

6

MY CHILDHOOD DAYS : THE HALCYON YEARS

*I have had playmates. I have had companions,
In my days of childhood, in my joyful school-days,
All, all are gone, the old familiar faces.*

Charles Lamb, *The Old Familiar Faces*

Nadine Gordimer has announced a story entitled "Some are born to Sweet Delight" with these two lines from Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*.

Some are born to Sweet Delight
Some are born to Endless Night.

I was really born to Sweet Delight. My maternal grandfather Pichitlall Mishra was a rich man well respected far and wide in his locality for his wealth and wisdom. His family was rich and brave, and spent a lot on religious functions and charity.

The Naming Ceremony (the Naamkaran)

In accordance with the prevailing custom going back to the days of Ramachandraji, after 11 days of my birth I was named 'Deep', which means "an earthen lamp". It is highly poetic to be called 'Deep': its body is of earth bound to return to the earth: but its flame moves upwards, as if it were the *aarti* to the Lord. In our Hindu society naming of a child is a solemn occasion. It is one of the *samskaras* (the sacred ceremonies). For my mother, I was just a flickering flame supported merely by her hope. My maternal uncle blessed me: "Be like an earthen light to dispel darkness". The Buddha had blessed someone counselling: " *Appa Dipobhabha*" (be thou thy own lamp). They called me 'Deep' (an earthen lamp). But I was formally named 'Shivakant' on a formal occasion after a good deal of deliberations by the elders and the family pundit. Brahaspati had said: "Name is the primary means of social intercourse, it brings about merits and it is the root of fortune. From name man attains fame. Therefore, naming ceremony is very praiseworthy." But my parents, and other elders, kept calling me 'Deep'. I feel sad as by now they all have gone who so lovingly addressed me by this short lovely name.

My Parents' attitudes towards children: they saw the Archer's hand

Coleridge made a touching point when he crisply said: 'I have often thought what a melancholy world this would be without children; and what an inhuman world, without the aged'. What always struck me extraordinary was my parent's 'carefreeness' about me. While they were never deficient in their parental duty, they held attitudes towards children resembling Khalil Gibran's. Children are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself." Gibran said:

"They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you. "

The children resembled the arrows which the Great Archer sends off from the bow, which the parents constitute, towards targets which the Archer alone knows. Whether the arrows, shot off the bow, reach their targets, or are lost on the way, the bow must not bother about. Once my father had shown me Marc Chagall's painting 'The Wedding' where a baby cherub, with wings unfolded, clasps heads of their parents giving the impression that it was on its take-off towards a destination unknown.

Down the memory lane

Childhood is generally a period between infancy and adolescence. "I understand", writes Lord Hailsham in his memoir, *A Sparrow's Flight*, "that people do not remember events which take place before they turn of five years." On racking my brain to go down my memory lane, I can see how I clung on the back of my maternal grandfather when he squatted on a wooden plank on his outer veranda. I was not even four when my maternal grandfather was killed. He was killed the way the great Dronacharya had been killed in the battle field of the Mahabharata. I have written something about him in the Chapter on 'The Portrait of my Mother'. He was tall and sturdy, and so fat that on his back I felt I was on an Arabian stallion. When I heard about his death, I couldn't believe it. How could the Olympus ever crumble even if the tempest of Death was most furious. I can also bring back to mind my father swinging me up and down on the rhythm of a song which he intoned in his characteristic rich voice. But I couldn't make out the song, but I enjoyed his voice and his style of singing. When he raised me up, I felt I was moving up into the space; when he brought me down I descended down on the earth with a thud. The words which he intoned meant: 'Let a new house be raised: let the old one be brought down.'

