because they were devil worshipers.

They also felt ill at ease with us. Our deep appreciation of the Malian animist culture was anathema to them, who believed that the Africans were savages and had to be "saved". Among the missionaries, the American and the Canadian missionaries were the toughest lot who openly showed a great deal of racism and intolerance. As I said earlier, they were also very ignorant.

They often mistook me for a Haitian and started talking to me in Creole, even if I replied in English. One of them, thinking that I was a Haitian, closed the gate on my face but did not

apologize when she learned of her mistake. They were by and large very arrogant people, but were eager to take any advantage they could get anywhere.

One woman in particular made me very angry by her bigotry and self-serving talks. She was the type who knew all the answers, so we came to a head a few times over unimportant topics.I told Jasmine to be wary of such people, but she wanted to belong to the expat community that frequently arranged for potluck parties to amuse themselves. There was nothing else to do in Les Cayes. I stayed at home to babysit the kids. Bad people were no longer welcome to our house once we got to know that they were bad.

Our next door neighbors were also such people who kept coming and asking Jasmine for favors all the time. This woman was such a pest that we sighed with relief when they moved to Port-au-Prince but sighed again when the replacement turned out to be just as bad. This white woman had an illegitimate mulatto child who was very ill-behaved. She often asked Jasmine to baby sit this brat.

I had written earlier that Jasmine had a golden heart and could not refuse anyone any help, so the missionaries were very surprised when one day we brought home a woman and her boyfriend who had an accident and needed home care. They asked Jasmine if she knew these people whom she tended to. When Jasmine answered that no, she did not know them but helped them anyway, they were all the more surprised.

They never helped anyone in distress unless they knew them, not even their own countrymen as was the case here but enough about the American missionaries. Only Jasmine would be nice to such rotten people, and I loved her for it.

One day we went to Saut Mathurine which is a magnificent waterfall some 20 km from Les Cayes. It was a lovely place for a picnic, so we packed some lunch boxes for an outing. The waterfall was well known in Haiti, but it was more beautiful than what one learned from the guide books. The water fell from a height of 50 or 60 feet into a blue lagoon that was the source of the Maniche river, emptying into the Cavaillon bay further east.

Children climbed up the rocky edges near the fall and jumped into the lagoon, which we understood to be quite deep. It was astonishing to watch small children climb up so high and jump, but apparently they did this all the time.

Down the stream, some boys and girls caught shrimps that hid under the rocks. Soon a crowd of women and children gathered around us, so we shared some food with them. Americans were always annoyed with such crowds, but we were used to it and did not mind them. They did not mean any harm.

Among them, we found a girl of eighteen or so and asked if she was willing to work for us and live with us. She showed interest, but her father wanted to make sure where his daughter was

going, so came with us to Les Cayes, saw our home and was satisfied. Thus, we found a maid who did cooking and cleaning, which was a tiring job for Jasmine. The maid ate with us and was treated as a member of the family, which some foreigners living next door found intolerable. The Bolivian woman treated her maid like dirt, but we did not have to follow their example.

We hoped that they would treat their servants more humanely, but that did not happen. People were a product of their culture and did not change easily. How were the maids treated by women in India or the Philippines? It was the same, but we made our own rules and Jasmine was very kind-hearted.

I had written in the meantime to Dr.Singh at IRRI to send me some rice varieties that I could test in the Les Cayes area. We had always kept in touch over the years and often visited IRRI during our home leaves. I planted these seeds near Les Cayes on a missionary farm and watched the crop grow anxiously. These were the high yielding varieties developed by the IRRI scientists, and I was testing them for the first time in this part of the world.

The 7 different varieties grew well, but one or two showed better results. I started naming them such as Colette, Amina, Ti Marie, Yole,Ti Rose etc. and waited for the harvest to determine the yield. The USAID officers came and were impressed by what they saw. It could greatly help the rice farmers throughout Haiti if these IRRI varieties outperformed the local ones. It could have profound implications. Our project staff from elsewhere also came to see and appreciated my effort.

Many farmers came as well and looked with interest at the heavily laden panicles of rice that bent with its own weight. They asked me how soon I could give them some seeds to plant. I had planted the other half of the seeds at a village called Charlette where they also grew well. Little did we know at that time that one or two of these varieties would do exceedingly well and spread to many parts of Haiti in a short time. It all had started from only 500 grams of seed for each variety. I wrote to Dr.Singh and sent him the results. He was very pleased and promised more help if I needed it.

I soon built a simple rice thresher to facilitate threshing. The grains separated only after three or four beatings on it, which delighted the farmers. It meant that they could now harvest the rice plants at the base and beat it on the thresher holding the bundle of stalks. It was easier as compared to their method of cutting the panicles one at a time and saved tremendous time. Later I had many of these threshers built at a workshop run by an Italian and sent some of them to other parts of the province.

But it was Amina that proved to be the winner and spread far and wide in Haiti in three years time, making it the success story of our project. Some farmers also like Colette and planted large areas with it.

I would later get funding for a seed multiplication project in Bruny where we built a huge warehouse with self-help and the funds provided a brand-new power tiller, seeds of Amina for propagation and fertilizer. I had set up a cooperative of farmers who would grow Amina here and sell it to other farmers as seed.

But some farmers liked other varieties that I had introduced. In Foscave the farmers grew nothing but Ti Rose and Colette, but by and large it was Amina that they liked because of its quality and high yield. I also started working on sorghum and black beans called Tamazulapa in Bereault and installed many field trials, but it was the rice trials that gave very good results.

I asked for and got a Nubian Alpine cross-breed goat from a goat project in Hinch to start a local breeding project for goats and sent a few farmers to Hinch for training. The project also built some pig pens in study villages to start the pig breeding as well, with the introduction of improved breeds of pigs from Iowa that our friend Hubert supplied. Next was the rabbit breeding program that I started and built a large number of hutches for the farmers in many villages. Thus, I was involved in many things at the same time.

I was picking up a lot of Creole by this time, but was not fluent. I came to know hundreds of farmers in the project area and names like Charlette, LaForce,Gauvin,Macieu,Boudet, Bereault, Jogue, Dassemar,Melon,Dame Marie, Fond de Freres became very familiar to me. We developed close relationships with the farmers and especially in Fond des Freres up in the hills where we set up contour terracing planted with Napier for erosion control and also set up a nice nursery of fruit trees to be planted later on.

A Peace Corps girl helped the project with the pig repopulation and rabbit breeding program in Maniche and Fond de Freres, for whom I had brought a motorbike and a helmet. She also had a huge crush on my friend Hubert that was very amusing because the rascal never looked at her.

Often we organized field days for the farmers when we showed them the rice or other trials. The field days were a lot of fun for everybody. The farmers often brought musicians who sang and played guitars and danced. Food and drinks were served after the field visits, and long discussions were held under the trees when we learned about their reactions to what they saw. Often their comments changed our focus of research during the next season, so we considered the field days to be very important.

Then in December 1984 we decided to go on a vacation to Mexico. We found the girls at the Eastern Airlines in Port-au-Prince were rude, but I had to wait patiently for them to write up the tickets by hand, but finally it was all done, and we were set to leave for Mexico City via Miami.

This was our first trip to Mexico. We arrived late at night, but the welcome was not good. They inspected my passport very carefully and made us all wait. They even wanted to see and count how much money we had. Finally, they were satisfied and answered sulkily that there were

many cases of Indians who used Mexico to get to the United States illegally, so they had to be careful.

From my experience in traveling around the world I knew that the worst part of any country was the airport where people were unfriendly to begin with and more so if you carried a passport they did not like. The rules were not universal. Some nationalities did not even require a visa while others were not admitted without one and still others were admitted reluctantly even if they had a proper visa like here in Mexico.

Others were denied entry if the immigration officer did not like the looks or suspected that the person did not have enough money or spoke like the Japanese with a deep grating sound. They all had to look carefully in a thick black ledger to check if your name was there, and you were wanted for some offenses somewhere. In the USA, for example, it was not enough to say that you were a tourist and going to stay at a hotel. You had to give them the name, address and the phone number of someone you knew there.

Then they often asked to see the money and even counted to make sure you were not telling lies like in Mexico City airport. Gone was the glamour of jet traveling and the difference with which people treated an international traveler. Now every Tom, Dick and hairy person could travel. Often the planes were full of janitors, maids and laborers who gulped down free booze and looked in the toilet rooms to see if they could take away the cologne or aftershave lotion bottles. The airlines now had to remove the bottle caps to prevent stealing, and often ignored passengers stranded in strange cities.

They were not going to pay for the hotel room anymore. It is so bad in the Middle East that even a business class passenger is denied a hotel room if the passenger is from a certain country. Now they treated you like a criminal and searched your bags and your body a number of times and even x-rayed your handbags. A simple letter opener could make those metal detectors ping like crazy. I suppose no one wants to take any chances with so many international terrorists on the loose, but it does not make travel any easier or enjoyable.

Anyway, we finally got out of the airport and took a taxi to reach a downtown hotel called Ontario which was right near Zocalo which in Mexico meant the center of the town. It was an old hotel, but the location was very good, and we were only minutes from the subway station. There were many restaurants nearby and a very good ice cream shop. We did not speak Spanish, but it did not matter that much. Jasmine and I got to know all the subway stations thanks to our Fodor guide book.

The Mexico City subway is a world-class subway. It is very clean and beautiful. The trains are shiny and comfortable and to get around the city is really very easy. Some stations had a nice underground market. People were well-dressed and did not shove and push. No one wrote graffiti on the trains or vandalized anything like in New York. You did not see the derelicts

sleeping on the platforms or begging or urinating in the corners. The Mexicans had a right to be proud of their subway.

We found many things in Mexico they could be proud of. Their civilization was very old, and their city had many well maintained parks and museums. The Anthropological museum was of world renown and the Opera hall called Palacio del Bellas Artes was a splendid building in architecture where we saw the Mexican ballet that is world-famous. We did not find the city full of smoke or smog as is often mentioned in the western press and enjoyed walking in the Chapultepec park where kids rode on horses, or we took the boat to row in the big lake.

Mexicans like to eat all the time, like in the Philippines, so there were food stands everywhere. Here you could find the authentic Mexican food and not the watered down version I used to get in San Luis Obispo, California. Near Zocalo we saw the excavated pyramids of the Aztecs and a huge round slab that was their calendar. The huge cathedral in Zocalo was very ornate and sinking on one side because the Spaniards had built the city on a lake bed with the rocks of the pyramids they had destroyed.

Aztecs were smarter. They had built Tenochtitlan in a beautifully laid out plan and used causeways to join the city with the outer parts. It had the most spectacular pyramids and temples ever built in the Americas. There is a model of the city in Zocalo. There was no city in Europe in the 14th century that could compare in grandeur, but the Spaniards came with swords and put people to death. They destroyed what was beautiful and converted the people to Christianity by sword. But that is the story of the Spaniards everywhere. Remember Magellan? He did the same thing in the Philippines but was put to death by Lapu Lapu.

The Spaniards could not believe that these so-called savages could build such a city, and were actually very advanced in astrology and mathematics. One needs to go to Teotihuacan to see what the Aztecs were capable of. Their guns and the greed for gold sealed the fate of these proud people that their national artist Diego Garcia so lovingly depicted in murals after murals in a palace nearby.

We found Mexico City a delightful place. In the parks, the clowns entertained the large crowd and came over when they spotted my video camera. They made fun of us to the great joy of the crowd, but it was all very friendly.

We really enjoyed watching the Mexican ballet. They showed different dances from different regions of Mexico, but they started out with dazzling dances of the Aztecs in their spectacular dresses. I could tell that Jasmine and the kids enjoyed it too. Outside the palace, one could buy Aztec paintings. Later we found that the artwork and handicraft was plentiful no matter where you went. One could get tired of going to all the art galleries and museums, but we did manage a few.

But a tragedy was waiting for us in the Chapultepec park where one day Ashis, while swinging from a swing, just fell off and landed on his left elbow. We knew right away that he had a broken bone and looked frantically for help. Soon a social worker, who could speak English, called for an ambulance immediately. The ambulance arrived but would not take us with Ashis so we worried where they were taking him. We then decided to take Ashis to the Red Cross hospital by taxi, where a team of doctors interviewed us at length and then decided to operate on him right away. He was just a small boy who had never been alone, but they assured us that they would take good care of him.

We returned the next morning to find Ashis in a cast. He must have been terrified being alone in a hospital room not speaking the language, but his roommate was a sweet girl called Elizabeth who was recovering from an auto accident, and it was she who kept company with constant chatter.

We were greatly relieved. Ashis was given the best medical care possible by the best doctors in the Americas and, wonder of wonders, they did not charge anything for it but in gratitude we donated some money anyway.

The doctors spoke excellent English and assured us by showing the x-ray that they had joined the bone perfectly, and it should heal in a month when the cast could come off. Our vacation had turned into tragedy, but we were glad it had happened in Mexico City. We stayed with him every day as long as possible until the day he was discharged. We came to know the family of Elizabeth through our misfortunes, and I often sat with her or helped change her clothes or bedsheet. She could only say gracias, but we understood the human bond that had developed.

After three days we brought him back to the hotel where his arm in the cast had to be hung up with a cord. He complained and sometimes cried but put up with it very bravely just the same. I bought him a colorful poncho to wear covering up his cast, but we had to be very careful and protect his arm from people accidentally bumping into him.

Jayanti was also very protective toward her brother and kept an eagle eye on him all the time. One day we all went to see the pyramids of Teotihuacan, about 20 kms away. These pyramids were the largest in the Americas and were built many centuries ago by the Aztecs for perhaps some ceremonial purposes. They compared well with the Egyptian pyramids in grandeur and had steps built into it to climb to the top, although the steps were at a scary angle. We marveled at the pyramids of the Sun and the Moon on the avenue of the dead and bought some handicraft before returning to the city.

The hills were full of obsidian, malachite, onyx and many other semi-precious stones that the Mexicans used to make beautiful objects, but one had to bargain for everything.

Of all the Mexican sites, Teotihuacan was the most impressive. The neatly laid boulevard called the avenue of the dead leading all the way up to the Moon pyramid and many smaller structures

on both sides were built with precise astrological orientations. The marvelous planning with very precise measurements in laying out various buildings was quite impressive. The government was slowly restoring some of the ruins, but more discoveries were being made constantly. There is a museum nearby showing what they have found so far in the area.

The Mexicans rightly took pride in their Aztec heritage, and often showed the pride through the ballet or public folk dances at religious places. They collected old artifacts and displayed them in their museums, and spent a great deal of money and time in restoring what can be restored. Yet we found a paradox almost as soon as we arrived in Mexico.

The descendants of the Aztecs now called Indians lived in poverty and could be seen selling flowers and homemade dolls. They had the unmistakable Aztec features and could be spotted quickly as compared to the rest of the Mexicans who were of mixed blood. The fair skinned mestizos looked down upon the darker skinned Indians because they felt superior to them.

It was the same story everywhere. In Haiti, the mulattos behaved worse.I found this hard to believe, while the Mexican people took pride in their Indian culture, or at least that is the impression one got anyway.

The native Mexican women did not like to be photographed and hid their faces with shawls or turned around. Their children had shiny black eyes, black hair and oval faces. I found the natives very attractive and full of character they way they walked or held their head high, but they were nevertheless sad people whose ancestors had ruled the land long ago. Now all that remained was some ruins, but they carried on their tradition of colorful weaving and basket making or pottery.

In the United States, the Mexicans were derided as wet backs and poor, but here we found a proud people living in a clean city that was well planned and had one of the better transport systems in the Western hemisphere. We saw a city that was full of manicured parks, gardens and lovely buildings. We saw a city full of lively people, shops and bazaars.

Furthermore, we found everything cheap and could buy anything for a lower price than elsewhere, but perhaps it was not cheap for the Mexicans. The peso fell almost daily against the dollar, making inflation grow fast. Except for the accident that Ashis had, we had a good stay in Mexico, but now it was time to go back to Haiti

The whole of 1985 went by without any problem. Ashis's cast had come off and the fracture healed perfectly thanks to the good doctors in Mexico, but he was accident-prone and had run into Jayanti one night playing in the dark when the electricity failed. It left a gash on his right eyebrow that had to be stitched up, and he would have other problems later, but it was a part of his growing up.

Jayanti did better and became very good at recitation. She had tried to write words just by the sound of it, not knowing the spellings yet, so we made a lot of fun of it. She wrote things like brid for bird and moon wid star instead of with star or gril for girl etc. Now she is all grown up, but we still call her a gril for fun. For a 4-year-old to write anything just by the sound of it was very remarkable indeed. Her first reaction in Dakar, Senegal to the ocean was "Look papa, a very big swimming pool" which had us all chuckle.

The project in the meantime made good progress, and we settled down in the routine of living. The kids made steady progress in their school and often brought home some of their classmates to spend the weekends with us. Jasmine got to know the Mexican wife of a local doctor who made wonderful Tamale, and we often got together. Others remained aloof.

In May or June I went to Fort-de-France in Martinique to attend a meeting and found the Creole spoken there somewhat similar to Haitian Creole. But the similarities ended there. Martinique was a part of France and their banana trade was mainly for France, so they made money. It was also a very expensive place. The meetings were attended by people from many parts of the world, but I found their way of handling the question answer part of any session tedious and proposed changes. This was quickly adopted by the President of the session, a professor from Surinam, although the French didn't like it. The French always had to have the last word in anything.

Haiti became independent in the 1800s and was the first free republic of former slaves. The slavery by contrast in the United States would continue until much later and only the civil war and Lincoln would bring about its end. But Haiti was ruled by despots like Henry Cristoff, who ruled Haiti from his castle in Cap-Haïtien in the northernmost part of the country.

We went to see the castle. It is perched high up on a mountain and is massive in construction. We rode on horses to reach the top and saw the massive ramparts and the cannons pointing towards the north from where Cristoff expected an invasion by France that never came. The history says that many people died building the castle and manhandling the massive canons up on the slope, but the king was ruthless and did not care.

The ruins of his huge palace down at the foot of the mountain shows that he was ambitious in its design and lived in style while the rest of the population lived in poverty. Haiti at his time did produce enough sugarcane and other things to be exported, and the country at his time was not so denuded. There were forests and wild games and a lot of fishing.

The legacy of ruthless tyrants still continues to the present day, although they had brief periods of elected government. Most Haitians could not remember when was the last time they had an elected government. The present regime has been in power for over thirty years and showed no signs of relinquishing it through the ballot box. I had earlier mentioned that their power base was the militia called the TonTon Macoutes that terrorized the rural folks. Some peasants joined their ranks so that they would not be the victims.

They were mostly illiterates, but then literacy had never been a requirement to oppress people. We lived next door to the police barracks in Les Cayes where people were brought in, beaten and jailed. We noticed that more and more people were being brought in lately. Likewise, we also now felt more than we saw the general unease among the population with the political system. The factory workers demanded higher wages, students demanded more academic freedom and farmers higher prices for their produce.

The farmworkers demanded the end to their exploitation by the rich landlords, and in fact everyone complained about something. Life had become very difficult for the average Haitians. People went on strike everywhere, but such strikes were broken up by the government using brutal force, often killing the demonstrators. Jails started to fill up more rapidly and the Macoutes and the military took a more offensive posture, if that can be imagined, but the grievances were genuine.

The suppression of people by force made them more determined, so we could feel the tension everywhere. Often there were roadblocks where poor people demanded ransom from passing cars, or they stoned the vehicles.

The farmers with whom we worked complained that the price they got for their produce did not cover the cost of production because the fertilizer price and labour was so high.

In the Camp Perrin area, many people were killed in fights over water rights because the rich and powerful farmers who were also Macoutes took the lion's share of water from the canals, leaving farmers downstream dry.

The schools were closed because the teachers went on strike. We all felt that the country was heading towards more and more social turmoil, the intensity of which increased by the end of 1985. We avoided going to Port-au-Prince where such troubles were frequent now, especially in the Carrefour area where most of the poor Haitians lived.

The most disturbed area in Haiti was Gonaive north of Port-au-Prince, where people set up roadblocks and confronted the army with stones and homemade weapons. The body count started to rise, but in Les Cayes it was not so bad yet. Duvalier came to Bereault once to inaugurate the irrigation canal system built with US money. The AID director came from Washington for the ceremony but it was a hired crowd that cheered Duvalier. The soldiers with automatic weapons pointed their guns straight at the crowd to make sure that no one had any funny ideas.

When the local AID director said that he wanted me to meet with his boss, I found the boss busy talking to his effeminate son so the local director lost his courage to approach and introduce me. I was appalled at his temerity and subservience. While the minister of agriculture was making a speech, the wife of Duvalier kept up the chatter with someone. It was very rude and

disrespectful. She was the Madame Ngu of Haiti and was known to be ruthless. She was the woman behind the downfall of Duvalier.

People could sense that Duvalier's days were numbered. We heard this through the grapevine. People said that something was going to give soon because the situation was no longer tenable for the poor masses. The government tried to drum up support by asking for a referendum, but again the hired crowd cheered and voted. Most stayed away.

Our project staff met once a month in Port-au-Prince to discuss the progress of the project as if nothing was happening, but we all knew better. Damien was a mess, where the faculty of agriculture had shut down. There were changes in the Ministry of agriculture and everywhere, but changing ministers did not change anything. The frequent changes made the matter worse. The country was now heading towards a cataclysm.

In October 1985 we went on a home leave to the Philippines and India via Seattle. My old friends Roger and Lauren from Vietnam days now lived near Seattle, so I wanted Jasmine to meet them. I also attended a meeting on the farming systems in Manhattan, Kansas, passing through the head office of my employer in Arkansas.

The secretary of the director general kept me waiting in the outer room for hours until she came bursting with excitement saying that the DG will see me now. He has just found a few minutes. The DG was a typical fellow who looked at my resume to know my name and a few other details, asked a few silly questions and stood up. The five minutes were over. It left me with the impression that no one at the head office cared a great deal about its personnel in the field. It was very reassuring.