**I hold myself under an infinite gratitude towards my Mother
whose fragrance is ever fresh, ever sweet for me**

Those days it was a general practice to massage the child with mustard oil and then to place the baby under the Sun. Often a lot of oil was put on the sternum of the baby. They believed that the Sun-rays and the mustard oil did well to the baby's health. It was felt essential that someone must remain near about the baby otherwise some ominous whirlwind could carry a baby aloft to the world unknown. Such morbid event had already taken place in the life of Krishna when Trinavarta carried off Krishna in his horrendous whirls. True, Krishna killed the demon, but such a feat could never be effected by ordinary mortals. So deep was

faith in the supernatural that my mother was most often busy in her multifarious efforts to ward off any evil that might overtake me. My village had certain *tantriks* well known in all the adjoining villages. Their power of the occult was never doubted. It was believed that some of them could even drive trees to shift with their roots, trunks and branches from their places to the places where the wizards wished them to go. My mother did not believe in such yarns, yet she was not ready to take any risk. She sat near me on the straw-mat most of the times. Like all other mothers, she sat gazing at her baby observing the 'sleep that flits on baby's eyes', 'the smile that flickers on baby's lips when he sleeps', the sweet, soft freshness that blooms on baby's limbs'¹ I wonder how my mother would have seen such things in her son, almost a gasping and panting skeleton. But she sat softly gazing, often cornering tears in her eyes, trying laboriously to discover some hope and meaning in that new visitor to the planet. After seven decades, when I reflect on how she cared for me, I am sure her meditative glance subjected me to a spiritual engineering to make me what I have become now; even this that vexes you with the words you are reading .

The Canoes adrift in the streams

My mind takes me back to those early years of my life when I enjoyed putting paper-canoes into the languid rainy streams, or into the gurgling floodwater. Rainworms or ants were forced to become a motley crew in my tiny Titanic. The ups and downs of the canoes in swirling rain stream provided some fine moments of the thrills of macabre delight. The worms and the tiny insects would creep over the brim of the canoes to crook down into the stream on which the canoes drifted. If on account of heavy rain, or the flow of the flood, the water gushed strongly, most of my canoes turned turtle. It was joy to see how the black ants frolicked even whilst they panicked, and then tried to swim to survive. But in this struggle for existence only those survived which could luckily climb over the tiny green bushes if they could find them floating down and down. But all these made me writhe with pain. I developed a craze for fishing. I made my own fishing-rod with which I tied long sturdy thin nylon thread at whose extreme tip I clipped a hook. I used the earthworm, which I picked up from my garden by upturning soil with a borrowed spade. I used it as the bait on the barbed hook for catching fish. When my mother came to know how ruthlessly I excavated the tiny creatures with a spade, which cut many of them into pieces, she was furious at my heartless adventures. I gave up this cruel act not out of benevolence but out of fear of my mother. I was shocked at my propensity for inflicting cruelty on other creatures. Childhood has been greatly romanticized in poetry. My mind captured the imageries of the capsizing canoes, and suffering worms. Their tragic lot lingered in my mind, and deepened my distress which I shared with Thomas Hardy when I read, years later, his poem 'Nature's Questioning' in which "Field, flock and tree" wonder:

Has some Vast Imbecility,
Mighty to build and blend,
But impotent to tend,
Framed us in jest, and left us now to hazardry?

The Stories which amazed & enchanted, taught & delighted

Those days all the houses in the village were of mud and daub. The house in which my parents lived was massive, and majestic. Its outer veranda was meant for men, and was the hub of all sorts of activities. The verandas facing the inner courtyard were meant for the ladies. As a child, I enjoyed my moments on these verandas. My second aunt held her conclave on the northern veranda. We children called her 'Manai'. She had great skill in story-telling. She had a prodigious memory and a wonderful capacity to invent situations and characters. Her language of gesture made her stories come alive. She believed that she could understand what the birds communicated through their warbles, and could catch what the leaves told through their rustling, what the thunders told through their ferocious and deafening noise and what the lightning suggested through its flashes of bright and piercing light, through the varied patterns of luminosity. Hers was the last word on everything she told us. Whenever we had grievances against anybody, we went to her. She was our highest appeal court. Everyone accepted her jurisdiction to decide, and we had total faith in her administration of justice.

Winter afternoons, and summer evenings witnessed multifocal activities going on in the inner courtyard. The elderly ladies had their own conclaves in which Manai was often the presiding deity. Her tone was generally censorious, and she could not stand aberrations. Her subjects ranged from the mosquito menace to the ways of the daughters-in-law which invited deserved frowns from their mothers-in-law. The most attentive listeners could embroider on her comments to carry tales, most often to raise a storm in the tea-cup, and also to provide a cause for the wordy fireworks.

Manai was short in stature but very fair complexioned; and had white flowing locks adding grace to her sharp features. She spoke in heavy tone, and her eyes had hypnotic piercing effects on the children who sat silently before her to listen to the stories of yore. She could tell all the stories of the *Panchtantra* in her characteristic style keeping the listeners spellbound. Her veranda on the northern side of the courtyard was, throughout the afternoons round the year, the hub of activities. It was also a laboratory for experiments in culinary arts and sciences. The children were the food-tasters. The veranda was wide enough to provide space for the games of *choupar* with cowries. Small cowries were used to provide eyes to the clay images of the monsters. The elders of the family loved to predict future using cowries, mango-seeds, and twigs by arranging them in certain ways. Postal communications were irregular, and telecommunication was non-existent. Manai predicted shape of things to come by working on the *Ramasalakaprasnavali* appended to that edition of the *Ramacharitmanas* which she read every afternoon. She taught me how the predictions could be made by moving fingers on the letters cast in an intricate latticelike chart in *Ramasalakaprasnavali*. The letters, selected at random after closing eyes, could become a line suggesting what was destined to come about. Till I joined my postgraduate course in the Bihar University in 1958, I frequently drew on the said chart. I seldom thought that it was a mere art of passing time.

Two beautiful photographs, one of Devi Durga on Her ferocious lion, and the other of Lord Krishna tending His cows, had been hung up on the mud-wall on

the northern side of Manai's veranda. She lighted incense every day. On the same wall was pasted a long photograph of a beautiful lady whom we did not know. Her son, my cousin, was a most beautiful man I ever saw. He looked so debonair that any Venus would have eloped with him. In some moments of passion, he had set his heart on a beautiful lascivious lady of the celluloid world of Bombay. Once he substituted Durga's photograph with that of his sweetheart. But Manai believed her to be a new version of Durga Devi. When someone told her who she really was, my Manai was not disturbed. She uttered in low voice: "For me she is Durga" She never stopped putting some petals of flowers on that photograph. But those who did not like this continuing fraud, removed, through stealth, that photograph, and substituted that with Durga's. But it was too much for my cousin to withstand: one fine morning he left home in search of the lady but came back, totally broken, after 15 years, just to die at his place. He could well express himself in Vittoria's last words in John Webster's *The White Devil*:

My soul, like to a ship in a black storm,
Is driven, I know not whither.

On Manai's veranda, I heard the story of the owl and the crow. Arimardan, the King of the Owls fell foul with Maghvarna, the King of the Crows. Arimardan killed a lot of crows. The crows could not match the owls in number and skill. So the King of the Crow resorted to a diplomatic move. His minister went incognito to the King of Owls, and wanted a refuge on the plea that he had been driven out. The King of the Owls, Arimandan, could not see through the game. He granted him asylum in his Kingdom. Later the King of the Crows attacked the King of Owls. The Owls were defeated, and were destroyed. While my aunt was telling the stories, the crows on the trees were crowing almost without break, perhaps out of joy on listening to the heroics of their ancestors! Crows for us used to matter a lot. Their style of crowing could suggest if someone dear was likely to come soon. We believed that through crowing they could portend things yet in the womb of time. My aunt claimed to know the language of all birds. We never considered the crows abominable creatures. Decades later, when I read the poem "Crow" by Ted Hughes, I became aghast at the poet's vision of their meanness. In the 'Uttarkaand' of the *Ramacharitmansa* there is an account of a great religious soul named Bhushudi. He was a crow. The dialogue between Bhushindi and Garuda is celebrated for its philosophic depth and spiritual insight. I heard his story with rapt attention.