I wanted to have some computer analysis done there, so I brought a lot of field data, but the head office with its room full of computers and full-time experts could not do simple analysis and left me with massive volumes of manuals to sort it out myself. I was very disappointed and soon left for Kansas. Jasmine in the meantime was waiting for me in Seattle.

In Manhattan, Texas my friend Abou Diabate from Sikasso was also attending the meeting. The head of that project was also there along with the Dutch fellow, but after saying a half-hearted hello, they all disappeared. But Abou was not like them. We were good friends, and it was Abou who had found the lovely village outside Sikasso where we had built our beautiful adobe house. I was naturally happy to see him again and helped him in translation during sessions because he did not speak English.

Jasmine had called from Seattle saying that the airline had misplaced her luggage, but otherwise she was ok and staying with some relatives. Filipinos have a lot of relatives in the States but more on them later. So I arrived in Seattle, and we all went to spend a day with Roger and Lauren. It was a great reunion. They met my family for the first time, although Roger

had sent me a long telegram on the day of our marriage saying how he regretted not being able to attend our marriage. Now we had two lovely kids and they had a kid of their own.

Ashis and Jayanti had great fun picking strawberries and selecting pumpkins for Halloween. The relatives of Jasmine let us stay with them but insisted that we carry huge boxes for them to the Philippines called balikbayan boxes. This is a tradition among the Filipinos. They always send boxes full of things for their poor relatives, which keeps their social relationship well oiled. We had no choice in the matter and carried the boxes to Manila. Filipinos always demanded payment in some form if they did something for you.

Back in the Philippines, we noticed a few changes. One of them was that the younger sister of Jasmine had married in the meantime, and they lived in our house in Naga. I disliked the fellow the Moment I met him and found him greedy and dishonest. They had to move out. We were there only for a short while, so I did not make any fuss but made a mental note of keeping a distance from this fellow who had demanded that we pay him for house sitting. They had also gotten rid of the wonderful maid we had. The house looked pretty run down, but we had no time to fix anything and soon left for India.

I wanted Jasmine and the kids to see Taj Mahal and other parts. She greatly enjoyed visiting Agra to see the wonder of Taj Mahal, the fort where the king Shah Jahan was kept in prison and the ruined city of Fateh Pur Sikri that Emperor Akbar had built near Agra, the mausoleum of Akbar in Sikandra which is an Arabic version of the word Alexandria and many such places. The kids were still small, so I do not know how much they really enjoyed it. They would again visit Agra when they had grown up.

The Buland Darwaja of Fatehpur Sikri which was the tallest gate in India, the mausoleum of Sheikh Salim Chisti with its jewel like mother-of-pearl canopy on the grave and its fine lattice work, various royal palaces and the huge Panchmahal, the royal stables and the royal chess board, the execution ground and many such places were of great interest to Jasmine who listened with rapt attention the history of Moguls.

The visit to Sri Ram Pur was nothing remarkable except that we attended the marriage of one of my nieces whose elder sister compared the gift we had given her to that of her younger sister now and found it cheaper. Such petty things caused jealousy among women. Poverty made women mean, and the relationship was always judged by the value of the gifts we gave and nothing more. It is not that different in the Philippines, as I had just mentioned. We had not forgotten the sad episode of our previous stay here, so were anxious to return to Haiti once again.

There were more roadblocks and demonstrations than before. The police and the military frequently opened fire on people to kill, so the body count rose every day. There were mass strikes everywhere, closing down factories and offices. The reaction of the regime was always the same. More repression to fill up jails, where the prisoners were tortured and often killed.

Now the Haitians wanted a fundamental change which meant the fall of the regime, but Duvalier held to power tenaciously with the help of the Macoutes and the army. In Les Cayes we had seen peaceful marches, but how long were they to remain peaceful? The shops were ordered closed by people, so the town looked like a ghost town. Then the violence started one day.

Scores of houses were looted and burned, some on the street where we lived. The Haitians wanted revenge on people whom they considered haughty and insulting towards poor people. One mulatto woman was a victim. It was true that rich businessmen and women treated poor people like dirt, so now they paid for it with their lives. One hotel was burned down. People burned tires and barricaded the roads, making circulation difficult.

Anyone driving around was just asking to be stoned, so we stayed indoors for a while. More and more military people were brought in who patrolled the streets with machine guns and the army barrack next door was full of soldiers all the time. I was anxious because of Jasmine and the kids, and waited to see what happened next. All the expatriates were asked to return to Port-au-Prince for evacuation just in case, but we stayed in Les Cayes, where we felt somewhat safer.

We did not dare pass through Carrefour near Port-au-Prince where the angry mob was always milling around surrounded cars or stoned vehicles but one day the dam burst. We were ordered back to Port-au-Prince just in time. It was the month of February 1986.

We arrived in Port-au-Prince not knowing how long we had to stay or if we could ever return to Les Cayes. We found many families gone to the United States, so they urged us also to leave, but we decided to stay. There was a place in La Boule in Petion-Ville where we could stay, but it was very isolated. Besides there we could not get any food or water so we stayed in the apartment that the project rented. At least it was near the market, from where our maid got us some food somehow.

All through the night we could hear the gunfire everywhere and people shouting and running with torches. The military declared curfew and patrolled the streets so no one could move about. I thought I could go back to Les Cayes alone and pick up some essential stuff, but I was ordered not to leave town. It was very dangerous.

Then on the morning of February 6th, 1986 the rumors spread that Duvalier had fled the country. This was the Moment people were waiting for, so now they poured onto the streets everywhere and attacked the hated Macoutes whose protection was gone. Right near our apartment we saw the crowd attack the house of a Macoute who escaped in the nick of time in his underclothes from the very angry mob.

They looted the house in minutes and carried away anything that they could carry. First they smashed the window glass after destroying the grills to enter the house. Then they carried away

furniture and fans and even the door of a refrigerator. A mangy dog was seen grabbing a sandwich in the melee while we watched from our balcony.

But the real tragedy was taking place elsewhere downtown, where people attacked and killed hundreds of Macoutes and paraded with their severed heads on stakes, shouting and looting. Houses were burned and scores of shops looted and many people killed. Streets were strewn with debris and often covered in blood. They looted the house of Duvalier and his cohorts all through the day and night and fled only when the military came with guns, but they could no longer control the crowd.

The relative calm returned only after a week or so, when a new government was formed and people were allowed to move around more freely. At last the storm blew over, and we were allowed to return to Les Cayes once again. We were told that many macoutes were killed here, and their houses burned down, but we could sense that it was not over yet.

Soon after our return, a macoute was spotted near our office and knifed to death. There were others killed near the hospital and many more in the countryside. People were in a very angry mood and asked for money or food, so we fed a few of them.

Now the people wanted the new provisional government to remove all the pro Duvalier people from power and install a more acceptable government, which they refused to do, so the agitation continued throughout 1986.

Back in the Philippines, a similar drama was playing out and Marcos had fled the country, but that is where the similarities ended. The revolution in the Philippines was largely peaceful, but here it was bloody.

People had tasted victory here, so they kept the pressure up by demonstrations and road blocks. One never knew when they were going to close the road and for how long, so any travel became risky. This exacerbated the fuel crisis. We had to fall in line for hours to get a few liters of gasoline.

I started working again with the farmers, who in general went about their business of planting and harvesting as usual, so our project continued in spite of what was happening in Haiti. At this time I submitted the proposal to set up a seed multiplication cooperative in Bruny which was approved and funded to the great anger of the whore turned missionary woman who demanded money for her project of saving souls and was refused.

In fact, Haiti was the ideal country in turmoil where these American missionaries came in droves to save their souls. They came with loudspeakers and tents for these revivals and held their show in stadiums where their counterparts translated their harangue in Creole for the masses in rapid fire style. Haiti was being overrun by them. You could see the white American women wearing only bras and panties sunbathing in remote villages where they had come to establish a

church, as if Haiti was short of Churches. I had previously written a great deal about the missionaries in Les Cayes who were more established, but there were a great number of itinerant ones who descended on Haiti like plague.

My seed multiplication program was a great success thanks to the funding and the farmers who worked tirelessly to build the warehouse, threshing cum drying floor and filling up the huge CARE truck borrowed with sand, gravel and rocks in the river bed. I taught them how to operate the new Kubota power tiller and got them the seeds of Amina. Later I was approached by other donors to establish similar programs for corn and beans, but I had no time. Our project became well known for its positive actions, so many people came to visit us from other parts of Haiti.

The kids started schooling again now that peace had returned temporarily. Jasmine lived through it all knowing that I was there to protect her and the kids, although in her heart she must have felt anxious at times. She even bought tee shirts printed with Vive Haiti that were selling like hot cakes. But we were surprised at our so-called friends in Les Cayes who never even phoned to know if we were alright or how we had managed during the revolution in Port-au-Prince.

Jasmine and I often talked about the Haitians and the expatriates in Les Cayes whom we had now known for more than two years and in general about their apathy. These are the people for whom Jasmine did great favors all the time, inviting them to dinner or lunch, but they remained aloof except when they wanted some other favors.

The tradition of the potluck party was now discontinued due to lack of participants or someone taking the responsibility of organizing one, but everyone showed up if Jasmine organized it. They wanted fun but shirked responsibility. The Camp Perrin people formed their own clique, and the Peace Corps people had their own group. Then there were the missionaries in Cite Lumiere, who did not mix with anyone.

I was more and more engrossed in my work with the farmers because many of my efforts had started to pay off. The corn, sorghum, sweet potato, black beans and the soil conservation project in Fond des Freres all were on track and doing well. I also helped push the construction of our office cum residence in Maniche for our field assistants and helped set up the Peace Corps girl in Maniche for her animal science work there. In short, the year 1986 was a Momentous year when so many things good and bad happened.

We often heard the voodoo drums late at night but had never actually seen a ceremony, so one night I followed the sound to its source and found a large crowd in a hut swaying to the beat. There was a houngan who is a voodoo priest doing some chanting in the middle and a few women dancing as if in a trance and writhing on the floor. The Haitians practice Voodoo as a form of ritual worship and consider it a part of their Catholic faith.

They assembled in great numbers in a place in Central Haiti each year to celebrate the Voodoo ceremony there, so I took Jasmine there once. But closer to home, the drums beat every night. The missionaries hated it and said that it was devil worship, but in this they failed to understand the Haitian people.

Voodoo had come to Haiti from West Africa a long time ago and had now become part and parcel of the Haitian people, who saw no contradiction in their practice of Voodoo and their Catholic faith. The two went hand in hand. The missionaries sewed disharmony in the Haitian society by turning Haitians against Haitians.

One could see the fanaticism of new converts in the countryside who would go around the villages cursing the sinners and frothing in their mouth doing so while the villagers just looked. I had seen this sort of thing in Bamako where the Moslem zealots cursed loudly standing outside restaurants that served beer to patrons. The fanaticism was not limited to American Protestants.It could be found anywhere but in Haiti which is a small country, its effects were deeper on the society.

In 1987, we took our last vacation in Mexico and the rest in the United States. I will not write about Mexico again because I wrote enough already, so let me just mention our stay in the US. In Washington, D.C. we met our friend Hubert, who had now found a job there. Jasmine had met Hubert before, and he had come to stay with us in Les Cayes for a while. The kids were happy to see their uncle Hubert again.

So we saw the usual places in the capital like the Lincoln Memorial, Jefferson memorial etc. but the kids were more interested in the Air and Space museum, the Smithsonian and the zoo. I showed them the place near Dupont Circle where I used to stay learning French from Nicole, but that place had closed in the meantime. The next stop was New York where we went to Liberty island, saw the Bronx zoo and the Metropolitan museum. We climbed up to the top of the World Trade Centre, which does not exist anymore, to see the 4th of July fireworks. We were not impressed, although many tourists oohed and aahed as if they had never seen anything like it. They probably had not.

Jasmine was very disturbed by the poor people sleeping in the subway stations on cardboard or urinating in corners. The trains were full of graffiti and often obscene words, but the stations were also spray-painted by vandals.

We saw poor homeless people sleeping on cardboards and covering themselves up with rags or newspapers in Central Park, which was also shocking to her. Filipinos believed that America was rich.

We then took the train to Niagara Falls, passing through the countryside full of derelict factories and abandoned hulks of machinery or cars. The names like Poughkeepsie etc. did not mean anything to the kids who observed everything with keen eyes. But Niagara Falls was wonderful.

The roaring water falling over the precipice was spectacular. It made a mist, catching the rainbow.

In fact everything seemed to be named rainbow there like rainbow helicopter service, rainbow hotel, rainbow shopping mall etc. Some people even went up near the falls in boats called Maid of mist wearing yellow raincoats, but we stayed above. There are some museums nearby, but we all have seen enough already.

The shopkeepers in Niagara where I bought some records were rude. It was just like in Miami. The waitresses in restaurants who were usually old and dour looking always engaged in small talks like" your kids are cute etc." but gave us the worst seats when there were very few customers and expected big tips. I learned that the waitresses had certain tables assigned to them, so they made sure that they all got an equal share of their tips. Their chitchat was a part of their commercial jargon that did not fool Americans, but there were many rich foreigners in Niagara.

Back in New York, we found a hotel, but they had no fixed rates. The rate for the day depended on demand, so it went up double during the 4th of July. This was another aspect of commercialism we came to know about in the US. Jasmine was disturbed by the aggressiveness of the African Americans. We saw a fellow pull a knife in a street brawl, so we walked away quickly. The filth in the subway that stank of urine, the mud caked derelicts in Central Park and elsewhere showed a different side of New York to her.

Black women spoke or laughed in the subway trains in loud exaggerated voice while bantering with what sounded like sex talks with younger ones. We felt uneasy and were glad to leave New York. It was time to return to Haiti. We did not like New York at all.

While in Mexico, we had decided that Jasmine should return to the Philippines with the kids to start schooling there and asked our office to wire the tickets to the agent in Port-au-Prince. When we arrived in Port-au-Prince, we found the streets deserted. The airline had warned us that there was trouble in Port-au-Prince, so they had to cancel previous flights. The airport was also deserted, but someone came to pick us up.

In Port-au-Prince, we could feel a sense of desperation now. One fellow told me to leave for Les Cayes immediately because he had information that the road was going to be blocked starting the next day.

He was wrong. We saw the first road block outside the city. They demanded money and the rabble wanted to smash the headlights of the car. I could see the tense face of Jasmine and the kids, but somehow I managed to talk my way out. There was the second road block further down the road where again they demanded money and were very angry, so again I tried to talk my way out and finally paid a few dollars.

The third road block had a bigger crowd and many women to whom I explained that I was an agronomist going back to Les Cayes with my family and my two children were exhausted so they should let me pass. Jasmine was on the verge of tears and very tense, but somehow we mollified the people, and they let us pass. This is how we reached Les Cayes late at night. There was a road block just outside the town, but we again explained that we were almost home so they let us pass.

The very next day, Jasmine started to pack when we received the phone call that her tickets were all confirmed all the way to Manila so she must leave Les Cayes immediately. It was not easy to pack so quickly, so I said that I will ship the rest later because I was staying behind. So hurried goodbyes were said to a few and we drove right back to Port-au-Prince.

It was a Friday afternoon when I got finally the tickets and rushed to the bank that closed at 1 pm to get some traveler's checks. The bank manager was about to close the doors but gave me the checks just in time. Now everything was ready for her to leave next morning, but nothing was easy in Haiti anymore. At 4 am the next morning, I found roadblocks on the way to the airport and had to get down in the rain to remove the logs and burned out tires. We arrived in time and Jasmine and kids flew off to Miami while I looked at the disappearing dot in the sky sadly.

Now I found a puncture in my tire. I was so glad that it had happened after she left. Now I had all the time to take care of punctures. It was a big weight off my chest. She was safe and on her way to her country where the kids once again will rejoin their old school and where we had a nice, well established house in Naga city. I was not worried any longer.

I had one more job to do in the project. The Americans had asked me to prepare a comprehensive final report on all the work I did for the past several years. So I got back to Les Cayes to prepare this report. I had kept meticulous notes on the experiments and trials, so I did not have too much trouble putting it all together in a final form. I finished this job and submitted the report in October 1987. I had asked to be relieved of my duties now so that I could rejoin my family in the Philippines, although the project ended a few months later. They agreed.

The construction in Bruny of the warehouse, threshing cum drying floor had been completed, so the farmers were really happy. They said that it is the first time they had seen the money faithfully and honestly spent for a noble project like this. The Haitians were noted for their corruption, who always kept something for their own pocket.

But a few more unpleasant things were in store for me. At this time thieves broke into my house several times and carried away almost everything of value including the video camera, record player and the radio. It was always known to them that now I was living alone and often out in the field, so they took advantage. They also knew that I was leaving, so could not stay behind to find justice. Nothing worked in Haiti anymore. It was just a total loss that I had to accept. The thieves even left a pair of military handcuffs on the roof.

They had come prepared to handcuff me if I woke up and caught them red-handed. They also stole the project motorbike from the office and a motorboat engine just behind my house. The thieves were very active, with no one to stop them or catch them. I did have a night watchman and a maid, but never knew if they were in cahoots and had left the kitchen door open on purpose. I was relieved that they did not harm me, although perhaps they could have if surprised.

The Bruny farmers arranged a farewell party for me in their village. Their daughters wrote poems for me that they read. The farmers sang songs on their guitars that they composed praising Doctor Amal for all I had done for them and offered rhum to me. It was all very touching. I recorded their music on tape that I still play sometimes. It brings back nostalgic memories of proud people who were going through hell.

I danced with them, but in the gaiety there was sadness in the knowledge that I was perhaps never to return here and never to see these wonderful people again. We had all come a long way since I had first arrived here. We had accomplished much working together, but it was time to leave.

The girls came one by one and kissed my cheek, and I hugged the farmers and said goodbye. I liked the country and its people in spite of my personal misfortune in the hands of thieves. I thought that the Haitians were a courageous people who suffered needlessly. It was a great country and they were great, gentle people. Haiti will remain my favorite country for the rest of my life.

I left Port-au-Prince on November 1 of 1987 for good. There was no one from the project to see me off at the airport, but that was nothing new. I did not make any friends with the expatriate project staff, so naturally they were aloof. The national project director who was a Haitian had spoken on national TV about my work in Les Cayes and showed great appreciation, so it was something. He died soon afterward.

Thus, the chapter on Haiti came to a close for me.

Chapter Thirteen: India, a rift grows in Sri Ram Pur

This time my visit to Washington, D.C. was short where I had to get an immigrant visa for the Philippines. The consulate required a complete medical check up, so one day I went to the George Washington University clinic to ask if they could do it. The nurse said that normally they did, but now the doctors were busy attending some meetings, so I had to go elsewhere. She in fact told me about another place downtown and called to make sure they would do the tests required.

This place was just nearby where an old doctor tapped my chest and knocked my knees and also peeled my eyes to pronounce me healthy but took an x-ray as was required and tested the urine and filled out all the medical forms the embassy had given me. That satisfied the embassy, so they stamped my passport with the immigrant visa.

Hubert asked me to stay with him for the few days I was in DC. He was working in Washington now, but I knew that he would soon go elsewhere. I never knew where he went or worked because he was a poor correspondent and seldom wrote or answered letters, so keeping in touch with him was always difficult. I was surprised to find him in Haiti after so many years, but he could have been elsewhere just as easily.

I knew at one time he was in Zaire, although what he did there was anyone's guess. He wrote once that he had married a Belgian divorcee who was probably black and had now her two grown up daughters to take care of in Belgium because his wife had died, so I suppose he went

to Belgium for a while… Then I heard that he was in Iraq, and lastly he wrote that he was in Jerusalem, but never mentioned what he did in those places.

I guessed he was involved in some animal science project because that was his specialty, but we rarely kept in touch. Then he wrote to me that he was again getting married and this time to a woman from Costa Rica so that was how Hubert was. I never knew what he was up to until he wrote which was seldom. Anyway, I was going to make a stop in India before going back to the Philippines and did not know if and when I would see Hubert again.

So one day I arrived in Sri Ram Pur again. My Mom was now in her eighties and very frail. All her hair had turned white, and she was just bones, but her hearing was good, and her brain was still active. Only her eyes were poor, and she could only see a blur, but she was not senile. Her memory was sharp, and she recalled names and events of time past very clearly.

She could not go outside the house because she was afraid. She said that she could not read or write like before because of her diminishing eyesight. I missed her big and beautiful handwriting full of love and blessings, but she said that no one took dictation if she wanted to write to me. Sabita did not care, and her handwriting was very bad.

She was also lonely and had no one to talk to. She stayed in her bed and listened to the radio most of the time and complained of her acidity. I bought her some antacid medicine that she gulped down and asked for more. I often sat with her, caressing her shriveled arms and legs or giving her a massage, but mostly I listened to her while she rambled on. No one really came to visit her or pay much attention to her.

I at this time started taking copious notes of what she said because someday I hoped to write it all down as a part of the family history. My grandfather and his brother had kept a family record book that my father had continued, but now no one kept any records. I also did not know anything about my mother's side and about her relatives, so I started to write it all down and asked many questions.

Nirmal said that our family was a most ordinary family not worth writing about in which I was the sole exception, but I did not agree with him and asked him for the dilapidated family record book of my father so that I could someday translate it into English for the next generation. I also wanted to make it as up to date as possible so no one was better informed than my mother. I also took some tape recordings.

Sabita was her usual self, so we hardly ever talked. The only words she said in a day were like “dinner is ready” and often not even that. She complained to everybody about how hard she had to work and take care of everybody and had no time to enjoy life or go anywhere. She often said she had shackles on her legs and was destined to take care of others all her life, this meaning mother and an occasional guest like me.