Of all the photographs nailed onto her mud wall, two drew our attention most. One presented a fantasy world of hell rich in macabre symbolism. It portrayed hell. It showed the sufferings that men have to go through for devoting their years to the worldly pleasures. Men were deep-fried in oil. Men were put asunder with a saw. Some cried with searing pain; and others were half-burnt in the hellfire which consumed but bore no light. Cruel, strange creatures of terrific size and shape caught them, and they writhed and withered in endless agony. The photograph was far more shocking than the portraits of hell that I saw later. Hieronymus Bosch created a fantasy of hell. Nardo Di Cione, in his 'Hell', drew up the images drawing on Dante's 'Inferno' in the *Divine Comedy*. But the impact that my nascent mind had received on observing the photographs at Manai's veranda was deep. I could liberate myself of its depressing impact only by

assimilating in my life the ideas of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Fear vanishes the moment one knows that fear has no existence. Darkness goes the moment a lamp is lit. Later I realized that the images of sufferings in the hell had been gaudily drawn up merely to impart lessons to their observers. The other photograph was of a cow in whose every limb gods manifested themselves in their various incarnations, versions and manifestations. This photograph was designed to show how the worship of a cow is a religious command for the Hindus. There were years in my life when my beautiful cow had been my best companion. She smiled when I was happy, she wept when I become seriously unwell. Throughout winter I massaged her parts with mustard oil. When the mosquitoes harassed her, I saw to it that fire was lit near her so that the smoke could ward off the onrushing mosquitoes. During winter I draped her with a blanket. My finest moments were when she communicated to me a lot of joyous feelings through her pregnant silence. I remember how beautiful she looked with circles in different colours put on her body, shining *sindoor* paste on horns, and the sweet and soft bell ringing on her elongated neck glittering with multicoloured glass beads of different size, and diverse hues.

At the centre of the courtyard there was a beautiful structure on a mud-built platform, open on all sides, having roof made of straw and wood suspended majestically on bamboo-frame. It had been constructed to perform some ceremony in the family. It was designed to last for a year or two; but because of its utility, it continued for decades by making timely repairs and replacements. In the course of the day, especially after lunch, it used to become a sort of seminary for learning arts and crafts. Wind could come, and words could float thereon. Everyone under the structure was ready to believe whatever struck his or her eardrum: everyone was ready to let noble thoughts come from all the sides. But what thrilled us most was the tiny bird which came in from nowhere, and flew into the unknown worlds after enjoying a stay for a short while on the flat wooden beam which upheld the thatch above it. For me the whole scene was an amalgam of wonder and beauty, almost *adbhutam romaharsanam* (wondrous experience of joy).

The hyperactive inner courtyard

My mother, when she was not looking after me, was busy in creating some artifacts from clay, straw, or old tattered cloth. She kneaded black clay, dug from a nearby pond, to make idols. Her idols of Sama, Chakeva, Satbhaiya and Chugla had excellent expressiveness. The clay images pertained to a beautiful story coming from ancient times. This delightful festival, involving mainly the ladies, begins on Kartik Sukla Dutiya, and ends with a great festivity on the Kartika Sukla Purnima. The story which this festival portrays runs thus: a canard was spread by the devilish maid servant called Dehuli, that Krishna's daughter Sama was having an affair with certain Rishis in Vrindavan. In his anger, Krishna cursed his daughter to become a bird Sama. On her metamorphosis, she flew away on its wings. Her husband, Chakravak (Chakva) became a bird of his own accord to become his wife's companion in the forest. Even many Rishis became birds. When Krishna's son Samba returned home, he was shocked to hear what had happened to his sister. He propitiated Krishna and obtained from Him blessings which brought them back to human forms. As Sama's brother rescued

them from their feathered existence, the festival is celebrated for the welfare of brothers. Dhuli is the target of the choicest abuses; and Chugla, who carried tales and indulged in backbiting, is subjected to public censure, then is burnt by setting his long moustache ablaze. It is a public indictment of all Chuglas, the backbiters, who are accustomed to spread false canard and mischievous rumours against others.

Game of cards and chess were very popular among ladies. Afternoons were devoted either playing these games, or reading the *Ramacharitmanas*. My mother found more delight in reading this epic than in indulging in other popular pastimes. She could recall the apt aphoristic statements from it wherever and whenever appropriate contexts arose. I have always felt that this great work provides guidance for all occasions, and for everybody. Whosoever needs light, he is sure to get that in this. Common people of our country live, and shape their cultural mores keeping in their consciousness the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the quintessential expression of our oriental wisdom in the 'Rama-katha' in the *Ramacharitmanasa*. If our culture is still vibrant, it is on account of these great writings.

Round and round the prickly pear: how the bullocks trampled grain out

The outer veranda overlooked an expansive lush paddy field stretching across a vast area which melted into the thick woods of the village Jaidevapatti. The luxuriant lush green paddy leaves at that distance seemed to turn into the waves of green. With strange delight, I observed the beauty and richness of the green maturing into different shades to become yellow and gold of the ripe paddy. The smell of the recently ploughed soil, especially on the first kiss of rains, couldn't be forgotten as it quivered its supreme delight into my whole self. When black clouds covered the whole sky, I found myself under a canopy of many shifting shades vibrant with the voice of goats, of frogs, of insects and a host of other creatures not all well known. From a mere observer I could become a participator. From the veranda I observed how chaff was removed from corn, how the sheaves were arranged round a pole for the bullocks to move round and round to thrash them to separate grain from them, how the heap of grains looked like in their full majesty, how the weigher weighed grain on his closely knit cane scales shouting with each exercise of weighing ' *Ramahi Ji Rama* ' followed by an increasing number. Either after his afternoon nap, or while sitting round the fire under the open sky, my uncle and elders would tell stories to the children who were used to assemble close to them for a piece of candy. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* equipped them with an encyclopaedic range of knowledge. It is well said that though every child lives in its unique universe, all the children grow alike. I belonged to a typical agrarian society. The feature of this sort of society is thus described by Professor J.K Galbraith:

“ For thousands of years, as Keynes later pointed out and as there will be occasion to stress, men and women had experienced no basic and continuing changes in their living standard – things were sometimes a little better, sometimes worse ; there was no fundamental, durable trend.”²

For the first time, the heavens revealed their beauty to me when I looked up to see the sky from my courtyard. The starry dome provided the wide sphere

where imagination could go wild. Gazing at the images of the Moon in the water-filled brass tray, we implored Him to bring rice and milk from the high heavens. The stars brought to us things of delight on their beams which we tried to catch by lying flat on a cane carpet in the courtyard. Perhaps, I thought later, Pythagoras might have got an analogous experience when he found in the movement of the heavens a superb and ecstatic music of the spheres.

I saw many interesting and amazing things happening in our courtyard. Only one I mention, as the constraints of space do not permit me to reflect on the incessant activities going on there. The chaff of wheat flew away whilst grains fell on same place. It was strange. Why did chaffs get scattered in the wind whilst the grains fell down? What would happen if on the break up of the ears, the grains flew away and chaffs fell down. Stock answer I got was: "It is God's wish". It took me many years to know from J. Brownski that in the remote past it did happen that way. Only some strange genetic revolution made it happen as it is happening now. Questions swarm in a child's mind which often baffle most adults. The early childhood is appropriately called the Age of Questioning. A child's curiosity to know the universe makes it ask questions which many adults falter in answering.

The House and its courtyard

The design of my house was of the pre-historic vintage. It was an intricate bamboo structure which supported a thatch. When I looked up towards ceiling I found that all the geometrical forms were integrated in the structure. Off and on snakes crept through the designs in the structure. Snakes sneaking through the crisscross of the structure could be spotted by the curves of their soft yellowish belly. The snakes registered their presence quite often but they caused no worry to us. The entrance of the master bed-room was on its right; and on both the sides of the entrance were the prints of hand painted with white rice paste on which was affixed the deep red flattened cotton symbolizing the blessings of the Goddess Kali.