Annapurna said that she did not feel welcome to the Sri Ram Pur house anymore but came anyway because of mother. She was also considering buying a house in Lucknow for her retirement because she could not live in Sri Ram Pur with Sabita always bitching about something or someone. Sabita did not get along with anyone now and had something nasty to say about everyone. She was only devoted to her husband and daughter.

Gone were the days when we brothers and sisters could sit around joking or singing songs pedaling the old Miller organ or discuss something and have fun. Sabita felt left out because she did not understand the jokes and could not sing so she sulked in another room. Now the atmosphere had changed. There was no more gaiety, and no one sang songs or joked.

Nirmal who is an artist and of sensitive nature sat in one corner reading the newspaper and rarely touched his electric guitar or paint brush. He had stopped making clay figurines in which he excelled. If I tried to talk to him about something, he took a negative approach right away. He was now very nationalistic and flared up if he felt that I was criticizing India or anything Indian. He said that no one could take an opposing view without feeling bad or bearing grudges.

I did not agree but kept my own counsel. He did not take any argument kindly and bore grudges for a lifetime if you crossed him. The only time we could talk was when I made silly jokes about his scooter or something, but mostly we kept silent. The time passed agonizingly slowly as I was bored.

A week felt like a month, and a day like a week. I had nothing in common with them anymore. They were not interested in knowing anything about Haiti, where I had just come from, and they were not curious about how we lived in the Philippines.

Sabita's daughter was a copy of her mother, and I felt no love for her anymore. I used to bring her toys and dolls from abroad when she was a little girl and adorable, but now she behaved like her mother and was haughty. Her studies were the priority so she often turned off the TV when we were watching because it disturbed her studies. Usually it was Sabita who closed the doors and turned off the TV when she thought we were making some noise.

Ashis and Jayanti did not feel any kinship with their cousin because she was aloof to them and never wrote letters. She casually asked one or two questions about how they were doing, to which I answered also cryptically.This was all the conversation we had during my stay of several weeks. Ashis by the way was the sole namesake in the family because Nirmal's daughter would one day marry and take the surname of her husband.

Sabita often snickered at my foreign education and wealth and said that it was more credible to get education in India and succeed than abroad because it was tougher. I could say nothing. We really had nothing to talk about.

It was the same with my sister Parvati, who lived nearby. She never smiled and always had a sour, beaten look on her face. It was very difficult to spend more than five minutes with her or her senile husband, who did not remember me. Her children were also aloof because I did not bring them gifts. They were at a loss as to what to do with me because they had no topic to discuss, and I did not drink tea or coffee.

Indians always offered tea in a small cup with milk and sugar, but I did not like tea or coffee, so this caused a problem every time I visited someone. They did not keep anything else in the house unlike here in the Philippines, Jasmine kept all sorts of fruit juices and ice cream. They felt embarrassed when I said that a glass of water would do.

Nirmal said that he too was lonely living alone while we all stayed so far. Perhaps he still felt some brotherly love. I will never know, but my life had taken a different direction since 1967, and he had come to acknowledge that fact. The house was big, and we could all stay there comfortably, but a house was never home if no one lived there or those who lived there did not welcome us. Annapurna too did not want to live in Sri Ram Pur after her retirement, and we had made our choice never to return.

I felt sad about my mother. Had she been able, I would have brought her to the Philippines, where we could take good care of her. I remembered how she had enjoyed the trip we took to Agra to show her the Taj Mahal back in 1970, but now she was weak and not fit to travel. She was curious about the kids and our house in Naga City and asked how Jasmine was doing. She was worried about my frequent transfer from one place to another because it would disrupt the studies of the kids, but I assured her that they were doing fine and had returned to Naga from Haiti to start schooling there.

I was glad that Mom had an income from the rent of tenants upstairs so she had money. She was also given the pension of my father that the government had recently approved for all the widows in India so she was independent. What she needed was someone to talk to or listen to. Old age is a terrible time for some people who become dependent on others for their daily needs, and more so when that care is grudgingly given.

She was once a proud woman who had toiled and suffered hardship to bring us all up. It was because of her that we got an education and became what we are today. It was she who convinced my father to let Annapurna go and take the government job, saying that she should be independent. Likewise, it was my mother who convinced my father to bring back Shanti and her baby when she became a widow at an age of 18 and convinced her to start schooling.

Shanti over the years had passed high school and college and now had a government job. It was my mother who had convinced Parvati to undergo tubal ligation so that she will not produce more children. Her husband had a very low paying job that barely fed their family of 6. It was my Mom who convinced my father to buy the lot and build a few rooms, for which she willingly gave

all her gold jewelry to sell. It was because of her that we all succeeded in our own ways, but no one gave her credit. She was a great Mom, but now she was old, feeble and helpless.

I hugged her and told her that she was the best Mom in the world and I will never forget what she did for all of us. She shed some tears of joy and said that at least someone had said it.

But Sabita was cruel and said that she pretended to be frail and sick in order to draw attention. I began to detest this woman and her heartlessness. It was she who had poisoned the mind of my mother when Jasmine said that her father was very sick, and we needed to return to the Philippines.

I visited Mr. Bose who used to be the tenant upstairs and who now lived in his own house, but he was an old man who lived in the past and was often sick. His wife was also sick of cancer and would die soon. Others in the community avoided me, although I knew them well since childhood. They were ill at ease with me because they had heard that I was now called Dr. and was wealthy.I think the wealth part worried them more than the doctor part because they were still struggling with their day-to-day living while I traveled all over the world by jet plane.

We had grown apart and had nothing in common now with anyone. Only Rinky was happy to see me and said that she knew of no one who lived abroad and came to visit India many times like I did. Her younger sister was closer to my age who had gotten married in Kolkata and I have not seen her since 1968, but Rinky lived nearby. Her failed marriage had produced a daughter who was Ashis companion in going to school every morning.

My old alma mater, the Institute, was also a place I did not care to visit because my old professors had either retired or died and the new people did not know or care who I was. The librarian Miss Desouza was also dead. She had given me a job to pay for my tuition and always welcomed me in the past. But now the Institute was just a place full of buildings and old memories. We had played so many pranks and mischief here, but my classmates had all scattered all over India never to come back and some even had gone abroad. The alumni association was very weak, although it existed.

I took some video of the campus just for posterity and Nirmal one day took me around on his scooter to take photos of various parts of Sri Ram Pur. There were many interesting places like the old fort with its massive ramparts and the Pillar of Ashok inside inscribed with the words of Buddha in Pali. It was a dead language now, so no one could read those words. Besides, one was not allowed inside the fort because it was a military fort.

But there was the Sri Ram Pur university with its huge Admin building, the Science College, the Central Park where Queen Victoria used to sit under the marble canopy with her broken nose and scepter, the public library, the gothic stone church, the cathedral where Jasmine used to go for prayers, the high court building and many such places that I photographed for Ashis and Jayanti.

At home, the TV was the center of entertainment when everybody sat down to watch a religious soap opera in the morning. Practically the whole country came to a standstill during this time because it was Ramayana that every Hindu knew by heart. When I got up to leave because I found it boring, they were surprised. It was poorly done and actors jumped around in comical fashion wearing face masks of monkeys, but the Indians took it seriously and never missed one episode.

It was the same as the Hollywood Biblical movies that no self-respecting Christian would find boring, no matter how badly they were done. People sat enthralled in front of the TV, swallowing every word and making running commentaries of their own. I often sat to watch their facial expressions that changed every few seconds.

Ramayana was the story of Ram who was exiled to the forest for 14 years because of his stepmother's ambition to make her son Bharat the king so Ram and his wife Sita and his brother Laksman all went to live in the forest from where one day the evil king of Lanka now called Sri Lanka abducted poor Sita. This led to the war in which Ram was victorious with the help of the army of monkeys etc.

Whether he was the ideal king or not did not matter to the Hindus because Ram was their God, so he must have had pretty good reasons for doing what he did and we mortals never could understand the ways of Gods. They revered Ram and looked with suspicion at skeptics like me. They thought that I was not religious enough because I did not watch Ramayana. They were right.

I now looked at all aspects of Hindu society impartially and with detachment, and found them lacking in many things. I found them discriminating against the "untouchables" even today, although Gandhi had tried hard to let people be treated equally with dignity. They did not let a Moslem into a Hindu home, and the Christians did not fare much better either. They still believed in the rigid caste system, although the government was trying hard to overcome it.

They also believed in taking a dowry for the marriage of their son from a poor family. Only the price of the groom depended on the outer limit of their greed. Bengalis were not as bad as others, but there was greed, no doubt.

They believed in the superiority of their religion, although dogma had set in, but almost everyone nowadays had to have a personal guru so the number of gurus had proliferated beyond belief. Nirmal and his wife sang devotional songs every evening together, playing the harmonium and I often wondered if Sabita really believed in the words she sang every day of the duty to be good and kind and truthful etc.

My Mom had always been wary of these so-called gurus and said she never needed one. She was a devout Hindu lady who had lived her entire life according to religious rules and laws, but

now it was different for the next generation. Now to appear religious was more important than to be good in heart and helpful to others.

India was a country where people still talked referring to the past events that took place 2000 years ago that had no relevance today. Most of them isolated themselves by saying that they did not need the world and had nothing to learn from them. A college education did not change anything. I noticed a streak of fanaticism in Annapurna, who would shed tears listening to religious music and reading the scriptures.

I was happy to see Devjani arrive one day. She was still the jolly one we knew and had not changed much yet because she lived near Kolkata and far from the unhappy house. She teased everybody and laughed but noticed that no one shared her gaiety much these days. I was grateful to her because she had helped Jasmine a lot during her delivery of Jayanti in 1979.

Devjani was the sole exception in the morose family who laughed, giggled and teased everyone and brought a breath of fresh air. She had left the family at the age of 17 when she married, and now she was in her middle age, but she was still the same beautiful, tall and now almost regal Devjani. She had put on weight, but still was the young girl at heart that I fondly remembered.

I teased her about the monkey who had pulled her hair so hard. How could she ever forget? She lived near Kolkata with her old husband and son in a small village. Her two daughters were married and recently her son was also married to a village girl who was without any education and plain in looks.This son had a daughter who was always sick because she was born with some defects that needed constant medical attention. This was the sore point in Devjani's life. I tried to help by sending some money, but the daughter would soon die.

I was glad to leave Sri Ram Pur once again though. I hugged and kissed my Mom and said that I will try to come and see her again and gave her some money. She always refused to accept, but I slipped it under her pillow and left. I looked at the house sadly.It was such a big house, but as if there was no life in it now. We were all gradually moving away from it, but once it had vibrated with laughter and music and jokes. Once my dad was in charge who sat on the veranda in his easy chair and received visitors.

But now his easy chair was empty, although still in the same place. It still had the teeth mark of the dog on its legs where it used to chew, but that dog too was dead. I did not know how long Ma had, but she looked so old and frail. She often cried to Annapurna and said that she was ready to go and wished to God that He would take her now. It broke my heart to hear her say that because she was our Mom and I loved her.

I remembered how lovingly she had selected the material for my suit before I left for Saigon, and how she looked at me when I was leaving Kolkata for Saigon so long ago. I remembered when I was a little child and climbed on her lap and how she used to pack my lunchbox every day or shine my shoes. As if it was a whole lifetime ago, which it actually was.

Now in her hour of need I was always leaving because I had to. I could not stay with her for more than a few weeks and had to return to the Philippines. She knew it and always forgave me. She said that she was happy as long as we were happy, living wherever we happened to live. It was her grace and forgiveness that perhaps hurt more, but I had to leave.

I said my goodbye one day and left for Manila. It was on December 4 and my birthday, but no one remembered. Birthdays were not important in India so we never celebrated it. Jasmine was waiting for me at the Manila airport to receive me. She had traveled 10 hours by bus to get there and looked tired, but we were happy to see each other again. She had gone to Haiti with the kids and had returned to the Philippines, so I was proud of her. She had managed everything so well and had gotten the kids into schools right away. She also said that she had made substantial improvements in the house as well that I was eager to see.

She was the solid rock on which my life rested, making me feel secure and happy. I was sorry that Haiti was such a mess, and she had to be there during the troubled times, but nothing mattered now because we were home where our kids were waiting for us. Jayanti had made a "Welcome Home Papa" sign and strung it on the doorway and I hugged them tightly.

She had memorized a long piece of text and recited with actions flawlessly that I videotaped. Ashis also was doing well and got awards in his class. Jasmine told me that the Bicol region had been hit by a severe typhoon recently that had brought devastation on a wide scale. Our fruit trees were uprooted in the strong wind and the garden was destroyed, but the trees could be replanted again and the garden rebuilt. I was home again, so I was going to set everything right.

I was surprised to see the new kitchen that Jasmine had fixed and the backside walls that she had raised. The floor was new and the drainage around the house had been improved. She had the city water connection now and also cable TV, so there had been substantial improvement since she had returned.

But I also noticed that the two small bedrooms were not enough for us, so we started thinking about adding one bedroom on top of the garage for us so that the kids could have their own rooms.

So the masons and carpenters came, and the construction began in February 1988. It was a messy job, but soon the room came up nicely. It took about a month to build an attached bath with hot and cold showers and the room itself was the size of the garage, which was huge. We installed the cabinets and put yellow tiles in the bathroom floor and walls. The bedroom floor was of wood that the maid polished with wax every week. The stairs were concrete with handrails.

This was a bit of luxury we could well afford. She even had a small fridge and the cable TV in our room, while the big screen TV stayed downstairs, where the kids enjoyed watching Chitty Chitty Bang Bang on VHS now.

The house was painted nicely and lights installed upstairs, so everything looked very nice. Ashis moved into one room and Jayanti stayed in her room that she had to share with the mother of Jasmine who came and stayed.

I bought a new stove and refrigerator for the kitchen and ordered a lot of Narra furniture for the living room. The old Narra furniture was repolished and the entire house spruced up. Jasmine surprised me one day when she brought back the VW Brasilia which we had sold previously.

We hired tutors for the kids to give them lessons in the Bicol language and also piano lessons. They were doing well in school. Ashis had won an elocution contest. Later, both Ashis and Jayanti would win medals in the extemporaneous speaking contest in Naga City. No Filipino kids could come near them when it came to English.

Our garden regained its health and started blooming. The back garden was replanted with carpet grass and some fruit trees. Now our home looked shiny and clean and no longer run down like when her younger sister had stayed there. They had now moved to their house nearby, but we did not have much to do with them because I disliked her husband by sight.

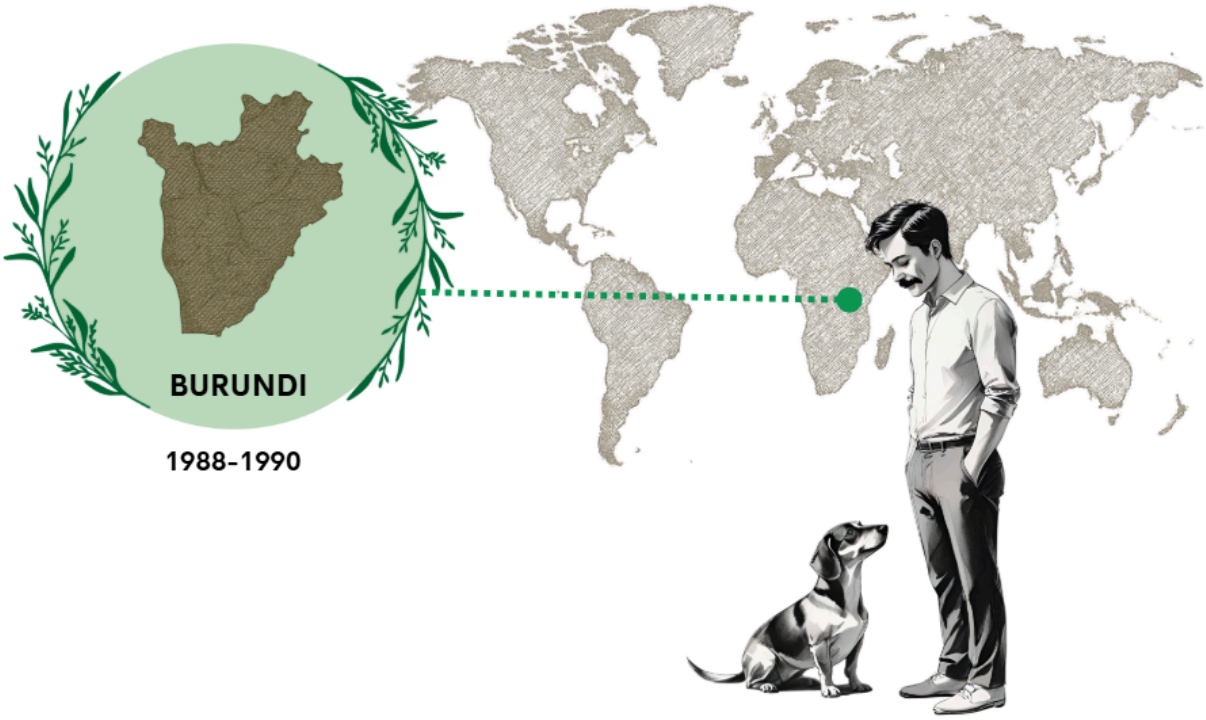
Our new bedroom upstairs was cool and airy, where I put my huge study desk. I did not want to leave again because the family was so nicely settled here. I hated to uproot Jasmine again and bring her to some remote country, disrupting their happy life. I could see that she was happy here because she was in her own house and the kids were in good school. She had many friends in Naga where she had grown up and worked before we had gotten married, so she was very much at home.

I had to look for another job somewhere soon. Dr.Singh had informed me that he wanted me to be a candidate for a post in Cambodia that IRRI was looking to fill and said that he was sure IRRI would hire me, but another offer came from Rwanda. I had mixed feelings about going to Cambodia, where the war was over, but the Khmer Rouge had strewn the country with millions of land mines, making it the most dangerous country to work in. My job there would have required working with the farmers in the countryside.

So I backed out of the IRRI proposal and decided to take a look at Rwanda first, to the disappointment of Dr.Singh, who had pushed hard for my candidacy. I did not know anything about Rwanda except that it was a small country in Central Africa and very hilly. They were famous for coffee. I was to also visit Burundi which was next to Rwanda to see a project there.

So one day I flew to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, from where a connecting flight to Kigali could be obtained. I was afraid another chapter in my international wanderings was about to begin.

Chapter Fourteen: Burundi, in the blood-soaked hills



I left one day in July 1988 for Addis Ababa, where I was to catch a flight to Kigali, which is the capital of Rwanda. It was to be a short visit of about one week to see the country and the project first hand and to decide if I will accept the job to work there. I had to meet with many Rwandan and other officials to assess the situation there. I had decided not to bring Jasmine and the kids with me this time if I accepted the job because uprooting them again would have been hard on Jasmine and them.

So I mentally prepared myself to work in Africa alone this time, but first I had to find out what the project was all about and more importantly who the project personnel, both Rwandan and the foreign experts. It was good of the Americans to offer me to visit the country first and then decide, so I was under no obligation to accept the job if I so wished.

I arrived in Kigali to find no one to receive me, although I had sent a telex to that effect. The military officer took his time to stamp a transit visa on my passport, so by the time I was free to leave, the airport was empty. Then I had to have some local money, but the bank was closed, so a Rwandan girl changed some money for me. Outside I found a lone taxi and asked the driver to bring me to the hotel called Hotel des Milles Collines where I was booked. But here again there was no booking made, so I was directed to the hotel called Diplomat where a room could be found.

The Diplomat is a nice hotel and had some people selling beautiful wood carvings and statuettes, so I bargained to get a tall Tutsi woman beautifully carved and polished in typical African style. The next morning I found my way to the office where I was to meet with the representative of the project.

Kigali is a hilly town and there are a thousand hills, as the name of the hotel suggested. The valley below was full of vast swamps full of papyrus reeds and hippos and crocodiles. I could see it before landing how extensive the swamps were and how green they looked. The town was small and well laid out with a small business district, but Rwanda was a poor nation composed of two tribes of Tutsis and Hutus who mistrusted each other deeply.

This mistrust was sown by its former colonial master Belgium, which made it their business to describe two tribes as distinctly different from each other, although to you and me they looked just the same. They even measured the width of the nose to say that Tutsis had sharp noses and thin lips, and were taller than the coarse Hutus. The population was roughly 80% Hutus and 20 % Tutsis but here the government was Hutu, whereas in the neighboring Burundi the government was Tutsi, although with roughly the same mix of the population.

They spoke the same language in both countries, so the separation of the region into two countries seemed very artificial, made of course by the Belgians who separated the two and sowed the seed of mischief that was soon to come. At this time I did not see anything but was told that there was an undercurrent of hatred between the two tribes.

I was given a driver and a car to bring me to Rwerere up in the hills in the north where the project of farming systems was set up, so soon I was on my way through green hills and arrived late at night in Rwerere. The project here was complete with a guest house and the residences for the project staff and office buildings. There was no electricity here so they used a generator that they turned off at 10 pm, but there was water piped in from some source.

Here in the cool mountains of northern Rwanda, I saw hills heavily populated, and many farmers could be seen tending their coffee and plantain or banana plantations. Their houses were simple mud houses built of red clay. In fact the hills were mostly of red soil but very green and full of plants of all kinds. Women worked with babies on their back the African style like in Mali but here the hills were lovingly tended and neatly planted everywhere which was in stark contrast to Malian jungle.

We went to lake Kivu or to a place near it where there was a waterfall. People said that it was a favorite place for some to commit suicide, where they just jumped off the cliff. I was shocked. Why would anyone commit suicide in such a lovely green country where food was plentiful and

climate so cool? They said that up the hills near the volcano there were plenty of gorillas that Dian Fossey had studied. Many tourists came to Rwanda to see the gorillas there, who were now protected from the poachers by the armed guards. I liked the beautiful country of Rwanda, but was unsure about the job.