Every morning and evening, a host of pigeons swooped down the courtyard to eat the leftovers and the scattered grains. The symmetry of their body, the rhythm of their movements and their sweet inviting coo were all arresting. But all things of beauty have to face hazards. We children contrived traps to catch them. Often a big basket was raised on its side with a bamboo stick with which a long sturdy thread was tied firmly by us standing in the hide. This device afforded the birds a way in, but not a way out. We scattered some grains near about and underneath the basket. Then we used a typical sound *aaja, aaja* inviting the unsuspecting creatures to the trap. Once the little creatures were lured inside the raised basket, we dragged the stick suddenly out. This entrapped the unfortunate creatures. Children caught them for their joy, whilst our grown-ups killed them for their food. I abhorred their acts. But I found great thrill in catching them. But when my father told me the story of a fox at the point of its death harrowed by the creatures it had killed, I stopped being a party to the crime against the innocent birds.

The Witches

There was a widespread belief in witchcraft. Some women had acquired bad name, and were generally avoided. Mothers would take their babies inside their

house on seeing them coming. Children were not allowed to eat in their presence. My mother, like others, believed in black magic. Lots of stories had been put into circulation about the witches. It was said that some of them could drive trees, and set even water ablaze through their glance; whilst some even visited, at midnight, the cremation grounds to appease their deities in order to perfect their magic. A woman had gone mad as she could not oblige her deity who wanted her to sacrifice her only son. Our locality had some distinguished, witch doctors, who claimed cent per cent success in exposing the witches and removing their spell. There were many who bore themselves as the witnesses to prove the power of the witches. They were the self-proclaimed exorcists. I was advised that the mentioning of a needle, within the hearing of a witch, neutralized the lead effect of her craft. Once on seeing an old drooping lady coming, I slowly told my friend that my mother had asked me to buy a needle from a nearby shop. The old lady heard it. She turned furious, and cursed me to her heart's content. She even went to my mother to tell her what her son had done. When I returned home, I was beaten mercilessly. It was a trial, judgment, and execution in one go. My mother was angry with me, and asked me never to do that sort of thing again.

As a child, I believed in witchcraft and in ghosts. It was natural for me to believe in the ghost when many testified to have seen them. It was said that in the small hours one could see them without risk if one sat on a buffalo's back as, it was believed, the ghosts could not come near the huge black beast. I was never allowed to undertake that adventure. My mother believed that once I had become a ghost's target. No medicine worked on me, but someone removed the spell cast on me. The poor ghost, it was believed, was taken to *amahuat* tree on which it was nailed to remain there forever. I couldn't deny the existence of ghosts. Once my sister, who was four years younger, fell down, and became unconscious. When the holy ash of God Mahadeva was smeared on her face, she immediately regained her consciousness. Such events occurred every evening for almost a month. Whilst in trance, she spoke so many things about my remote ancestors which even my parents neither knew nor remembered. Once, while she was not in her senses, the ghost said in chaste Maithili that she was a captive of a witch who had killed her through her black magic. She was sent by that witch to kill my sister so that her subtle self could be under her servitude forever. But her scheme could not materialize as each evening, whenever she fell into trance, my mother smeared the holy ash on her, and sprinkled on her the holy water of the Ganges. One evening my sister, still in swoon, implored my mother to take her to the temple of Lord Shiva at Baidyanath Dham where, she felt, she would stand freed from the nasty witch's trap. The next morning we set out for Baidyanath Dham. Those days the Ganges at Semariaghat had to be crossed by boarding a small steamer which could often become unsteady in the river. We spent a night on the bank of the Ganges. After the sunset, my sister slipped into a trance. Through her mouth the ghost spoke, "I have cast my spell on her merely to make clear to all that I was going along with her. After this, I shall not trouble her again as I shall be freed from the bondage under which I was bound to serve the witch." The world is mysterious, the universe is mystical, and life is baffling.