I met and talked to many Rwandans and the expatriate staff about the project and visited their sites in some villages. They had set up a huge tree nursery to distribute saplings to farmers to plant on hill slopes to prevent erosion, so obviously the project was doing something good. But I found the Rwandans morose and sulking. They were unhappy about something but would not tell me what. The expat staff also were unhappy about something, so I sensed that their relationship with the Rwandans was not smooth.

If I joined the project here, then I would be in the middle of their quarrel, which did not sound very appealing to me. The person whom I was to replace said that he was glad to leave the place. There was also tension among the expat staff, so they did not get along very well. The project chief was an American, who asked me why I did not publish any technical papers, to which I replied that enough has been written about the farming systems already. I was a field person and wrote about my work as a final report, but never really cared to publish anything.

He thought that publishing articles is what people should do and looked at me with suspicion. He was not a friendly person but addressed me as Sir, which I thought was very odd indeed.

Then the American representative from Arkansas suggested that we go to Burundi next door and see if I liked the project there. They also needed an agronomist there, so we drove through Butare on to the border one day. I bought some wood carvings of misshapen African figures in Butare that I found typical if not very attractive, but arriving at the border, the border guard refused to let me cross to the other side.

It was because the officials in Kigali had made a mistake of writing the date of expiry of the visa, which had expired before I had even arrived in the country. But the guard was adamant and said that it was not his problem. He said that I should go back to Kigali and correct the problem, but we stayed and insisted on going to Burundi. Finally, after what seemed like a long wait, the guard finally saw my point and let us through.

We walked across the border when the policemen lifted the barrier. On the Burundi side, the project leader had come to pick us up. I noticed that the Burundi outpost had a solar panel telephone with a tall antenna. The road slowly climbed up the hills of Burundi, snaking through green hills full of coffee bushes and villages until we finally arrived in Gitega where the project had the office and where most of the staff lived.

From my long experience, I knew that a project succeeded or failed depending on the relationship among the team members and the relationship with the host country counterparts.

Money had very little to do with it. I had very good success in Haiti, although Mali was a bad experience where the Malians controlled everything including the money.

My strong personality and ideas about what the farming system should be doing did not mesh well with the project staff in Rwanda, whose leader insisted on doing very scientific research and publishing results. There was nothing very scientific about a farming systems project anywhere. It had mostly to do with trying new crops and varieties, new methods of cultivation and improving the yield. One had to be daring and innovative. You could draw on the expertise of the International research centers around the world and ask them to send you seeds or technical materials. I always received help from IRRI.

Here in Gitega I sensed that it was a better administered project. I was assured of full autonomy in deciding what I wanted to do within the framework of the project goals. They had heard about my success in Haiti and said that I was to stay in a remote village called Karuzi which was some 60 km from Gitega. The road to Karuzi was a dirt but drivable road.

I did not mind the isolation of Karuzi. I was coming alone so it did not matter where I stayed so I accepted the offer and proceeded to Bujumbura which is the capital of Burundi. But something that I had seen in Gitega bothered me a great deal. It was the army soldiers in battle gear running on training exercises through the streets all the time. Why were they so heavily armed, and what was the meaning of this exercise? I was to soon find out.

The road to Bujumbura runs downhill all the way from Gitega to the plains through similar green hills like in Rwanda. Here too, coffee was the mainstay of the economy, but the farmers grew plantain in profusion as well. It was their main diet, although I saw some rice in the valley. They grew manioc and potatoes, and I heard they had huge tea plantations in the north. The rainfall was similar to that of Rwanda, so Burundi was just as green.

Here, women wrapped in clothes of psychedelic green or bright red walked down the hills carrying babies on their back and loads of stuff on their head, but the men were really dangerous. They carried huge loads of plantains on their rickety bicycle and speeded down the slopes without brakes all the way to the plains. The accidents were frequent on this part of the road to Buja as they called Bujumbura. Then there were minivans that plied between Buja and Gitega that competed for space on the road with the daredevil farmers with their loads of plantain.

The huge tankers carrying fuel from the coast naked slowly through the mountains, posing more dangers. But now I was on my way to Bujumbura to meet with the officials there, and mostly to let them see and appraise me.

Bujumbura is spread out next to Lake Tanganyika, which is a very big lake next to Lake Victoria. It is a freshwater lake that is the source of livelihood of thousands of fishermen in Burundi and Tanzania. You can see the huge hippos playing in the lake just near the shore, but they are wild

and dangerous. The bull hippos often flashed their sabre like teeth at people when they felt nervous. The baby hippos bathed and cavorted under the watchful eyes of their mothers.

But the hippos came out to graze in the middle of the night and mowed the gardens like a lawn mower, destroying everything in its way. Many Bujumbura residents complained of the marauding hippos and the destruction they caused, but the hippos were protected. There were also huge crocodiles in the lake somewhere.

In Bujumbura one could find a lot of ivory and hippo teeth carvings as well as zebra skins and many artifacts made in Burundi, Rwanda and Zaire. The expat population was small and tourists very few, so it was not like Kenya. I liked Burundi and thought it was a nice country with friendly people. People at the airport remembered your name even after many months. The pace was relaxed and the atmosphere very exotic with all the hippos bathing nearby. The market was chaotic and full of minivans leaving or coming from the distant parts. They sold beautiful baskets and bowls made of papyrus reed that grew in abundance everywhere.

The meeting with the Americans and Burundians in Bujumbura went well. It was mostly the monologue of someone who seemed to know all the answers and had face marks like an Ibo from Nigeria, but I was used to strange people. We all agreed that I should come to Burundi and work on the project as the only agronomist in Karuzi. The Belgian fellow at the ISABU looked at me very strangely, as if he had never seen an Indian. ISABU is the agency that represents the Burundi government interest in the project.

The director of ISABU had visited our project in Haiti and I had taken him to the field to show some of the work I did there, so he remembered me warmly and said that I should come to Burundi and give the project a helping hand. His companion in Haiti was to be my counterpart in Karuzi.

Meanwhile, the news from Burundi was bad. My worst fears had materialized. The Tutsis were killing the Hutus again everywhere. That is why they were marching in full battle gear in Gitega that had made me so uneasy. CNN and the BBC reported mass slaughters of Hutus by the Tutsi army while the world watched in horror. Years later, the Hutus in Rwanda would take revenge and slaughter half a million Tutsis there until driven from power by the Tutsi militia.

These green hills of Burundi would be soaked with the blood of Hutus who fought back only with machetes and knives but were no match for the machine guns. Many fled across the border to Zaire and Tanzania and some to Rwanda. Their lovingly tended coffee plantations were now abandoned as village after village was destroyed and people died or fled in fear.

I debated with myself whether I should go back there, but the project people urged me to return in October. They said that the bloodletting was over at least for a while so the project could start again. Jasmine was worried that I should go back to such a place, but I said that It would be ok if the project people said so. Burundians seldom attacked foreigners.

I visited IRRI to see mainly Surendra who now worked in an outreach program. Others seemed too busy to have time for me. They all felt very important and would keep me waiting in the outer office like a refugee. I did not respect such people, but IRRI was a strange place. There were a lot of scandals there, involving some people in wide scale theft and mismanagement. Dr.Singh seemed unhappy and said that there was a lot of reorganization of departments, so he was not sure of his status now.

I found the atmosphere unfriendly but Dr.Singh promised me any help I needed from Burundi like seeds or technical help. He had helped me a great deal in Haiti by sending me wonderful high yielding rice varieties and would do so again in Burundi, but he still wished that I had taken the job in Cambodia. Everyone heard of Burundi in the news or rather saw it onTV.

I liked Surendra. He and I did our graduate studies at the same time at the University and had somehow kept in touch, although not often. He did not know that I was in Haiti for a while, but now we talked about our good old days whenever we got together. I had a feeling that he too was not very happy at IRRI and wanted to get out. IRRI's reputation was carried forward by such stalwarts as Dr.Singh who was a scientist of world renown but I wondered what would happen when such people retired or left IRRI for other jobs somewhere.

Return to burundi

I returned to Burundi in October 1988, but I had to spend a few days in Addis Ababa this time to get a visa for Burundi. Addis Ababa is perhaps the most forlorn city that I have ever been through. The small and old airport is seen full of refugee relief goods piled sky-high on one side while Russian jets unload some more, reminding you that there was a war going on in Eritrea in the west. The ride to downtown took you past drab concrete block buildings and many had a red star on top meaning the regime was communist. People were poor and would often ask you to buy them beer.

You could hardly find anyone to guide you to a good restaurant, although I tried hard because I liked Ethiopian food in Washington DC, but I had no success. The Ethiopian hotel only served beefsteak or omelet with oily french fries that I had trouble swallowing for three consecutive days. It was a tough country that had gone through a horrible famine and now a protracted war that no one was winning.

They boasted about their coffee, but I found it tasteless after the Burundi coffee that was so aromatic. Their handicraft was shoddy, although I did buy a leather briefcase that was well-made. The Burundi consulate was nice and stamped me a visa, so I was ready for Bujumbura once again. I was glad to leave Addis Ababa. The Ethiopian airways was not a good airline that took your business class ticket and put you in the economy class, saying that the flight did not have a business class. They also did not like to refund the excess charge or give me a first class upgrade, which I demanded.

The flight to Bujumbura from Addis Ababa takes you over the Lake Victoria, which is the biggest freshwater lake in Africa, but it was pitiful to see the shores denuded for miles around. This did not look like the Africa of Humphrey Bogart and Hepburn, but as we approached Kigali, the country turned green and hilly. The green, dense papyrus swamps spread over a huge territory. Only in East Africa you could see such huge swamps. The one south of Sudan was bigger than France.

This time I was met at the Bujumbura airport, and we soon traveled to Gitega again and then on to Karuzi which was my station.

Bujumbura was now calm and showed no signs that there were fighting here and in the country recently, except many checkpoints everywhere manned by armed military men. I arrived in Karuzi the next day but saw some checkpoints on the road where the military scrutinized the papers thoroughly before they let us proceed. The situation was still not totally normal, but no one talked about what had happened here so recently.

My driver was a Tutsi who felt hesitant to discuss the recent massacres in northern Burundi. In Karuzi I was given a house next to the guest house of the project. It was a fairly big house just for one person and was partially furnished, so I settled down quickly and hired a servant to do the cooking and cleaning chores.

The village of Karuzi is hilly and is surrounded by small hills and numerous valleys where the farmers plant rice. Just below my house down the hill is a small lake where the cattle herders always brought their cattle to water. Sometimes you could see wild ducks landing on the lake. The governor of the province received me without much enthusiasm, but that was understandable. People were still uptight about what had happened here and were suspicious of foreigners.

Karuzi is a very small village with a few houses and a few stores. The Institut Technologique Agricole of Burundi or ITAB was located here, so their staff mostly stayed in Karuzi. The foreigners who worked in Karuzi commuted from Gitega, but my job was here. The project had an office just outside the village, where I soon met my Burundian office workers, who appeared a bit shy. They were young people who had been shabbily treated by the American woman I had replaced, so they thought I was also arrogant. But I soon put them all at ease and found them very willing workers.

I was in charge of the big research station which was nothing but an area full of weeds and jungle so my first job was to carve out enough land area to plant the experiments and do seed multiplication work. This work had already started, and some land had been cleared, but more land was needed. The Burundians worked eagerly and did whatever I asked them to do. They were glad to work because they were bored doing nothing so far.

Soon several hectares of land was cleared, and I started laying out many trials on corn, beans and potatoes. Down the slope we cleared more land and planted corn, beans and potatoes for multiplication. We had some huge pits dug and filled with compost that we collected from the dairy farm.

The French fellow who worked in the project commuted from Gitega, but never lifted a finger to help in anything. He played with his computer all day and went right back to Gitega if there was no electricity.

But he came to pose and take photos of beautiful experiments on corn and beans or other crops to take credit. This project was 90% agronomy work, and I was the sole agronomist so I wondered what the others did.

The routine of work with the farmers in outlying villages in the province and the work at the Karuzi research site kept me busy all the time, so I seldom went to Gitega. I had received some rice varieties from IRRI that I was testing in the valley below, but also some upland rice varieties that I had planted in a distant village. Upland rice is grown just with rainfall and directly seeded, as compared to the lowland rice that had to be transplanted.

The villages of Bugenyuzi, Munyinya, Gishikanwa,Kabwira, Rugazi, Kiranda and Murambi were many such sites where I had planted trials on potato and beans. The potato trials were very successful, but the bean did not do badly either. Often, farmers asked me to share a glass of banana beer they brewed and called it pembe. They also made beer from sorghum.

Beer drinking in Burundi was a national pastime. Almost everyone drank huge quantities of local beer or the Amstel that was brewed under license near Gitega. We often sat around sipping pembe amidst the coffee plantations and joking. Women tended the coffee plants with care and plucked the red beans while carrying the babies at their back.

I did not understand this beer culture at first and invited my office workers to my house for some tea and cake. They made faces when they were served tea and inquired if I had any beer. No one drank tea. Beer was the only thing respectable here, so it was expected that I serve beer to them.

The farmers were simple folks who lived in rectangular adobe houses with tin roofs and planted coffee, banana and plantain near their houses on the hills. They also planted beans, manioc, corn, potato and sweet potato.

They planted low land rice in the valley below, which was mostly women's job. In general, the country was blessed with good rainfall and rich volcanic soil that made growing anything easy. They had plenty to eat and were prolific breeders. It was not unusual to be surrounded by at least a hundred kids of all ages as soon as I stopped my car somewhere.

Most of the farmers were Hutus and their landowners were Tutsis. The periodic slaughter of the Hutus by the Tutsis probably made them more anxious to produce children. There were trees everywhere, but the farmers chopped them down mercilessly for firewood. The government was the military that often ordered the villagers to plant trees on the slopes, so you could see many hills completely planted with pine trees.

The villagers were required to work one day a week to help maintain roads or make new ones or repair small bridges or culverts. In that respect it was so different from Haiti where no one did any community work and chopped down all the trees making the hills so utterly denuded. Here it was really green and lovely. The farmers here wore tattered clothes and were barefoot, but that was perhaps because they always worked in their fields and did not want to spoil their good clothes.

The once a week village markets were a riot of colours where mostly women bought and sold things they produced. They carried huge bunches of plantain on their heads and walked 10 kms to a market where they sat the whole day to sell it for a small price, but often carried it back if it was unsold. The women would not reduce the price by 10 cents and preferred to carry the heavy load back to their village.

Children here didn't throw stones at passing vehicles or shout insults. Instead, they said good morning and smiled. People raised their hands in greeting whenever they saw a vehicle, but whether it was a show of subservience to others was hard to tell. The past was tragic in these lovely hills that a Times correspondent had called the bloody hills of Burundi.

They lived side by side with the Tutsis but in fear. I only saw a country where no one benefited from this mutual animosity. The country was beautiful and supported a growing population well, but it lacked infrastructure like roads, schools and health care facilities. I often saw seriously ill people carried in a reed basket by strong men and walking for miles over the hills to reach a primary health care facility. There was no ambulance service here. The roads were just dirt roads that became muddy during the rainy season that often washed out the culverts and bridges.

Many villages were remote and cut off at such times. The public transportation system was also poor and dangerous as I had mentioned the road to Bujumbura where banana carrying bicyclists posed a threat. People waited by the roadside for hours to get a ride to some place, and a medical emergency could be catastrophic.

Most villages had no electricity or running water, but in Bugenyuzi, the Italians had set up a hospital and clinic that probably had a generator. They also had a church. Even in remote villages, one could see beautiful churches. The one in Karuzi was built with red bricks and had stained-glass windows and a dirt floor where women sat suckling their kids during service.

There were many Catholic missionaries of various nationalities who lived in isolation in small villages but built nice churches and often a school and a vocational school where they trained boys in pottery making or women in basket making or weaving. Islam was not much in evidence yet, but I suppose it was only a matter of time. One Tutsi girl in Gitaramuka once told me that she did not believe in the church controlling the lives of people, but the Catholic Church insisted that the Catholics baptized their children. This was the only way they could propagate the faith.

She also said that the Hindus were correct in thinking that the religion was a private matter that concerned no one except the individual and wished that others would follow their example. But this was not to be. In some countries, it was the State itself that controlled the religious lives of its citizens rigorously. Then there were the fundamentalists, forever pushing their agenda.

The young lady was an educated Tutsi who saw no future in intertribal hatred. I suggested that perhaps people could forget their tribal differences and learn to live in peace, but for that to happen, it was essential that teachers like her work hard to make the children understand that they were Burundians first and last. Perhaps more intermarriage could also blur the tribal lines and reduce animosity.

My life soon settled into the routine of going to work at 7 am and visiting some villages and sites where we had set up field trials. In the evenings, I would often curl up with a book or listen to the short wave radio. There was nothing else to do or no one to visit. Only my next door neighbor who was a Peace Corps girl dropped by once in a blue moon, so we played scrabble.

The nuns and the priest also came to visit me, but not often. The Burundians remained aloof because I did not share their enthusiasm for gulping down beer every night at the village grocery store that also doubled as the pub.

The evening meals were the leftovers from the lunch that I warmed up. Life became monotonous and routine with no break for anything. I did get a dog later on, but he was a free foraging dog chasing chickens and birds in the village and showed up at dinner time only. I called him Jumbo, but he looked more like a hot dog with small legs and floppy ears.

Sometimes I played on my harmonica and sang a few lines of songs that I played on the cassette player or even talked to myself. That is also known as thinking aloud, but mostly it was a very solitary existence.

Jasmine frequently wrote and asked me to return home. Kids were missing me because this was the first time we were separated, but I could not return home. Home seemed so far from the hills of Karuzi, but the fact was that home was indeed very far from here. The letters took more than a month to heighten the sense of isolation, but time somehow passed.

One day, the governor invited me to his inaugural ceremony, which meant the traditional dances and parade. The Burundian drummers are known for their drumming skills. They all showed up

in their costumes of leopard skins and feathers and beat 15 or 20 drums in unison. They beat their drums and danced at the same time, while the women in bright clothes also paraded and danced. The school teachers brought their students, who also paraded and sang.

Later I saw similar dances and the drummers when the president of Burundi came to Karuzi. His ministers stayed in my house and made a mess of the bathroom by flooding it and dirtying the carpets, but the President stayed elsewhere. They took my sofas for him to sit on. The ministers made their obligatory speech of" when you are in Buja, come and see us" etc. and left not meaning a word of it of course, but that was expected of politicians.

I could not depend on the project staff in Gitega to buy anything that I needed for the work in Karuzi. Once they brought me a can of spray to kill mosquitoes when I had asked for a bottle of insecticide for corn. Others said that they simply forgot. The only problem was that nothing was available in Karuzi, so everything had to be bought in Gitega, some 60 kms away or in Buja, some 200 kms away. Their attitude was that if I needed something, then it was my problem and not theirs.

But they always took credit for the work I did by saying that our project did this or that. They bragged endlessly about the success of the project to the visitors but left it to me to do all the work in agronomy. The project did not work as a team because others did not participate or help in the project work in Karuzi. The meetings were held in Gitega, but mostly to discuss administrative matters and seldom technical matters.

People often asked me if I was lonely in Karuzi to which I always answered that although I missed my family, I was not lonely and spent my time in solitude reading books or listening to radio or music. It gave me time to think about a lot of things and sort them out in my mind. People in Karuzi thought that I was antisocial.0 because I did not join in their beer drinking, but it was never my style. I liked talking to people over a cup of tea.

I tried fishing and fashioned two fishing rods. My servant made a platform at the edge of the lake below, where I often sat in the evenings with a lantern and caught a few catfish. Later an FAO expert from Congo who came to work in Karuzi became my fishing partner. It was more fun than actually catching anything because some days we came back empty-handed.

The French fellow who was a team member often derided my work by saying the data were too good to be true or that I had faked it somehow. I let it pass but knew that the matter had to come to a head someday. He was a lazy fellow who pretended to work but only played with his computer. He said that he was an extension specialist, but there was nothing to extend to the farmers yet. This was not true, as the results showed.

Once, I organized a field day for the farmers in the Karuzi station to show them what results we had obtained. This was pure extension work. The field days were very important in the farming system's project, when you could discuss with the farmers the experiments. They often made

valuable comments that could then be taken into account in planning for the future work. So I depended on the French fellow to take charge.

But he let me down and said I could handle everything myself. This I did. We transported the farmers from their villages to Karuzi and back and set up a program. We also ordered banana beer for them and the drummers to entertain the crowd, so everything went well. The Frenchman then came and took photos to take credit for the successful extension work.

This was the last straw. I confronted him at the next staff meeting and said that he was a lazy person who shirked his responsibility in the project by not doing what he was hired to do. I was very angry.

From that day onwards, this fellow became my avowed enemy and started spreading lies that I was a womanizer and received women in my house. People who lived in Gitega believed him and spread the word farther afield. The Gitega people were all with families and children and often got together, so they were a solid group of which I was never a part. They treated me as such. It was now them vs me. It was unfair about the lies, but it is an unfair world we live in. No one bothered to hear my side of the story.

I had nearly spent 18 months here and wished to leave. The FAO expert who became my friend often said that I was doing excellent work, so I should apply to the UN. I thought about it and sent an application form from Rome. They replied that they were very impressed with my resume and encouraged me to fill the form and return to them as soon as possible. I did and waited.

Jasmine and the kids were arriving, so that was very exciting. I counted the days until they landed and waited eagerly for them at the Bujumbura airport. The kids came running and hugged me tightly. Jasmine looked more beautiful than ever. She remarked how different the country was from Haiti, which it was. We climbed the hills to Gitega where we accepted the invitation only from the project leader for a short visit. I did not like these people who were treating me in a poor way and said so to Jasmine. The Frenchman's invitation was rejected out of hand.

In Karuzi, Jasmine and the kids stayed for a month. I tried to keep the kids occupied with fishing and bee hive installation. I took them to various villages to show them the field work I did. We went to see the Italians in Mutumba nearby, who were very nice people and had invited me to attend their Christmas party the year before. They received Jasmine and the kids warmly. She attended the Karuzi church service and saw the research station I was developing in Karuzi.

I had recently completed the building of a big warehouse there with a toilet facility nearby, and was in the process of building a potato storage facility. This was completed later, where all the potato harvest from the fields was stored. I had planted fruit trees and cleared more land for other experiments.

I brought them to the Bugenyuzi market to show what they sold. The Karuzi market was very small by comparison. We went to see the hippos in the swamps of Karuzi one night, but they came out only late at night. The kids had never seen the papyrus swamp before and wondered what else could hide there. There were probably crocodiles too. They marveled at the crowned herons that looked for insects in the farm and the spoonbills. Africa had so many different types of birds that were unique.

Back in Bujumbura the kids were thrilled to see the hippos in the lake and the black mamba snakes in the small zoo. There were huge boa constrictors and pythons. But soon their vacation was over, and they flew back home. It was a difficult period for me now because I sorely missed the kids, so I occupied myself with finishing up the remaining part of the work that included data processing and analysis of results so that I could start writing the final report.

I had attended a meeting in Arkansas a few months ago where I presented the results of the work in Burundi with the help of a video that I had filmed. The lab that helped me redo the audio part of the video wanted a copy of it. It was very unique and showed how the Burundi farmers grew their crops. Now the project invited a professional video man to make a film on the project at a great cost and promised me a copy but never sent.

The African problems had to be solved by themselves. I found the Burundian people at ISABU very uncooperative because they did not share the idea of farmers as a partner in development. It was their schooling and training that was top-heavy. It was just like in Mali, except that here the mentors were Belgians who taught them values that did not mesh well with the concept of working with poor farmers. The intellectuals, if they could be called that, were Tutsis who had no empathy with the Hutu farmers.

They resented that I pushed for appropriate technology to help solve farmer's problems. When I designed a hand operated grain blower to clean grains that was actually based on an IRRI design, they laughed at me and said that I was going backwards. The way to go forward for them was to import expensive machinery from Belgium and not build primitive hand operated tools.

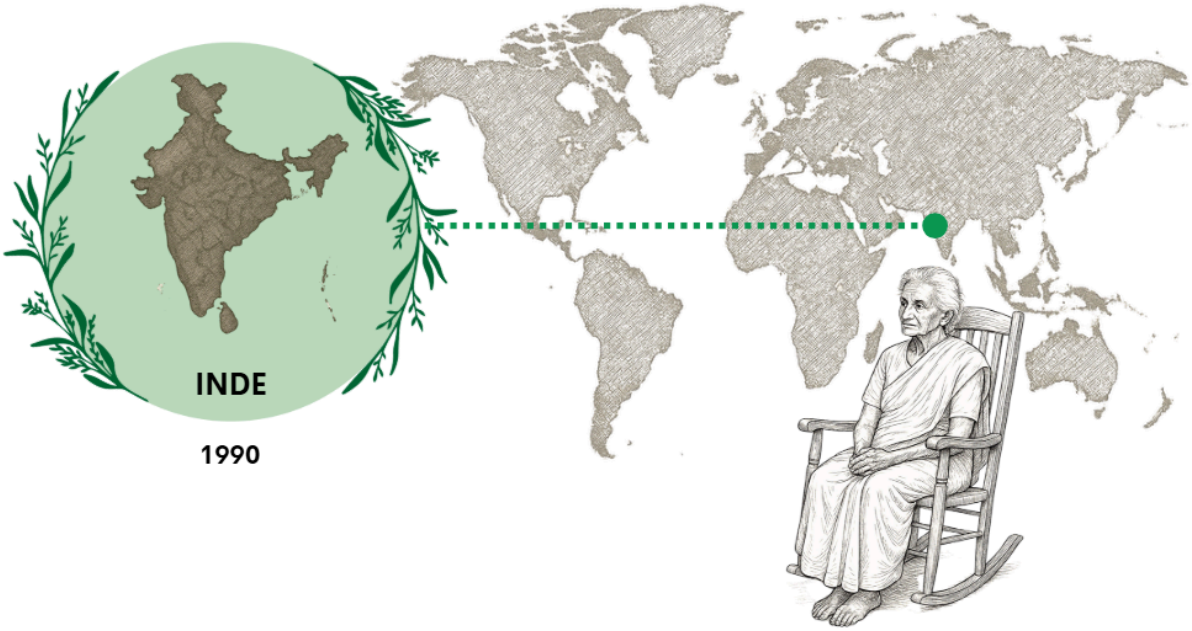
These people had a closed mind that nothing could penetrate. I loved the farmers in Burundi. They were simple people who were excited with the new blower or the crop varieties that increased their yield, but the Burundian researchers had other ideas. It was just like in Mali. The project gave me full autonomy in doing my work, so I did a lot of good and very productive work. Americans were happy and came to see the trials in Karuzi.

But literally, I had enough. I was tired of dealing with the Burundians who could not understand what the farming system was all about. I sought their cooperation, but only the North Koreans were interested. The ISABU director had died in a road accident, so my link with them was also lost. Then the Frenchman in the project had started spreading lies about me so that too discouraged me to stay on and fight this lonely battle.

This is also the time I started writing my memoirs that would be the basis of this biography later on. My time was short, and I prepared to leave in a few months' time, although the Americans wanted me to stay on for a while. This I refused. I had done my job well and got very good results that I presented in the form of a final report now and left Burundi for good in November 1990.

So I left Burundi gladly. I did not know what the FAO, also known as the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, was going to do because I had not heard from them. I was at this point not too keen on working anywhere and wished to go back to my loving family in the Philippines, but I had to make a stop at Sri Ram Pur once again.

Chapter Fifteen: India, the last drama of Sri Ram Pur



So, having accomplished the mission in Burundi, I flew to India to pay a month-long visit to Mom. She was happy to see me again, although no one was expecting me. Mom hugged me and cried while others milled around asking where I was coming from, how long I was staying etc. so I told them that I had just visited Rwanda and Burundi and was on my way back to the Philippines. No one knew or had even heard of these countries, but that did not surprise me anymore.

Shanti even made fun of Rwanda saying it sounded like ‘anda’ which means egg in Hindi, but I was determined not to be disturbed by their comments. It was only going to be a short visit of 10 days, so I was prepared to say nothing and do nothing. Thankfully, their curiosity lasted about 5 minutes, after which they left me alone. I felt sorry for Mom, who said that she suffered a great deal of pain. I was amazed at the great number of medicines she took and gulped down the white liquid which she said was the antacid syrup.

I tried to comfort her but did not know how. She was feeble and partially blind. She stayed in bed most of the time but did not sleep very much. Nirmal said that he was doing all he could and consulted the best doctors in town, but her problem was old age and loneliness.

I kept quiet. I knew better than to open my mouth. These people could take something I said and use it twenty years later to start a quarrel with someone. I said nothing about Rwanda or

Burundi. Nirmal had once told me that God had made the blacks ugly, which to me was so shocking that I did not know what to say. But Bengalis derided anyone who was not Bengali.

They said that the Sikhs were stupid, the southerners uncouth who did not know how to eat properly, and the Punjabis were shameless and unethical. The local UP people were uncivilized, and the Biharis were barbarians etc. Only the Bengalis were the best because didn't they produce Tagore and Subhash Chandra Bose? The Bengalis tended to live in the past, probably no more than others, but they did live in the past.

Annapurna also came, but had no idea I was in town. People were not surprised that I visited India often. They took me for granted and said that international travel to me was like going to visit someone next door. I left for Delhi with a heavy heart this time because I knew Mom was not going to be around much longer. Dad was long gone, and now she too would leave us. She had lived through many difficulties and sickness in life, of which she spoke with misty eyes while I brushed her snow-white hair.

She told me how badly the relatives in Kolkata had treated her when she was with my father there, tending to his needs. He was in the hospital for his cancer treatment and the operation while my poor Mom braved the crowd riding many buses to reach him every day with food. She was old at that time, but no one often gave her a seat in the crowded bus. I did not know that our relatives were so bad, and made a promise never to see them again.

I had sent her money from Vietnam regularly and built the upper floor so that she could get an income from the rent, but she gave the money to Sabita for her upkeep and Sabita being a shameless woman took it. But she had the pension and was not short of money. She in fact gave it away freely to her daughters and their children. What she needed was the feeling that she was loved and cherished by everyone, but Sabita did not love her.

Nirmal took care of her, but often sided with his wife. Annapura was away working somewhere, and I was the farthest. It made me sad. She was the greatest mother in the world, and I said so. But now she was old and weak and needed our love and help. Don't people ever realize that they too will get old someday? How would I feel for example if Ashis and Jayanti someday told me that I was pretending to be sick to get attention when I lay in my bed all wrinkled and shriveled? If I am a proud person, which I am, then how much prouder Mom is?

She came from an important family in Sri Ram Pur and was the apple of the eye of her parents. She was born after my grandmother prayed for a girl child in Tarakeshwar temple and fasted there. That is why my Mom was called Tarakdashi or the servant of Tarakeshwar which is another name for Lord Shiva. She was given gold jewelry and beautiful saris when she married our father at the tender age of 13. She survived her husband and two sons who died which is hard for any woman.

She traveled all over India with my father but never saw any place because she was busy raising children, but never complained. I asked her to give me something that she had made so she gave me a most beautiful bed cover of crochet work that had taken her years to make. It is now with us forever in the Philippines.

The marriage

After leaving Burundi, I had to make a visit to Sri Ram Pur again because Nirmal's daughter was getting married, so they wanted me to attend her marriage. I had to spend nearly two months there and then pick up Annapurna to bring her to the Philippines. She was eager to travel abroad for the first time in her life and visit the Philippines.

I have written enough about the Sri Ram Pur people, so I will not repeat myself. I found Nirmal very busy preparing for the marriage of his only daughter. The groom had been selected through matchmaking as was the custom, and he had purchased the gold jewelry etc. already that he showed me eagerly. There was some communal tension in Sri Ram Pur, so the mayor had imposed a curfew that made going around difficult. But somehow the preparations went ahead, and the invitation cards were printed.

Nirmal had included my name on the card as sponsor, but I noticed that in the final printing my name was omitted because Sabita did not want it. She had also refused my gift of a Sony radio/tape recorder to her daughter by saying that they could afford a better one. I had given Nirmal a check in dollars for his daughter that he neglected for a while to put safely away and left it here and there on the coffee table or somewhere else.

When I asked for one invitation card to give to someone, Nirmal neglected that as well until a day before the marriage, making it clear that my guests were not important to him. My gift of the radio was later passed on to Parvati because Sabita did not want it. As if they were bent on humiliating me in every respect. I put up with everything silently.

I was a stranger here, so I could not really help him in anything because I did not know anyone anymore. I waited patiently for my stay to end so that I could leave, but one week in that house seemed very long, let alone two months. Annapurna did not make it any easier by constantly harping on my silence and said I was a very boring person who did not know how to talk to anyone. I did not go out or talk to anyone.

Finally, on the day of the marriage the groom's party arrived from Delhi by train so I went to the station to receive them along with Nirmal and others. There was a problem when the bus driver could not be found anywhere while the guests waited so I suggested hiring a few taxis, but I was overruled in this effort. Nirmal's friends did not give me any importance because they took their cue for him. Anyway the driver was later located, and the guests lodged in a hotel, but here too there were problems.

The hotel rooms and the bathrooms were dirty because the person in charge had failed to clean everything before the guests arrived. Again I tried to help, but my help was ignored. Later in the evening, they all arrived at the house, but there was no one to receive them. The reception committee of girls was busy with lipsticks and mascara so it was very embarrassing for Nirmal being the host and the father of the girl.

I was just a silent witness to all these dramas. The reception for the invitees was held outside the house on the sidewalk under a tent, where the caterers prepared food and coffee and put them on tables for the guests to help themselves. This was the new trend. Gone were the traditions of serving food to the guests and urging them to eat. Now people came to eat by picking what they wanted and soon left without once entering the house and seeing the bride and the groom or anyone. Many did not know who I was, so paid no attention. Nirmal was busy with the ceremony inside the house.

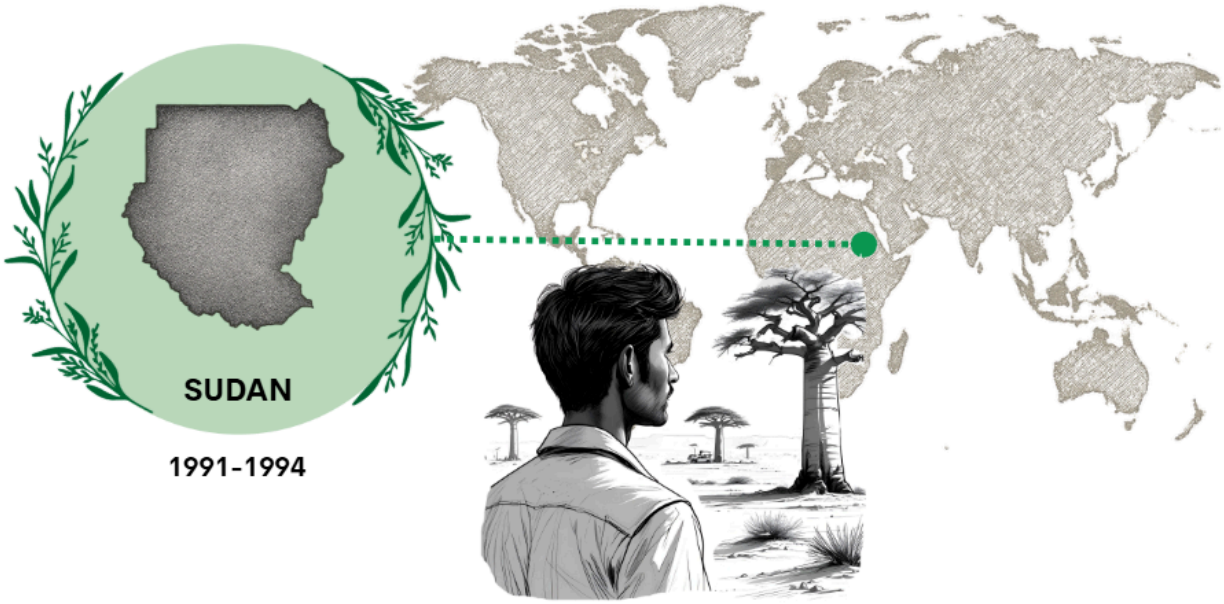
My Mom was also ignored. She was old and could not help anyone in any way, but she still was the owner of this big house and being the grandmother of the bride deserved some respect and attention, but Sabita said that she was too busy even to die. The girls stayed up all night playing VHS movies one after the other along with the bride and the groom. I was told that this too was a new tradition. They also inspected each and every gift to evaluate its worth and who gave what. This was to be their subject for gossip in days and weeks to come.

I was very annoyed by everything I saw. Now we had to leave for Delhi, where another reception was planned. There too it was the same story. The caterers left the food on the table for the invitees to take as they wished. I did not know anyone there, so no one paid any attention to me. But I was happy that it was finally over, and we could leave for the Philippines.

So one fine morning I with Annapurna flew to Manila and from there by bus to Naga. Jasmine wanted Annapurna to enjoy her stay with us, so spared no expense to make her comfortable. She bought her gifts, took her to parties at her friend's house, to movies and to many scenic places like Balatan and Legaspi to show her the Mayon volcano. She took many photos for her and gave her the prints in several albums to take back to India.

There is no limit to Jasmine’s generosity because she has a big heart unblemished by petty feelings and jealousy. It was as if she could not do enough for Annapurna. So Annapurna returned to India very happy. Her visit to the Philippines and her first trip abroad flying for the first time was very successful. She had many photos to show and many things to talk about but found Sabita not interested. Her relationship with them was from this point on to go steadily downward.

Chapter Sixteen: Sudan, in the land of Mahdi



My last assignment

Soon, the FAO office in Rome offered me the job of the project chief of a Farming System's Project in Sudan and hired me as the Chief Technical Adviser or CTA in the multi-million dollar project and invited me to go to Rome for the two-week orientation program. This was in January 1992.

I was sad to leave Jasmine and the kids again but promised her that it was going to be my last assignment so she had to bear with me for a while. I will come home during leave, and she and the kids will be able to visit me in Sudan during the school holidays. I did not tell the FAO that it was to be my last assignment because it was none of their business.

The FAO office in Rome is on via delle Terme di Caracalla near the old ruins of the Roman bathhouses of Caracalla and is a massive monolithic and quite ugly building with a marble façade. It is also close to the Colosseum and can be reached by the metro Circus Massimo. It covers enormous grounds and is complete with the flags of all nations that the UN represents fluttering in the wind in the front.

The security is really tight in the building. No one can go in without first checking in with the security people, who then call someone you knew there to verify if you are expected and then issue you a temporary pass for the visit. In my case, they had to issue a 14-day pass later on

that I had to always wear for scrutiny by the guards. I was also given the commissary card, but I had no use for the whisky and got some chocolate they sold there.

There is a nice book store where I found the Salman Rushdie book that the clerk charged me double for by saying that it was the last copy. I naturally could not bring a book like that to where I was going, so sent it to Jasmine through someone who was going to Manila.

The FAO offices were just cubicles on both sides of the long corridors on every floor and were spartan. There were some 3000 employees so you could easily get lost there and had to remember the floor and the corridors. People sat in front of their computer terminals and peered into the screen the whole day, or talked to overseas managers endlessly on phones. I found many of them very nervous and chain-smoking. They were also cool and calculating, but one of them invited me to have coffee with him upstairs.

The Egyptian woman was meticulous in explaining the complex accounting procedures to me for several days, and the very nervous finance officer explained to me how their finsys or financial system program worked on the computer without ever looking at me and smoking constantly.

On a Sunday I walked around the thieve's market nearby or went to the Vatican that I was familiar with. I spent one month in Italy when I was working in Algeria. So on the whole, the training went well.

The UN people are real gentlemen and very proper in everything they did, like giving me extensive training in accounting and office procedures and giving me a detailed contract that spelled out everything about my salary, benefits and privileges. They determined my salary based on my qualification and years of experience and not on my last salary.

This was in sharp contrast to the Americans who would not even give me a written appointment letter and failed to mention what rights and benefits I had or deserved. One of them even said that I had no rights, only some privileges, implying that they could be taken away anytime.

I was very impressed by the FAO and its staff in Rome. Everything was done by them, including my visa to Sudan and the generous allowances to settle me down there. I was the CTA of an important project with a huge budget and had the sole discretion to spend the money of course according to the UN rules to advance the project goal, hire the personnel and set up the project in five locations in Sudan from scratch. My only guide was the project document and the accounting procedures I had learned in Rome.

They promised to send me technical help from time to time from Rome, but on the ground I was the head and no one could challenge my sole authority. I learned as much as I could about Sudan and its people, but the real education began when one bright morning I arrived in Khartoum.

The FAO was the dream job for the professionals because so few are chosen. However, I had the qualifications and the experience they were looking for, although the ability to speak Arabic would have been a great advantage to me. But to find a Ph.D. in agronomy with vast experience in Farming Systems research who could speak Arabic was almost an impossibility, so I was the choice of the FAO.

You can see the Aswan dam in Egypt flying high over it and the huge lake Nasser spread out over the desert. But Egypt was mostly desert, with the Nile flowing south to north and irrigating a very narrow strip of land on both sides that was green. The rest was brown. Further on, we were in Sudan, but the landscape did not change at all. It was still the same Nile and the brown desert on both sides.

Now, as I approached Khartoum, some green patches appeared. Here the Blue Nile came down from the highlands of Ethiopia and met at Khartoum with the White Nile that originated in Uganda and Burundi and became one mighty Nile. I had read that General Gordon, who was employed as the Governor of Sudan by the Khedive of Egypt in the 18th century, was murdered by the fanatic hordes of a madman called Mahdi who preached fundamentalism.

Gordon appealed for help from London, but the help came too late. Queen Victoria urged her generals to save Gordon, but the bureaucracy and the difficulty in communications delayed the expedition force that finally arrived late and took tremendous revenge on Mahdi's followers. Mahdi in the meantime had died.

His remains were dug up and scattered to the jackals by the British. They hanged a lot of people in reprisal to General Gordon's death and would stay for nearly one hundred years to rule Sudan. Here the educated people spoke English, but Arabic was the national language. The British brought the railway and telegraph to Sudan and taught the people the governance and built many institutions to do so.

My first impression of Khartoum was a negative one. It was a shabby, dusty and dry city laid out in a rigid grid pattern on the eastern side of the Nile. You could hardly see any tree anywhere, although there was some greenery near the river. They grew some crops and fruit trees on some islands in the middle of the Nile. The other side of the Nile was Omdurman, which is an old city, where there is a huge mausoleum of Mahdi. His bones were rescued by his followers and now buried in the place which was a national shrine.

The Hilton hotel is located near the Nile where I stayed but soon moved out to another hotel in town. The FAO office did not send anyone to pick me up at the airport because they said they did not know I was coming. Their office is on the 10th floor of a tall building, where I was introduced to the representative and others. The program officer was from Yemen and a nice person. He took me to Wad Medani and other places to introduce me to the Sudanese people who would one way or the other be useful to my project.

At this time, Sudan was fighting a long protracted war in the south where the mainly Christian people of various tribes were seeking autonomy from the Moslem north, but Khartoum was insistent upon fighting because they wanted the entire country to be under Moslem and sharia law. The war had devastated the south and sent hundreds of thousands of refugees, some of whom were settled near Khartoum in massive camps in the desert.

One could see these tall and often ugly Dinka tribesmen in Khartoum and elsewhere in the country, but the Arabic-speaking Sudanese populated the north. They wore white gowns and very white turbans. Women did not veil themselves but wore a chador over their head. One could see mosques everywhere, reminding you that you were in a Moslem country.