The Myna

I have already referred to the mango tree in the courtyard of my house. A lot of birds had made their nests on its branches. Once I climbed the tree to rob a Myna of its young. I brought the little creature down on a patch of soft grass. The sorrowful mother's doleful cry did not move my heart. I can still, at times, hear the plaintive strain of the heart-broken bird. Its pathos was beyond words. I caught grasshoppers after rummaging the nearby green fields for the tiny bird to eat. I spent many hours cajoling the bird to open its beak to gulp small grasshoppers. I fed the bird for a few days. But I could not prevent a disaster, (who can avert cruel Fate when it chooses to strike?). A black cat caught the bird unawares, and vanished. For several days, I wept at its tragedy. We children formed a funeral procession; and I lit its funeral pyre on the bank of a nearby river.

The Creative Plasticity

Those days, our elders had time to enjoy the pranks and the pretty flippant devilry of children. In the eyes of the adults the ultimate role model of every child was Bal Krishna. Childhood is most precious for many reasons; one being that it is not subject to the rigours of discipline which crush humans after that phase. I couldn't believe that the attitudes towards children could differ from a community to community. I felt amazed, when during my visit to India's North-East, I read about the Lepcha children:

“It follows that — save perhaps individually in the immediate post-infancy period—childishness is not considered an excuse either for anti-social behaviour or for stupidity; a child is capable of committing crimes as much as an adult is, and may be punished as severely, though in different ways; and, judged by adult standards, their conversation is stupid and largely meaningless.”³

What has ashamed me over all the years

When I was a child, I witnessed every year a blood-sport at some public place in my village. I was shocked seeing the spectacle, we called *Hurrahuri*. It was celebrated in the month we celebrate the Diwali festival. Now, I hear, this game is not being played, as the animal protectors have succeeded in convincing people to consider it a cruel game. *Hurra* means to strike, to subject a creature to fatal blows. Cows, buffaloes and bullocks were brought into an open field, and were provoked, on the notes of drums, to strike a pig. The legs of the pig were tied to a wooden pole which was carried on the sturdy shoulders of some young men. The hapless and restless beast, the pig, made mad on being fed with *bhang*, was carried to the provoked animals. The animals were goaded and excited to strike at that creature with their horns; the pig could only cry, and cry. It was mercilessly killed. The spectacle was ghoulish to the extreme. Persons assembled there kept on shouting and clapping hysterically while the poor creature was drenched in blood, and wrenched into pieces. It was enormously more cruel than the bull-fighting which people of many western countries enjoyed. Years after, when I read the “Pro and Contra” in Book Five of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, I felt that Hobbes was right in calling the human beings ‘brutish’ See how the novelist describes the cruelty inflicted comfortably, and as a matter of a pastime:

“ Well then, at the turn of this century, there lived a retired general, a man with the highest connections, a big landowner, one of those, you know (although even at the time there were only a few such left), who, upon retiring from the service of their country, feels sure that they have earned the right of life and death over those subjected to them. Yes, there used to be such people then. This general lived on his estate, which had two thousand serfs. He strutted around, feeling immensely important, and bullying his lesser neighbours as if they were hangers on and clowns obliged to amuse him. He had hundreds of hounds and just about as many kennel attendants, all dressed in special livery and every one of them mounted.”

“It so happened that one day an eight year old boy, playing in the courtyard, threw a stone and inadvertently hit the General’s favourite hound in the leg, injuring it. ‘Why is my favourite hound limping?’ the General demanded, and he was informed that the boy had hit it with a stone. ‘So it was you,’ the General said, looking the boy up and down. ‘Lock him up.’ They took the boy away from his mother and locked him up in the guardroom for the whole night. The next day, at dawn, the General rode out to the hunt in full dress, surrounded by his obsequious neighbours, hounds, kennel attendants, huntsmen, everyone of them on horseback. All the serfs of the estate were summoned too, for their edification, and so was the boy’s mother. They brought the boy out of the guardroom. It was a bleak, foggy, raw day – an ideal day for hunting. The General ordered the boy stripped down naked. The boy was shivering. He seemed paralyzed with fear. He didn’t dare utter a sound. ‘Off with him now, chase him!’ ‘Hey, you, run, run!’ a flunkey yelled, and the boy started to run. ‘Sic ’im!’, the General roared. The whole pack was set on the boy and the hounds tore him to pieces before his mother’s eyes.”

[Translated by Andrew R. Mochulsky (Bantam Classic)]

It was a crime on our part to become the onlookers of the ghastly scene of the little beast’s death. Whenever I go back to those moments, I feel shocked how the people gathered there chuckled and cheered at the wails of the dying creature.

When I drew my alphabet

In the fifth year, on the full moon day of Margasirsa, my *Vidyaramabha Samskar* (the Ceremony to commence learning alphabet) was performed by my father. The fifth year of a child had been considered appropriate for this by the sage Vishvamitra. It is said that Sankara had learnt everything worth learning before he reached this age of five. My nimble fingers wrote words in praise of God on a small heap of rice with the sandalwood paste. The curves that my nimble fingers drew gave me the first delight of *akshara* (a letter) which is the attribute of the Supreme God who is Himself *Akshara* (the One who never comes to an end). I began going every day to the village school. While going to the village school after the *Vidyaramabha Samskar*, I carried, as others did, my earthen inkpot with mud-ink, a pen of a twig, and a small wooden plank painted with charcoal. Each student carried a rag to spread on the dung-washed mud-floor of the school to sit

on. Chalk and quill were our writing instruments. On reaching the school, the first act was to assemble under the massive *peepal* tree to pray: ' *Raghupati Raghava Raja Rama* '. After this daily prayer, the students squatted on the mud-floor on the veranda canopied by a leaking thatch over which monkeys hopped the way they wanted. The adjacent massive Banyan trees were the places of their sojourn, and were also the resting places for birds of all sorts. Scribbling in mud ink on black plank had once seemed to me my great achievement. We heard our teachers whilst we listened to the croaking of the frogs in the nearby ponds, the bleating of goats tied in the bamboo poles supporting the roof, and the cacophonous sound made incessantly by a host of tiny insects. After our school hours, I enjoyed picking up the grasshoppers, which I carried home to be used as the feed for my pet birds. But the most fascinating pastime I and my friends had was to gather ripe tamarind which we loved to eat.

The Upanayana (initiation)

In my ninth year, my *Upanayana* (initiation) ceremony was performed. This is the most important of the *Samskars* for the Brahmins. With this I became a *Brahmachari*, a student. This *Samskar* is rich in symbolism and makes one realize that one is on a new assignment in one's life. Its symbolism is rich in suggestions. I started wearing a sacred thread which was spun by a virgin Brahman girl, and it was twisted by a Brahman according to the customary norms which had to be meticulously followed. The three-folds of the cord in the sacred thread represent the three *Gunas* out of which the whole universe is made, and which shape the propensities of persons through the proportionality of these three *gunas* [*sattva* (goodness), *rajas* (passion), and *tamas* (darkness)]. The twists of the thread are made upwards suggesting the triumph of the *sattvaguna* which helps one to evolve into a purer life. The three cords constitute a continuous reminder to the wearer that he has to discharge the Three Debts which he owes to the ancient seers, his ancestors, and gods. These three cords are tied into a knot symbolizing the Holy Trinity of the Hindu pantheon. This sacred thread was believed to transform the very way of one's life. My *Upanayana* ceremony was performed in my village. My father was the *acharya* (the guru, teacher). The one situation during this holy *samskara* had a seminal impact on my mind. It was when I put on the dress of a *sannyasi brahmachari* wearing only a strip made of sacred *munja* (a type of straw). Thus dressed, I begged alms carrying a long thin bamboo staff in my hand. For the first *viksccha* (offering), I went to my mother who put some offerings in the big white pouch made of cloth by tying the ends of cloth together. Thus began a phase in my life we called the period of the *Brahmacharya Ashrama*. It was in this phase that I learnt something of Sanskrit, and read the *Bhagavad-Gita* which became my companion for life.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The expressions under the inverted commas are from Rabindranth Tagore.
2. Galbraith, *A History of Economics*, Pg : 87
3. Geoffrey Goerer in his *The 'Lepchas' of the North East* (**at p. 301**):