Wad Medani is about 60 km from Khartoum and is the headquarters of the Agricultural Research Council or ARC that oversees all agricultural research in Sudan and was involved in my project that I had come to set up with their help. Wad Medani is in the middle of a vast agricultural plain called Gezira that is irrigated and produces cotton, sorghum, corn, small millets and many such crops on a large scale. They use small aircraft to spray the fields. Here I met with the director of ARC who said that he had studied at Cal Poly in the United States which was my alma mater.

So it looked as if I was in the right place after all. I was eager to go to El Obeid which is where I was supposed to stay and set up the project office, but I did not have security clearance to leave Khartoum. No one could travel anywhere in Sudan without one, so I waited for several weeks until it came through. I placed advertisements in local newspapers to announce that the project was in need of field assistants soon and checked with the local UN office about vehicles and started sending orders for office supplies etc.

Then one day I flew out to El Obeid in the ARC Fokker aircraft. It is some 600 km by road, but the road is good and asphalted all the way. I was to meet with the researchers of the ARC station here, where they were to give me the office space and facilitate the start of the project. They had a radio through which I could reach Khartoum or Wad Medani. The Sudanese who worked here considered themselves the elite of the country in terms of education and mostly connections

It did not take them long before they started name-dropping like the minister of agriculture is their cousin, or they know the president etc. They showed me the office space they would give me, but presently it was used as a warehouse full of foul smelling something that would require at least a month to clean up. They were eager for the project to start and offered me tea and a promise of help. This was the honeymoon period, so to speak.

I took advantage of my short one-day visit to line up a house to rent as my residence and bargained with the landlord to a reasonable rent and gave him one month to fix up the house that needed a lot of renovation and fixing. This done, I looked for a carpenter who had a

workshop and ordered a house full of furniture that he promised to make and deliver in one month's time.

So within 24 hours I had a house and furniture and an office that would all be hopefully ready in one month's time.

I flew back to Khartoum, greatly elated by what I had accomplished in a short visit. Now I had to see how many vehicles had been ordered and where they were garaged. I had to get the vehicles out, hire some drivers and get the UN license plates for them. Then I placed an order to deliver a tanker of fuel to El Obeid that our office in Khartoum secured in Port Sudan. I also ordered motorbikes for the field assistants.

I found 10 vehicles stored in various offices by the UN, so I got them out, fixed the plates on them and took them to a research station in Khartoum to park there until I could move them to El Obeid and elsewhere. I was walking around so far, but now I had my own car and a driver.

The applicants for the post of field assistants started to come in for interviews and I spent a lot of time with them and selected a few, but the main issue was to select a local project director who was to be my counterpart. After screening several candidates, I selected a fellow from El Obeid station and asked the FAO to appoint him with a good salary.This was done after some delay but finally his appointment came through, but the thorny issue of national project professionals or NPPs remained unsolved.

In El Obeid lived a German CTA in another project who had promised me a house and helped me settle down, but he died in an automobile accident at this time. But I had found a house on my own and was eager to move to El Obeid soon. Because the rains were due in May, I was pressed for time to get a work plan for the season prepared soon before the planting began.

The security clearance had delayed me in Khartoum for nearly two months, but now there was no time to lose. I left for El Obeid soon and settled in my renovated house, where soon all the furniture was set up. The carpenter had kept his word, and the landlord had done so too. Only the question of the office remained, which was still being cleaned, but I ordered office furniture and the FAO delivered tons of office supplies etc. The computers I had ordered in Hong Kong also arrived, so the office started shaping up fast.

But I was troubled by the calculating looks of the Sudanese researchers, who soon started bringing their female cousins to apply as my secretary. They looked at me with suspicious and mistrustful eyes. One in particular struck me as a devious person who had eyes like a snake and a face full of pockmarks. He was the director of the station, and he often name-dropped like he knew the Minister and even the President, thus hinting that he was well-connected.

These girls all came loaded with gold jewelry but could speak little or no English. Their typing skills were very doubtful as well so I rejected all of them. I then found an Egyptian woman who

was young and spoke English reasonably well. She was naturally fluent in Arabic and knew how to type so I hired her on the spot. This did not sit well with the Sudanese because she was a Coptic Christian but selecting a secretary was purely my prerogative so I ignored their snide remarks and got on with the job.

I had brought most of the vehicles to El Obeid and the fuel had arrived to be stored at the station. I had also hired the drivers and opted for an administrative assistant who could get things done in Khartoum for me. I was in a good mood and set about making a work plan for the coming season. The field assistants were selected and sent to their stations. In addition to El Obeid, I was to administer 4 other stations spread out all over Sudan. These were Idd el Ghanam, Umm Kadada in the Darfur region west of Sudan and Ed Damer and El Saada in the eastern part of Sudan.

So I went to all the sites and helped settle the field assistants there in rented houses and brought them motorbikes and the vehicles with the driver and some fuel. They started the selection of farmers for the field trials that were to start soon, but we were still working on the trial protocols in El Obeid.

Sudan is a vast country. West of El Obeid there are no roads but trails through arid regions that look like desert. You could fly to Nyala to reach Idd el Ghanam or to El Fasher up north to reach Umm Kadada, but these two airports had only dirt strips that became soft during heavy rains, so planes had difficulty in landing. By road, it was too tiresome and took several days.

The road to Idd el Ghanam was particularly bad, where even the 4-wheel drive vehicles bogged down in the deep mud or got stranded because the wadis ran full and could not be crossed. The road to Umm Kedada was a bit easier because it was mostly desert.

The roads in the east were better so I could easily drive to Ed Damer because the road was newly asphalted up to Shendi by Osama bin Laden's company and the road from Ed Damer to El Saada was just desert trails so also easy.

But the distances were vast. It took me two days to reach Ed Damer from El Obeid and the same time to return, making the road travel bone weary. There are a number of roadside stands selling food and drinks 24 hours a day but in some places, like Um Kadada, the food was truly awful.

Back in El Obeid I pushed hard for the completion of the work plan and asked the El Obeid researchers to get busy planting the trials in various sites with the help of our field assistants. Now the trouble began in earnest.

I found out that these Sudanese were not used to work in the fields because they considered themselves the elite of Sudan. They hired assistants and laborers from the station to do their job. I did not agree with this setup because in a farming system's project it was the farmer who

was our partner. He did most of the work under the supervision and active participation of the researcher.

It was against the principle to bring in hired laborers to work in the farmer's field, but the Sudanese insisted on this and now demanded that their workers be paid full-time plus overtime. They also demanded enormous salaries for themselves. When I said that I observed they did not go to the field and did not in any way work on the project, their answer was that they were thinking, so I have to pay them for their thinking exercises.

The ARC people came, but they sided with the Sudanese researchers of El Obeid. It was a very bad beginning for the project, but elsewhere in the western part and in the eastern part the work took off and many trials were planted the very first season.

But soon everyone started asking for money. The gas station attendant of the station would not fill our vehicles with our gasoline unless I paid him, the guards would not watch our offices at night and so on. When I argued that the Sudanese government has signed a legal document saying that they will be responsible for a great number of things like office space, housing for the staff and rent etc., it fell on deaf ears. No one honored the agreement between the FAO and the government.

I in the meantime was pushing very hard for the FAO to formalize the contract to hire the national professionals and send to them all relevant documents. Finally, one day it was signed and the NPPs were now directed to work full-time for the project and report only to me. But again they balked and said they could not work full-time for the project but wanted a full salary. Most of them worked as consultants outside and used the project computers at night to do their work. This earned them good money, plus they did not have to work for me but got paid just the same.

The snake eyed person was their leader and spokesperson. In short, they found the FAO project as their fat milking cow. They did not care about farmers or ways to help them, but always bragged about the package of technology they were developing for them. I was in an impossible situation.

My counterpart was the worst person chosen, and the fault was partly mine. I had trusted his resume and the endorsement of the ARC in Wad Medani. He was given a car, a driver and an office, but he did nothing. He went out but not to the fields and wanted to control the money. This was not allowed under the rules. Only I as project manager and CTA was responsible to the FAO to spend and account for the money, but he resented it.

When I asked him to read a report I had prepared to send to the FAO, he kept it on his desk for two months and said he was writing the forewords. No one had asked him to write anything, so the reports were delayed. He started conspiring against me and saying that I was paid a high salary whereas he was paid pittance, although he was equally qualified etc. etc.

The Khartoum Government did not respond to my request for them to pay the rents of the houses for the junior staff and build their permanent residences as soon as possible, but they always said that they were short of funds, so no rent could be paid, and no houses were built. The situation in Ed Damer was very bad, where the female staff had to be housed properly. In Idd el Ghanam it was the same story where an FAO employee from Tunisia who was also a CTA decided not to cooperate with my project and help my staff there to the great embarrassment of the FAO in Rome.

He would say one thing to the visitors from Rome and do another when they left. He saw our project as a rival and not as a partner and made awful remarks. Then the Sudanese person who was the coordinator in Ed Damer started stealing money and made false receipts in Arabic, knowing I could not read or write Arabic. A receipt of 100 pounds became one thousand by adding a zero, while he pocketed the 900. This went on unnoticed until the Arabic-speaking accountants in Rome spotted the anomaly and asked me to explain. But this would happen after almost two years.

I was having difficulty keeping an eye on 5 sites while the UN cut our project budget drastically, but Rome advised me to shut down two sites and transfer the staff elsewhere to consolidate the project.

El Obeid is a dusty town where only a few roads are asphalted. Sometimes the rains flooded the town to a depth of a few feet. It had one cinema and one park where people sat in the evening to escape the heat. It had one hotel and a few low class restaurants. The only place where I could go and sit was the Syrian club, where the El Obeid Syrians gathered a few times a week to socialize or play volleyball. They warmly accepted me and often invited me to their homes. They were Sudanese but remained apart because they were Catholics. The girls wore short skirts and western clothes that the Moslem mullahs did not like. They castigated anything western on TV and radio all the time. The Syrians did not mix with the Egyptians, who were Coptic.

The Egyptian Coptics had their own club and their women too wore short skirts and western clothes, making the Mullahs upset. It was a Moslem country, where one could see the cement hands holding the Koran and a gun in many traffic circles. Women were shabbily treated and often shouted at.

I stopped this practice when I forbade anyone shouting at my secretary and insisted that she be treated with respect and dignity. In return, they accused me of being a foreigner who did not understand their culture.

Sudanese often asked me if I was a Pakistani or Bangladeshi. When I said no, they assumed I was an Indian Moslem and were very surprised when I said no again. What was an Indian Hindu doing in a Moslem country?

The housing situation in Ed Damer got worse, so I made a decision. I gathered all the villagers and asked their help to build a residence complex for us just outside their village. The project would provide the doors and windows and some other costs. They agreed and built adobe houses in a short time and a separate house for the female field assistant. In El Obeid I had found some shelter for them in some villages but in Idd el Ghanam now called Idd el Fursan I still had trouble and paid the rent from the project funds. I had to take care of the staff everywhere and explain to the FAO later the justification for the expenses.

One of my staff based in Nyala fell seriously ill and had to be evacuated to Khartoum by plane, but the pilot refused to take the responsibility, so I had to get a doctor from El Obeid to certify that the patient needed very urgent medical assistance. He was flown to Khartoum, but he died soon after anyway. Another of my staff in El Obeid was seriously sick so I took him to Wad Medani personally where he had a brother to look after him. He got well. So there were many problems that I had to handle right away.

One of the more serious problems was that of communication with the field and Khartoum. At first, another project office helped in transmitting the radio messages for me, but soon the radio operator started asking for money. They were all UN projects and were in theory supposed to help other UN projects, but I had mentioned the Tunisians in Idd el Fursan.It was the same story here as well.

I tried to make friends with them by inviting them to my house for dinner. They came and had dinner, but never returned the courtesy. They were aloof and uncooperative from the start, and there was nothing I could do to win their heart.

Jasmine and the kids came to El Obeid to spend their vacation, but really there was nothing to do for them.It was worse than Timbuctoo. Jayanti learned how to bake cake at the Catholic mission and also had her hands dyed with henna, but Ashis was really bored. There was nothing to read and I had no TV. Jasmine tried to keep busy with cooking and some housekeeping but said one day that she did not trust my servant. Perhaps he was stealing money.

I took them to the El Obeid water reservoir one day and had a picnic. The foreigners of El Obeid were a strange lot and unfriendly. When we invited one Dutch fellow to dinner, he forgot to show up. Others came but never returned the courtesy. I had become thin due to constant traveling all over Sudan and poor food on the road that worried Jasmine and the kids.

I took them to Khartoum, which at the best of times was not a pretty town. Jasmine was dismayed at the shabby hotel rooms where I mostly stayed and poor quality food. There was an Indian family in Omdurman where they served traditional Indian food, so that is where we used to go. She was terrified one day when the infamous haboub hit Khartoum one day.

Haboub is a terrible dust storm that can appear suddenly and cloak the entire city in darkness in broad daylight. The dust is so thick and choking that one has trouble breathing even inside a closed car. It was a novel experience for her. She had never known anything like it and was glad when it was over. I used to go to Omdurman to buy some books they sold on the sidewalks.I picked up a few good books on Sudan there.

This story is not complete without mentioning the Nepalese fellow who came to join my project. I had to get the approval of the Sudanese government for this fellow to come and join the project, so one day he showed up and said that he was an economist. His idea I soon found out from the survey consisted of interviewing 4 or 5 farmers to fill up long questionnaires, and then he wrote up voluminous reports by extrapolating the answers. He called it a key informant survey. I called it a preposterous shortcut that produced erroneous conclusions, but he insisted.

He lived alone and refused an invitation to my house. In the 18 months that he stayed, I went to his house only once for 30 minutes, so our relationship was cold and unfriendly. I do not know why it turned out that way, but it was like everything else in Sudan. He left the project but left no mark. He vanished and I never knew where he went.

Jasmine did not enjoy the terribly long flight back to the Philippines, but at least we were able to see each other. Soon I went home for my first leave. Back in Sudan, the grinding work and fighting the bureaucracy and the devious Sudanese of El Obeid sapped my energy like never before.

But by this time I had received the long awaited radio that I installed in my office at El Obeid and was from that time on able to reach any part of Sudan. I sent my secretary to Khartoum for one week of training on how to use the radio. She was an excellent student. She typed my reports, did the accounts with my help, went with me to the bank, handled the radio to receive or send messages, solved any problem I had like the alternate fuel storage facility that she found for me downtown. She did many such chores with a smile and more while the administrative assistant looked for something to do. I was very happy with her, but the Sudanese were plotting against her to get her out of the project.

The Yemeni project coordinator in Khartoum in the meantime had been posted in Egypt. He had been very friendly and helpful to me, but his replacement was another story. This fellow of unknown nationality was hostile to me from day one and often spoke in an uncivilized manner on the radio that many others could listen to.

I had to from time to time do the budget revision as mandated by the UN but one day I found to my surprise and dismay that this chap had done a budget revision by himself and sent it to the UN office as a result of which some, 60000 US dollars were slashed from my project.

I said that what he did was wrong. I could report him and get fired on the spot, but he was very well-connected in Rome. That is how he had gotten his job in the first place. I fought very hard

for several days to get this money restored to my project, and had to go to many ministries and wait for long hours for them to sign or write letters. The Egyptian fellow at the UN office was also very unfriendly and kept me waiting in the outer room for a long time while he attended to other matters. He said that he had to correct my English. Obviously, it took him a long time to do that.

But finally the money was restored. I said that if he did such mischief again, then he would be in more trouble than he can handle. No budget revision is ever to be submitted without my approval and signature because that is the rule. I never reported this misconduct of the project coordinator to the FAO, although it became known to the Rome office somehow anyway.

The bad roads in the west took their toll on the vehicles that now needed frequent repairs and spare parts that were hard to find in Sudan. The photocopying machine in my office started breaking down as well. Someone borrowed the project camera and returned it later, but it never worked again. My servant meanwhile was caught red-handed stealing from my house, so he was taken to the jail, only to be released a day later.

They said that they had no budget to feed the prisoners. The fellow promptly left the town, but a policeman came and suggested to me that for the consideration of a fee, he was willing to go and look for the culprit in Khartoum. It was a pure con job, so I disagreed. The thief had stolen my money, the traveler's checks and the project camera. I never recovered most of the money and the camera, but the American Express after nearly 8 months of writing refunded me the loss.

The second year work plan was made on time and field trials started, but the problem of national professionals remained and got worse. The animal science part of the project was doing well in El Obeid and also in Darfur. The agronomy work continued in Ed Damer, but so did the stealing.

There the driver lent the vehicle to an unauthorized person who caused serious damage to the car. The repair bill was horrendous, so I wanted to fire the driver. Now the driver ran to his mentor for protection, who happened to be the former ambassador to the United States who had begged me to hire this fellow.

He promptly called the FAO rep to protest and said that the driver was a poor fellow and should be given a second chance etc. etc. The FAO rep was an American fellow who often had compelled me to hire people in my project whom he wanted to get rid of himself. I paid the repair bill and took the driver back. Such is the power of connection. In Sudan, it seemed that everyone was connected.

Hiring people was easy but firing them was not. They made lifelong enemies, but I had no choice but to fire the administrative assistant who was of no use to me and a few drivers. I also fired a field assistant for the neglect of his duties but I could not fire the national project director

yet. The researchers at the El Obeid station were also proving to be difficult to handle because they still refused to work full-time for the project and wanted full-time pay.

So I sent the Director of the ARC in Wad Medani to Rome to sort out some of the problems I was having with the people in El Obeid. He went there at the project expense that I had authorized, but once in Rome he said that it was I who was the problem because I did not understand the Sudanese people etc. No one in Rome believed him and sent him home.

Western Darfur

If you watch CNN or BBC these days, you will often see the Western Darfur and the problems there. In 1992 the problems were in the making and simmering under the surface. Darfur is bigger than France in size, so you can imagine the distance. Here there was a conflict developing between the nomads who called themselves Arabs and had large herds of camels and goats or sheep that they constantly moved from region to region for grazing.

This brought them into conflict with the settled farmers, who also had their animals and contested the grazing of huge herds of animals on their territory the nomads brought in. Darfur is very dry and animals had to be watered in few watering holes near the villages that also caused conflicts that would later erupt in full scale war in which thousands died and millions would become refugees in vast camps. But in 1992 I could still drive to Umm Kadada that I had to soon close due to budget cuts.

There is a bad road between El Fasher and Nyala, but south of Nyala there are no roads. During the rainy season I had to cross the fast flowing wadis in the evening using the car headlights as the source of light and holding on to a rope and carrying our bags on our heads. This is how bad it was there. Then there were roots and sharp objects underwater that could seriously damage the tires. If you have ever tried to change a tire in mud and water when jacking up the car is nearly impossible, you will know what I mean.

Here in the south of Darfur many Africans had settled who had come long ago from West Africa with the intention to go to Mecca on pilgrimage but had never made it. They now settled in villages near the wadis which run dry most of the time but are full during heavy rains. During the dry season the wadis look dry, but there is moisture under the sand, so these farmers plant mango trees near the wadis. A wadi is a natural drainage system.

So the mango trees grew very well and produced tons of fruits. They also planted bananas and many other crops. The villages here had a settled look. But now they were in conflict with the Arab nomads, who invaded their territory for grazing and water. The Arabs hated the villagers whom they considered non Arabs and would attack them again and again, but that was still a few years away. I had to keep the staff here, keep them supplied with fuel for the vehicles and rent for their houses and salary every month.

But when I wanted to send a computer there on the UN plane one day, the project coordinator from Khartoum refused.This was the same fellow who had revised my budget without authority and my consent. I had earlier written about the Tunisian fellow here. I sent him music cassettes as a gift and invited him to El Obeid or in Khartoum, but he always refused.

The Filipino community in Nyala is worth mentioning here as well. There were only two or three of them, but they had heard of my Filipino wife through the grapevine. They would say hello only if you had a Filipino wife and not otherwise. They really did not care who you were, but would always press their resumes on your hand, just in case you were hiring. If you said no, you were not hiring anyone, then they would just turn away and never look at you again. The one who ended up living behind my house in El Obeid later could never stop bragging about his house and cars back home and how much money he was spending bringing gifts for the relatives.

But one person who was an Englishman and lived in Nyala is worth writing about as well. He had an Iranian wife who hated everyone. Once I went to his house just to say hello because he had seemed friendly in the past. Now he hurriedly came out to meet me outside his house, sort of blocking the main door. She soon peeped to see who had come and made faces. He then asked her in a pleading voice if she would be so kind enough to prepare a cup of coffee for me, to which she did not reply at all.

Instead, she just stood there for several minutes not saying anything and disappeared somewhere. I understood and took the hint. I was not fond of coffee anyway. But I always found it odd that foreigners who were so totally isolated and a thousand kilometers from anywhere could be so unfriendly and so unwelcoming. This was also true in Mali and elsewhere. How can anyone explain this phenomenon? I can't.

Eastern Sudan

If one considers the western part of Sudan desolate, then the eastern part is more desolate because there are vast tracts of featureless land where nothing grows and where there are no villages. Shendi is the only town between Khartoum and Ed Damer and Shendi is just a hellhole. It has changed little since the days of General Gordon, except that the road to Shendi from Khartoum is new and well-made. It gets worse after Shendi.

On the way to Shendi you come across the ruins at Meroe where the ancient ones built small pyramids that are no more than 20 or 30 feet in height. None of them are intact and are vandalized. At the base you can still see some very beautiful carvings, but they too are vandalized by people writing Ahmed love Fatima type of graffiti by scratching crudely on the fine carvings. No one cared about the past. At one time, Sudanese pharaohs ruled the entire Egypt, but that was a long time ago.

Then you come to Ed Damer which is another disappointing town on the way to Dongola. The Nile in this part takes an S shape and passes through many cataracts before becoming straight

at Abu Simbel and Aswan. But I have not gone that far. The trip to Ed Damer and El Saada all the way from El Obeid was over 900 kms that always wore me out. I had to close the El Saada site due to budget problems and transfer the staff, but Ed Damer continued.

Back in El Obeid the Sudanese now started black mailing the project by saying if they were not hired with a high salary they will not cooperate any more and will block any appointment of people if I chose to hire from elsewhere. I gave them one more chance to prove their worth and asked the FAO to confirm their appointment using a formula called reimbursable loan agreement or RLA. I didn't quite understand how it worked, but the problems remained the same. They liked to get their salary, but not work for it. They had become a total liability to the project and were wasting precious resources.

Jasmine came to visit me during my second year and stayed with me for a month, but it was the same story. El Obeid was still the same dusty and dirty town, where there was nothing to do for young children or for Jasmine. Jayanti tried to make friends with the daughters of my neighbor, but I do not know if she succeeded. Ashis was worse off, but they never complained. This is what I really appreciate in my family. They knew that I was the head of a very difficult project where many people were not cooperating and hell-bent on giving me a hard time.

This made me often irritable. They said that I should return home and be happy, but I could not. At least not yet. They had to endure the period of Ramadan when no food was available anywhere, but thankfully they came at the tail end of it, so I was able to feed them properly. Now I was glad they were going back home. They had seen enough of Sudan and were not impressed. It is not a tourist country.

I had to go home one more time but the FAO Rome office knew my troubles and proposed that I transfer to Myanmar where they had already obtained the approval of the government, but I wished to complete my term of three years in Sudan and leave for good to retire. I was determined that this will be my last assignment anywhere. I was not going to go to another hellhole, leaving this hellhole. That made no sense, but the FAO people were only trying to help me. They were very concerned.

So I went home for a month. I had already discussed with Jasmine the matter of moving to Laguna in the near future, where the kids will study at the University, so she had in the meantime purchased a lot there. Now during my home leave we drew up plans for a beautiful house that we will build there. This was also the time when Annapurna came to visit the Philippines for the second time. Jasmine said that she will go to Laguna and get the building permit and look for people to build our house.

I returned to Sudan after putting Annapurna back on a plane to Delhi. I could now sense that the Sudan situation was becoming more and more untenable. I was right. During my absence the counterpart fellow wrote nasty letters to Khartoum accusing me falsely of all sorts of things. I then made up my mind quickly to resign and return to the Philippines.

I wrote to the Rome office that I had come to the conclusion that my usefulness to the project had come to an end, therefore I wished to leave Sudan and the FAO by the end of March 1994. I had spent more than two years and three months trying to set up this project from scratch and had succeeded in establishing the project in three parts of Sudan. The junior staff were working well and were doing useful work, but I left the fate of the national project director to the FAO.

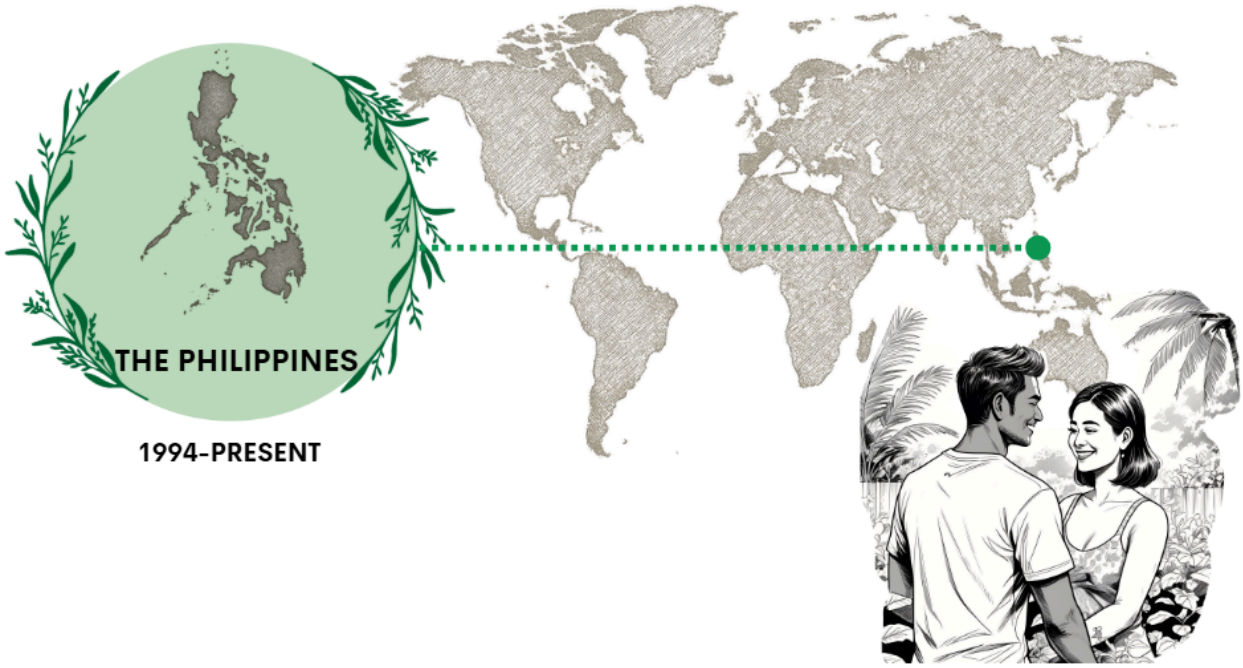
They replied that I should stay at least until the middle of April because they were sending an evaluation team. This team finally arrived, so I spent a whole day and evening talking to them in Khartoum about the project and the problems some had caused. They listened silently without saying anything. Obviously they would hear another side of the story from the El Obeid troublemakers and then perhaps make up their mind. I did not care.

I had given this project nearly two and half years of my time, but now it was time to quit and rest. I had enough of my international career. I later heard that the FAO had fired the national project director and a few others, no doubt upon the recommendation of the evaluation team.

I left Sudan behind for good. I did not have the same feeling as in Haiti. I loved the Haitians and the project was tremendously successful, but here I was not so sure, although I did try. It is just that the odds were too great to overcome. I suggested that my replacement be a Moslem who can read Arabic. I do not know to this day whether the FAO found someone. Now, many years later, the entire Darfur region is in turmoil. Who knows what is in store for those poor people?

Thus, I ended my professional life with a simple letter. It took me to distant places, and I was able to achieve a great deal in many countries like Vietnam, Algeria, Burundi and Haiti, but everything must come to an end. I gained a lot of experience and met many people, some good and some bad, but that is life. The lesson learned is that one has to know who the good people are and cherish them. One has to also know who the bad people are and avoid them.

Chapter Seventeen: Philippines, finally Home Sweet Home



I had often thought of quitting overseas work and returning to the Philippines for good. Living alone overseas did not appeal to me anymore. The kids were growing up and Jasmine was handling them alone. I also did not need the money. We had a very nice house in Naga all paid for and were solvent. Jasmine was not extravagant, and we lived a simple but comfortable life, so there was no need for me to stay in places like Karuzi in Africa.

So, I returned to the Philippines in April 1994 leaving Sudan and the FAO for good. I had waited for a long time for this day, so now I intend to fully enjoy my retirement. But first we had to build our dream house so that we could all stay together. Ashis was in the dormitory at the University for over a year and now Jayanti joined him starting June 1994. Jasmine had found the team that would build our house, so she got them started by the middle of March.

The building permit was obtained and money was transferred to a local account. When I arrived from Rome, I found the laborers digging the foundation of our future home in earnest to lay out the rooms. Jasmine said that she could not find a house to rent because the local people did not like to rent their houses for less than one year, whereas we needed a place only for a few months. We expected our house to be completed in 6 months time.

So we drove back to Naga while the work continued in the university town. Jayanti stayed in the dormitory. But in the month of May someone called to say that their house was available for rent

for a few months, so we packed quickly, locked up our house in Naga and moved to Laguna. Now I could supervise the construction personally.

We had drawn up the plan ourselves during my previous home leave by playing with a Lego set, arranging and rearranging the rooms until we got everything right. Jasmine also made many suggestions. It was to be a lovely house of over 345 sq. meters with 4 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, and a huge 20 ft by 40 ft. living room, kitchen and a laundry room. There was to be a 60 ft. long and 8 ft. wide veranda outside shaped like an L and a spacious garage.

We left room in the front for the lawn and room all around the house on our 600 sq. meter lot. The whole house was to have only one level, and the rooms and the bathrooms were huge by normal local standards. I decided to spare no expense to build this home. Jasmine and I searched for choice materials, marble, slate stones and beautifully carved Narra doors. We ordered Spanish red colored tiles for the veranda. It took more than 2000 bags of cement and tons and tons of steel bars to build our home.

All the bedrooms were to have parquet floors, and the outside veranda walls and the outer fascia were lined with green slate. The roof was an expensive metal tile system called Decrabond that was Spanish red. In short, it was a house to be proud of. The windows had extra strong grills that were ordered custom-made.

So the work progressed speedily, and soon the house started to take shape. Jasmine and the kids came from time to time to see the progress and were excited as the house was nearing completion by September. Now the marble floor shined like a mirror and the inside of the house was painted and electrical fitted. People marveled at the size of the bedrooms and the bathrooms, and became the talk of the University nearby.

Then in September, Jasmine and I drove back to Naga and arranged for all furniture and other things to be shipped to our new home the very next day. The huge truck came and loaded everything. The Naga house was again locked up and remained so for a while until one day it was sold later.

We had finished with Naga for good, so from now on this small town was to be our home. It was a magnificent home. Within a short time, Jasmine arranged the furniture and the appliances. We had purchased huge beds with very nicely carved headboards. Now Ashis and Jayanti have their big private rooms.

Then on the 8th of September, we had our new home blessed. All the laborers and masons who were still working on the finishing outside were invited, to their great surprise because in the Philippines they were never invited to the house blessing ceremony anywhere. But we did because they had worked very hard to build us our lovely home so they deserved to be invited.

They continued to work outside for one more month until the 15th of October, when the last of them left. The kids had moved in from their dorms, so once again we were one family living together. Now we started planting grass on the lawn and looked for other ornamental plants to fill up the garden. Ashis watered the lawn every day, while Jayanti helped in the garden or decorated her room in her own style. I bought them both 18 speed bicycles, but they preferred to walk to the campus nearby.

We were genuinely happy and forgot all our past bad experiences. At this time I decided to buy a luxury car. We had already purchased the adjacent lot of 600 sq. meters, so now we had a total of 1200 sq. meters of land. Jasmine said that we should build another garage in the next lot where the pickup could stay and retile the main garage for the arrival of our new car. After several visits to many show rooms in Manila we decided on a Nissan Altima with 2 liter engine and leather upholstery.

It is the top of the line Nissan and is very powerful and roomy. It has power steering, electrical doors and windows and side mirrors, power antenna etc. and is truly a magnificent machine. Now, Ashis had the full-time use of the Nissan pick up that I had purchased earlier.

The best part of our home turned out to be the veranda that all visitors liked. It is spacious where we can sit and enjoy the cool breeze coming from the mountains looming nearby, but our home is very well ventilated and full of natural light due to extra large windows. Jasmine soon purchased the curtains to complete the interior decoration.

Surendra who still worked at IRRI often came to visit. He said he was now handling the IRRI outreach in India and elsewhere, so constantly traveled. We sat on our veranda savoring the cool breeze and talked about the old days sipping ice-cold beer. This is the life we had dreamed of but now with the help of Jasmine, it was a reality. The music played softly on the stereo and I could see that Jasmine glowed with contentment. Kids were also happy.

Thus, the years passed. I was contacted by Dr.Singh, who was now settled in the United States and wanted me to go to Zambia or Zimbabwe, but I said that I had retired. He was surprised but did not say anything. Then some other people wanted me to go to Madagascar, but I said the same thing. I was not going anywhere anymore.

Then one day our lovely children who were now grown-ups graduated from college. Ashis got a BS in agricultural economics and Jayanti graduated with a degree in Development Communications. Ashis soon started the graduate program in agricultural economics, and Jayanti got a job on campus. She had been selected as the beauty queen of the university and won a 10000 pesos award and a crown. She was very popular with everybody.

Ashis is the quiet type, but he too became popular in his department, where he was finishing up his Masteral program. He was over 6 feet two inches tall. He then started working with various projects of the university and did so for almost two years, but in the year 2004 he announced

that he was accepted by two top universities in the United States as a graduate student in Agricultural Economics. He chose the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied under scholarship and eventually decided to get a second Master's degree in agricultural economics.

Soon after his graduation he was accepted by Monsanto as a trainee in Soda Springs in Idaho and after spending 6 months there as a trainee he was offered a good job in St. Louis, Missouri by the company. While at Penn State, he had met a beautiful girl whom he decided to marry. The marriage took place in St. Louis on September 16th, 2007 that was well attended. Jayanti and Jasmine among many others were present for the happy occasion. He now works in New Jersey for a Belgian company and makes Philadelphia his home, where he has moved into a lovely 2-storey house in the suburbs. His wife works in Philadelphia, and they have two lovely children who call us on Skype and say "love you grandpa".

Jayanti after working on campus for a while decided to go to Australia where she was accepted by the University of Canberra in their Information Technology course of two years leading to a Master's degree. After her graduation she started working in various places until one day she was given a good job by the Australian government where she now works as an IT specialist and business analyst. They also gave her citizenship.

We attended her marriage in Canberra in 2010, but we had our reservations which unfortunately came true 2 years later, and she decided to annul her marriage, move to Sydney where she found a good job. Jayanti is full of surprises. One night she showed up here in Los Baños in early January 2016 and told us that she had quit her Sydney job and was on her way to Lahore in Pakistan where she was to attend a workshop arranged by MIT. This was to help her learn how to use her expertise in information technology to help improve services for the poor, like better health services etc. Then she moved on to attend Yoga lessons in Rishikesh in India and then on to Philadelphia to visit her brother Ashis.

Then we heard from her from Phnom Penh in Cambodia where she has taken up her new job as senior IT expert for an international company and was on her way to Zambia in Africa for a month-long assignment.

I wanted my children to see India so we all went to visit Agra, Jaipur and Delhi and later went up to Nainital, Almora and Ranikhet in the hills. We climbed up the steep Himalayan slopes on horseback to reach the Kedar Nath temple at 17000 ft. elevation full of snow in April and rowed boats lazily in the lake in Nainital. We saw Jaipur and the fort nearby. They rode elephants and saw snake charmers and even dancing bears.

In Delhi, we went to Raj ghat to see the memorial of Mahatma Gandhi and others and marveled at the Qutub Minar, the presidential palace and the parliament building then visited the red fort and many such places. The Lotus temple which is a Bahai temple is worth seeing in Delhi. The Taj Mahal, the Agra fort, the mausoleum of Akbar in Sikandra, the ruined and abandoned city of

Fatehpur Sikri near Agra, the mausoleum of Sheikh Salim Chisti there were so many places we saw.

During that trip to India in 1996, we had decided to buy a house in Lucknow and finalized the papers. We now had a nice bungalow in a planned city on the outskirts of Lucknow. This is where Annapurna now lives after her retirement from her teaching job in a nearby town. She had chosen not to live in the Sri Ram Pur house. I also bought a huge 350 cc Royal Enfield motorbike that I kept in our new house so that I could enjoy bike riding once again in India.

But this was the last time we as a whole family would go somewhere. Kids now had their own lives to live in Australia and the United States. I went again to India in 1997 for a short time and returned with Annapurna. This was to be her third and the last visit to the Philippines. She really liked our new home and enjoyed the space and the greenery. We brought her to some tourist places or flower shows.

The sad news came in the year 2001 when Sushmita called one day to say that Mom had died. It was the month of March and the day was the 8th. I called Sri Ram Pur so Nirmal told me that the funeral rites were to be held after 10 days. I then traveled to Sri Ram Pur to attend the last rites of Mom.

She was a wonderful Mom, but now she is gone. They said that she had a heart attack and expired suddenly. She was 92. She had lived a long life. The Hindu tradition says that the body must be cremated soon after death, but they hold the funeral rites after ten days when the sons have to shave their head and attend to the Vedic rites with of course the guidance of a priest. I did all that was required and gave Nirmal some money. They shaved my head and I went to the Ganga to perform some ritual ceremonies. The 14 Brahmins were fed and given gifts as was required, but finally it was over, and I soon returned to the Philippines. The sad part was that now Annapurna and the Sri Ram Pur folks did not get along at all, so she did not attend the last rites of mother. She did all the pooja with the help of a priest in Lucknow. Sushmita also did not come to Sri Ram Pur and performed the rites in Meerut.

We were no longer a family of brothers and sisters, and so soon after the death of our beloved mother. That was the shocking part. Devjani came and was surprised to know that Mom had left her and Parvati her remaining money. Mother thought of everyone up to her last Moment on earth.

I had during this trip brought home my grandfather's handwritten diary in which he had written down the family history that my father had continued.It was very dilapidated, but I had it photocopied and began the translation in earnest now. The notes I had taken from the conversation I had with Mom were now transcribed, and one day I completed the document that included the family tree of both sides. It was a more complete document than the original.

I also had found quite accidentally my father's silver medal that the British had given him for his services in Waziristan, which is now part of Pakistan. This medal was minted in London with my father's name inscribed on it and has the bust of King George the fifth on it, so I brought it home along with another gold-plated medal that he had received from the seven sisters during that prank he had played in Sri Ram Pur so long ago. I also found his Parker pen. I brought these things to the Philippines and framed them along with his photo in our living room. I brought the old photo of Mom when she was only 11 years old and framed that too along with her latest photo.

Our last trip to India was in the year 2003 when I brought Jasmine to South India to visit many places there. We landed in Kolkata where we visited the Adya Peeth Kali temple for a pilgrimage and paid some money to them to fix a marble slab with the names of my father, mother and Kamal chiseled on it. This slab will now be there forever in their memory. I had previously asked them to fix such a slab, so there were two of them.

Then we took the train to Chennai, where we booked a guided tour of south India for 14 days. We visited many sites in Chennai like the snake farm, the deer park, the Thiruvalluvar memorial, the museum, the aquarium and the famous beach called marina. We visited a famous temple and the silk market, where we purchased very nice silk saris for Jayanti and Jasmine. Furthermore, we bought expensive shirts for Ashis there as well.

Then we took the bus trip to the hills of Kodaikanal. The guided tour of the south India started on October 1 and took us to Hoshur, Bangalore, Mysore city, palace of Tipu Sultan and his fort, the Vrindavan gardens, the Hills of Ootacamund, the Madhumalai game reserve, the Guruvayur temples in Kerala, Cochin, the waterways of Alleppey, KanyaKumari and the shrines of Swami Vivekananda and Thiruvalluvar there, the temples of Rameshwaram, Madurai, Thanjavur, Mahabali puram, Pondicherry ashram of Aurobindo, the Kanchipuram silk weaving center, the Tirupati temple in Andhra Pradesh and many more such places.

Jasmine visited the famous and holy Hindu temples and offered pooja and money to each of them. The priests put vermillion powder on her forehead as a symbol of piety. She was blessed by the elephants in Thanjavur and other places. We rode in boats through the scenic waterways of Kerala and climbed to the top of a hill in a cable car to visit a temple that had its dome completely covered in gold plates. The trip to Tirupati was in itself wonderful, and I think Jasmine enjoyed the richness of Indian culture and the beauty of the south.

We then visited Secunderabad and saw the famous Golconda fort, the Birla temple and the zoo among many other sites one whole day and proceeded to Aurangabad where we visited the Ajanta cave temples and the Ellora temples, the Bibi ka Makbara, the grave of Aurangzeb who was the son of Shahjehan and emperor of India. He was buried in a simple grave of soil with a carved marble screen protecting the grave in the open.

One can write volumes about the Ajanta and Ellora caves, but this is not the place for it, so I will skip it. It was an exhaustive trip covering many states and thousands of kilometers by bus and train, but finally we arrived in Sri Ram Pur and after a day there went to Lucknow to visit Annapurna. Then it was back to Kolkata and Manila via Brunei.

I took many photos during this and other trips, which I now burned into a CD and gave the kids a copy each. I turned thousands of photos and slides into a photo CD so that the kids can have their copies.

I had to make one more trip to India in September 2006 to settle a long-standing issue. I had decided to donate my house in Lucknow to the Ramakrishna Mission, so this is what I ended up doing. Annapurna was allowed to stay there by the mission, but I could tell that she did not like my idea at all. My short visit to Sri Ram Pur once again was to see Nirmal again and convince him to visit us in the Philippines. However, this was not to be. I understood that his wife did not support the idea, but I had to try anyway.

He looked old and frail and told me that he could not climb stairs or do anything strenuous because of palpitations. His food was severely restricted now, and he spent most of his time either with his rosary beads or prayer rituals and had lost all interest in worldly affairs, or so it seemed to me. He made no comments about my deed of gift to the Ramakrishna Mission or my wish that my share of the proceeds of the ancestral home should be donated to charitable missions.

I saw a few of my old acquaintances, but they all griped about how hard it was to live in India, how corrupt the society, how polluted the atmosphere, how no one cared about anyone or how there was so little to be cheerful about. Listening to them made me depressed as well.

It is true that India had changed dramatically since I first left in 1967, but many of the changes were negative in nature. I did not feel like visiting my alma mater anymore because there was no one there who knew me. The old professors had died or retired, and there was no such thing as alumni in our system. The batch mates once graduated left the campus for good, never to be found again.

I could see the old Sri Ram Pur vanishing under the new development that brought more traffic and pollution to the once placid city. There was a new bridge over the river that was a feat of ingenuous engineering, but it added to the traffic than to solve it. The Durga Pooja that I attended was now a commercialized, lackluster affair that brought nostalgic memories of the time when Pooja was truly a community affair. Our whole family participated then. Now I saw only ghosts of the past.

I longed to get back to the Philippines. I was surprised when Nirmal, who seldom saw me off, insisted on accompanying me to the train station. He looked sad and forlorn. He so much

wanted me to stay in the ancestral home, but this was not to be. The past could never be erased, but we had learned to live with it and move on.

It seems only yesterday, but so many years have gone and so many changes have taken place. Ma is no more. Dad had died a long time ago. Now sisters look only to their self-interest and have nothing to say to me and I to them. The next generation is already aloof and drifting apart. That is perhaps inevitable but still lamentable just the same.

In Delhi Surendra was waiting for me because we had planned to visit our old friend Laksman Lal in Hisar where he was now a professor. I had not seen him since 1975 so one day we drove to Hisar. Laksman Lal had aged as we had all, but he looked frail and limped due to an accident he had suffered a while back. Still it was good to see him after such a long time, and we reminisced until wee hours. I do not know if I will ever see him again.

Surendra still comes once in a while to our home. He is now based in Delhi and no longer works for IRRI. He plans to build a beautiful home right next to ours so that we can grow old together.

Dr. Singh still works in the United States, where he is settled. Subroto has now retired as the vice chancellor of an agricultural university in Bengal.

Dr. De la Cruz has died. I heard that Suranjeet now works in Jullundur in India. Robert Springsteen is now a professor of agricultural economics in a famous university in the United States.

Ramesh who was my classmate at the Institute in Sri Ram Pur now stays in Delhi and works as a consultant after his retirement from the Fertilizer company. Susanto has also retired as an under-secretary in the ministry of agriculture of Bengal. He had visited me in our new home a few years ago. There is no news of Abhit who used to work as a block development officer in Bengal the last time I heard.

My mentor and professor Dr. Chowdhury of Sri Ram Pur has died. Very few people from the Vietnam era or Algeria keep in touch with me, but that too is expected. People of my age are in their sixties now. This is the time when the health problems start to crop up, family ties loosen and perhaps break apart resulting in divorce or worse, children grow up and leave etc. All these factors make people less social and more introverts. I am not complaining.

My life has been rich in experience. Now I must stop here. I am happy and content with life because Jasmine is by my side. We live in the big house in a peaceful area. Our life now is peaceful and without excitement, as it should be at this age.

The saga of the house of Sri Ram Pur

My last chapter was supposed to be the one I wrote and published last but as life goes on, many things happen so I would like to write about them as well. Jayanti lived in Sydney,

Australia for a while where she was the senior consultant for an IT company and frequently traveled to many parts of Australia to give lectures on IT related topics to CEOs of big companies and such groups.

She now works in Cambodia where she develops programs for the government to make social services more accessible to the poorer section of the society and works in Africa as the program leader of similar projects.

Our son works in the United States and lives in Philadelphia. They have two children. They are now permanent residents of the United States which means they will become citizens in the future. Jayanti is already a citizen of Australia so we in our family all have different passports meaning different nationalities.

But the Sri Ram Pur chapter had to come to a close so in 2010, a buyer was found and the ancestral home was sold and Nirmal moved to Delhi with his wife for good. Now the house where we all grew up and shared so many years of togetherness was locked up and dark. The new owners have not decided yet what to do with it. The garden must be full of weeds and the cobwebs everywhere but that is what happens when a house is locked up. I can imagine empty rooms full of dust with footprints of mice everywhere. Once it was a very decent home full of light, laughter and music with Pa and Ma in charge but that was a long time ago.

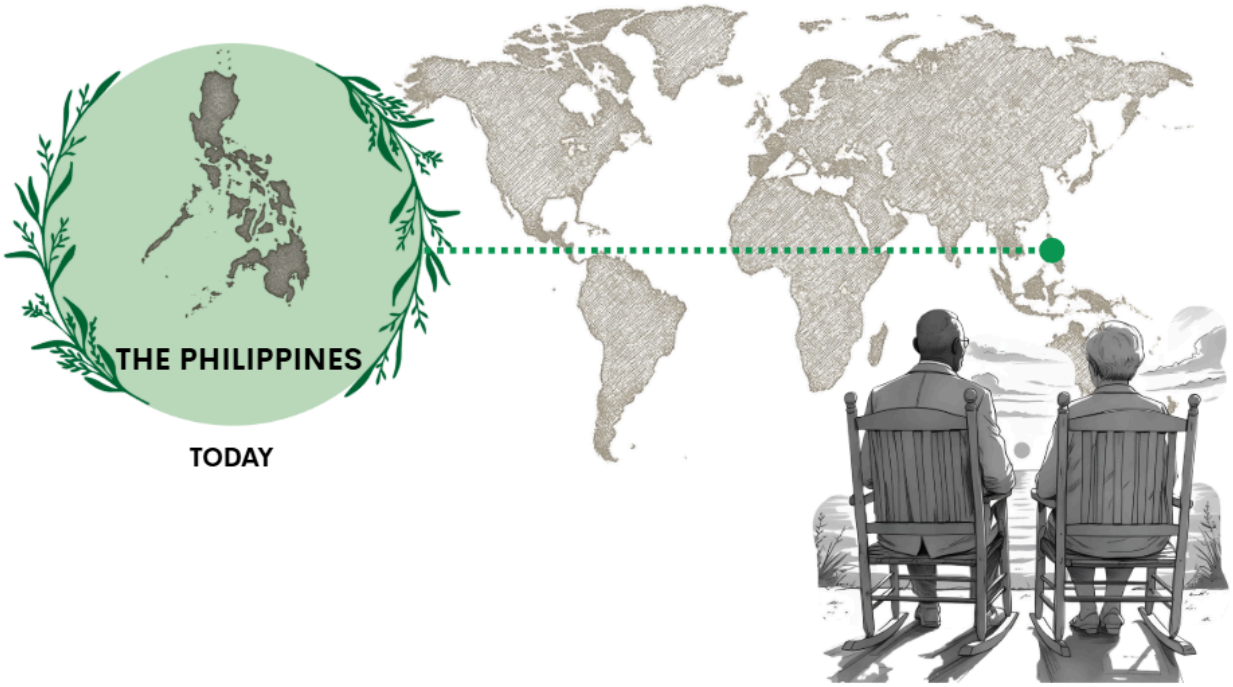
Now the circumstances dictated that the house be sold because no one wanted to live there. I suggested the idea that Nirmal should move to Delhi to be near his daughter and grandchildren so eventually that is what he did. He is quite happy now and feels that it was the right move for them. Annapurna died in Lucknow in the house that I donated to the mission and our youngest lives in Meerut. We have made our permanent home here in the Philippines.

Shanti and Devjani have both died in the meantime but I gave my share of the proceeds from the sale of the house to all the sisters and their children so they are happy.

The letters have stopped coming and no news comes. The e-mail or Skype is useless because Nirmal or my sisters do not have computers and they do not know how to type.They are also afraid of the technology.

My younger sister calls maybe once a year and sometimes asks when I will visit them. I have a pat answer saying I do not know. The truth is I really do not know.

Epilogue



I have often thought about whether my life has been worth it and meaningful, but soon a question comes up. Meaningful to whom?

To me or to others? It is far easier to determine if it has been meaningful to me, but then meaningful in what sense? Does it mean that meaningfulness refers only to material wealth or in addition something else? Have I been able to achieve great goals?

Materially, I was now comfortable. I provided for the education of the kids and a good new home. I paid for their education abroad and brought them to many countries where they lived or visited. I take care of Jasmine and provide her with the best medical care when she has a problem. I shall leave her with enough money to last her the rest of her life in case I die now, so she will never be dependent on anyone.

I have learned very early that there is no greater curse than poverty in anyone's life. It isolates a person more thoroughly than the most secure jail. Brothers and sisters and relatives avoid such a person. The parents feel let down if you don't succeed in getting a good job and earn a decent living. Friends become unfriendly and everyone looks down on a failed person.

So having achieved freedom from pecuniary needs has certainly been a blessing for me. But is money everything in life? I have learned that although money does not equate to happiness,it comes pretty close to it. It allows you to be independent and do things that you want to do. It gives you the freedom to choose.

But having money never really meant a great deal to me. I gave it away when I had little, like one time I gave away my entire savings in Algeria to Nirmal. In Vietnam, I shared with others what little I had, so having money now does not impress me a great deal. This has caused a lot of misunderstanding between me and my relatives, who still think that it is not worth having money if you do not show it. You have to wear fancy clothes and your wife should be loaded with gold jewelry.

But Jasmine and I had chosen a simple lifestyle because we are simple people. We live within our means and do not take credit anywhere. We have taught our children to always save a part of what they earn and never take credit. We are happy being what we are and do not pretend to be someone we are not. We do not attach sentimental value to material things. Jasmine can easily give away her pearl necklace if she wants without thinking twice.I love her generous nature and pure heart. She is my blessing. So in that sense my life has been meaningful to me.

Spiritually, I cannot say that I have been wiser or gained anything. After all these years, I have not changed my views on religion that is supposed to lead a person to spirituality. Organized religion has not played any role in my life, although I consider myself a Hindu in every sense of the word.

I have always felt that the religion should guide a person to improve himself and give him a sense of direction in life, but I never needed to be guided by any ideology or religion because I have a built-in compass in me that has always guided me to take the right road.I have never needed to be persuaded to believe that some things are right and others are wrong.

It was wrong to cheat, to lie, to steal and to be dishonest and neglectful in duties. It was wrong to be irresponsible, to be insensitive to other's feelings, to be disrespectful of elders, or other cultures or traditions. No religion needed to tell me that because these are the basic tenets of the civilized world. You are told about some of these things as soon as you learn to walk and talk. These are the commandments that are common to all organized religions and even primitive societies.

I always knew what to do when the time came and did it without hesitation. I have been no saint, and surely I have had my share of fibbing once in a while, but white lies never hurt anyone's feelings but rather protect it. It was far more humane to tell a person that I was busy and could not see him than to tell him that I disliked him and did not want to see him.

I tried not to be neglectful in my duties to others. But spiritually speaking, I became more cynical than before and started developing a strong dislike for those who for whatever reason always tended to expound their religious beliefs on others. I had earlier mentioned the American missionaries who offended me the most, but there are many such people everywhere. I had a right to believe or not to believe in anything, so it really was no one's business.

Jasmine was brought up differently, so her beliefs are strongly guided by the Catholic Church, but she is not a fanatic. She agrees that fanaticism is a disease and should always be treated as such. She respects Hindus and has visited most of the holy shrines in India, where she has offered money and prayers. The Swami of Adya Peeth in Kolkata was so impressed by her pure heart that he called her "mother". I bring her to church every Sunday because it is my duty.

I have always believed that one can serve humanity by deeds so it is far more religious to be honest, diligent, respectful, conscientious, humble, truthful, forthright, industrious, prompt, compassionate, kind, gentle, knowledgeable, free from superstitions and blind beliefs. Such a person to me is far more religious than all the Bible thumping people who are mean.

Jasmine is such a person with all the qualities I mentioned. She is a gold mine of such marvelous qualities that are so hard to find in one person.

Now to analyze whether others have been equally satisfied with my life, I have to first consider the Sri Ram Pur folks. It is fair to say that Mom was disappointed that I had chosen to marry a foreigner and outside our faith but she more than anyone else had come to appreciate the sterling qualities in Jasmine, and she was generally speaking happy that I had succeeded in getting a good education and made a good living. She was the liberal in the family.

But to others I have been a source of embarrassment because they did not like me being a non-conformist and a non traditionalist. They openly said that someone with my wealth was expected to show it, and derided my faded blue denims. Their values collided with me in every turn, which made them angry. They believed in show and not substance in a person, but we believed otherwise.

To me, the inner qualities of a person were far more important than external show. Our children were simply dressed but had admirable manners. They were also the most generous by nature,a trait they shared with their Mom. So my life has not been very meaningful to my brother and sisters and relatives, although they all benefited from our generosity to them.

Now I have to consider if the people I tried to help in so many countries appreciated my efforts and whether my interventions had been meaningful to them. These are the farmers I had worked with. I can proudly say that they all told me at one time or another they benefited from my work with them.

New high yielding crop varieties, new ways to grow them and many such things had been taken up by the farmers. The seed multiplication project in Bruny in Haiti where I got them a brand-new tractor, seeds and a warehouse to store the seeds were appreciated.

It is true that in some countries like Mali and Sudan I was not able to do as much as I wanted due to reasons beyond my control, but my time there was not totally wasted. To set up a big

project from scratch and get it going is a challenge in any country, but more so in such countries where people put their vested interests first and take advantage.

I do not regret going to those countries but only the missed opportunities there. A plant grows healthy and blooms one day given the proper environment to grow. Many people gave me that environment in which I grew and showed my potential. I am grateful to them for believing in me. Even the FAO people believed in me.

No one can claim to be self-made. One needs the helping hands to grow. At first those are the hands of loving parents. Later they are the helping hands of people who at every step stand by you and believe in you and in your potential. I was helped by so many people in my life that I can not express my gratitude to them sufficiently enough. Many are dead now but are lovingly remembered.

My only wish at this point is that our children practice some of the values and become useful in their lives. Perhaps when they read this memoir someday, it will help them in some ways understand human nature better and learn to cope with life better when I am no longer around.

Life can be full of surprises. The charm is in not knowing what the future holds but being prepared for whatever comes. Always try to live a useful life, both to you and to others. My only advice to Ashis, Jayanti and also to Jasmine is as follows : Whatever you do in life, do it well and do it with love. Only then will you begin to enjoy living. Cheers.

Anil

June 2025

About the author

On this page you will learn something about me. I am Anil the Bard. A bard is a storyteller who loves to tell stories. Storytelling is an oral tradition that is still practiced in many parts of the world, but it is now told in printed form like this.

I grew up in a small town and went to college there, but I wanted to get away and see the world at an age when young people seek the comfort and security that only a family can provide. But I was curious about the world, so one day the opportunity presented itself and I took it. My life was never the same again.

I went to Vietnam to work as a volunteer agronomist during the war, and it was there that my international life began as an agronomist and later as a writer. You will read all the details in my biography.I am a simple person blessed with a wonderful wife whom I call my angel. I have two adorable children who have grown up to be successful in their own ways.

I live peacefully in the Philippines with my wife after my retirement. After reading my biography, you will know me better and understand why I wrote it. I only use my pen name Anil and have changed the names of all people and places to protect their privacy.

Your friend.

Anil the Bard

Other books by the author

Story of Anil (Biography in English)

This is the remarkable story of a young man named Anil, whose courage and sense of purpose took him on a lifelong journey across continents. At a time when the Vietnam War was raging, Anil made a life-changing decision to travel to Vietnam as a volunteer agronomist. Despite warnings from colleagues and discouragement from Indian authorities, he remained steadfast in his mission to help farmers in need.

Anil's bravery and his dedication to the welfare of farmers didn't go unnoticed. In 1969, he received the International Distinguished Service Award from Macalester College in the United States, a prestigious honor that marked the beginning of an extraordinary career devoted to agricultural development and humanitarian service.

As Anil traveled the world, he witnessed the resilience of farmers in Algeria, Mali, Haiti, Burundi , Philippines and Sudan. He saw the struggles of those living in poverty, but also their hope and determination. He worked tirelessly to improve their lives, serving as Chief Technical Advisor for a multimillion-dollar FAO project in Sudan. His pursuit of knowledge took him to California Polytechnic University and the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines, where he earned a Ph.D. scholarship.

Throughout his travels, Anil witnessed the diversity of human experience — the challenges of social and political upheaval in Haiti, Burundi, and the Philippines; the resilience of farmers in Algeria, Mali, and Sudan; and his everyday struggles against hardship and hope.

Anil's story is one of courage, perseverance, and the quest for meaning. Though his experiences in India left him disheartened, they ultimately guided him toward a new beginning in the Philippines, where his journey continues. This is his story, told in his own words – a testament to the human spirit's capacity to overcome adversity and find purpose.

Reflections from the village bard series

Anil the bard shares a lifetime of personal observations shaped by living among diverse cultures and communities through reflections on social

issues, travel, food, and human conditions. He invites readers into a thoughtful exploration of the world as he has seen it. These writings offer a heartfelt and honest look at the beauty. the struggles, and the small moments that connect us all.

Book one

Cultures and contrasts

Anil has spent decades capturing his observations on culture and human conditions. Drawing from his experiences, including his first fateful flight into the outside world, this first compilation takes readers across the world, exploring rich traditions, fading rituals, and humanity's timeless quest for meaning. Through vivid memories and thoughtful reflections. This book offers a heartfelt look at how cultures shape, inspire, and challenge us.

Book two

Values and verity

Anil has spent decades capturing his observations on culture and the human condition. Here, he shares stories of resilience, kindness, and courage across generations. This compilation reminds us of the quiet strength found in ordinary lives and the enduring values they carry.

Book three

Communities and crossroads

Anil has spent decades capturing his observations on cultures and human conditions. Through years of writing about human connection, Anil offers reflections on relationships, belonging, and change. This compilation invites readers to reflect on the ties that bind us and the choices that shape our lives, celebrating communities and the courage to embrace new beginnings.

Book four

Protest and progress

Anil has spent decades capturing his observations on culture and human conditions. This compilation of essays presents a bold and unflinching

exploration of the struggles, hopes, and movements that have defined our shared history. These stories of the struggles and the heroes who have created change call us to remember, to question, and to believe in the ongoing journey toward justice, dignity, and hope.

Book five

Grit and glory

In this deeply personal volume, Anil reflects on India of his youth - a land of resilience, spirit, and transformation. Through stories of patriots, memory, and everyday life, he honors the sacrifices that shaped the nation's freedom and shares his reflections on the culture, people, and places that formed his earliest worldview. Grit and glory is a remembrance of a country that lives on in his heart, full of both struggle and pride.

Histoire d'Anil en français

Voici l'histoire d'un jeune Anil qui a pris la décision de se rendre au Vietnam pendant la guerre, en tant qu' agronome volontaire, pour répondre aux besoins des agriculteurs, malgré les tentatives de certains de le dissuader de prendre cette décision périlleuse. Les autorités indiennes l'ont dissuadé de se rendre au Vietnam, mais il a persévéré et a servi deux ans au Vietnam pour aider les agriculteurs de sa province.

Sa vie a été menacée à plusieurs reprises, échappant de justesse à des blessures, mais il a persévéré et a été honoré comme volontaire exceptionnel en 1969, lorsqu'il a reçu le Prix international pour service distingué du prestigieux Macalester College aux États-Unis. C'est ainsi qu'il a entamé sa vie aventureuse d'agronome dévoué et a également servi en Algérie comme volontaire. Sa quête l'a conduit en Haïti, au Burundi, au Mali, en Algérie, au Soudan et aux Philippines, où il a exercé comme agronome pour apporter son expertise technique aux agriculteurs et a également été conseiller technique principal dans le cadre d'un projet de plusieurs millions de dollars de la FAO au Soudan.

Son rêve d'études supérieures l'a conduit à l'Université polytechnique de Californie, puis il s'est vu offrir une bourse de doctorat par l'Institut international de recherche sur le riz aux Philippines.

Anil a vécu dans de nombreux pays où il a observé la culture, les enjeux sociaux, les développements agricoles et industriels et les bouleversements politiques en Haïti, au Burundi et aux Philippines. Il a néanmoins pu servir les agriculteurs malgré les problèmes de logement et les vols en Algérie, au Mali et au Soudan.

Son histoire, racontée par lui-même, est riche de réflexions sur de nombreux sujets, certains agréables, d'autres désagréables, mais il a tenté de surmonter ses difficultés dans chaque pays où il a vécu et travaillé. Son expérience personnelle des difficultés interculturelles dans son Inde natale l'a attristé, mais elle l'a conduit à décider de vivre définitivement aux Philippines.

Historia de Anil en español

Es la extraordinaria historia de un joven llamado Anil, cuyo coraje y propósito lo llevaron a un viaje que lo perduró por toda la vida a través de los continentes. En un momento en que la guerra de Vietnam se intensificaba, Anil tomó la decisión crucial de viajar a Vietnam como agrónomo voluntario. A pesar de las advertencias de sus colegas y el desánimo de las autoridades indias, se mantuvo firme en su misión de ayudar a los agricultores necesitados.

La valentía de Anil y su dedicación al bienestar de los agricultores no pasaron desapercibidas. En 1969, recibió el Premio Internacional al Servicio Distinguido del Macalester College de Estados Unidos, un prestigioso honor que marcó el inicio de una extraordinaria carrera dedicada al desarrollo agrícola y al servicio humanitario.

En sus viajes por el mundo, Anil fue testigo de la resiliencia de los agricultores en Argelia, Malí, Haití, Burundi, Filipinas y Sudán. Vio las dificultades de quienes vivían en la pobreza, pero también su esperanza y determinación. Trabajó incansablemente para mejorar sus vidas, sirviendo como Asesor Técnico Principal para un proyecto

multimillonario de la FAO en Sudán. Su búsqueda de conocimiento lo llevó a la Universidad Politécnica de California y al Instituto Internacional de Investigación del Arroz en Filipinas, donde obtuvo una beca de doctorado.

A lo largo de sus viajes, Anil fue testigo de la diversidad de la experiencia humana: los desafíos de la agitación social y política en Haití, Burundi y Filipinas; la resiliencia de los agricultores en Argelia, Malí y Sudán; y su lucha diaria contra las dificultades y la esperanza.

La historia de Anil es una historia de valentía, perseverancia y búsqueda de sentido. Aunque sus experiencias en la India lo desanimaron, finalmente lo guiaron hacia un nuevo comienzo en Filipinas, donde su viaje continúa. Esta es su historia, contada en sus propias palabras: un testimonio de la capacidad del espíritu humano para superar la adversidad y encontrar un propósito.