

Memoirs of a Journalist *Par Excellence*

Readers of these pages may get the impression that I have run out of ideas and have taken to quoting from books by others. This is partly true. I am afraid that I am beginning to grow senile and much of what goes by way of present-day research is at times beyond my power of understanding. Much of it too appears irrelevant to our present day needs. There is also a sense of frustration that what I write in these pages although appreciated by a few has not made any dents in the minds of those in seats of power. Agricultural drought of the worst type has spread over a greater part of rural India. Instead of providing structures to harvest rain water, the only remedy that suggests to those wielding authority is to sink more and more bore wells into the crust which has been rendered bone dry through bad management. Water levels have descended to depths beyond the reach of economic pumping. Methods of rain water harvesting and recharging groundwater reservoir have not drawn their attention.

In this mood of disillusionment and physical disability that has affected me, the only solace I can get is through reading the works of masters, who have analysed and laid bare the ills pervading the country.

The book that has been engaging my attention for the last two weeks is the autobiography of Madhav Vittal Kamath, a journalist *par excellence* who has covered the events of the past eighty years with rare ability and distinction. Every page of this book is a veritable mine of information. Moreover, his prose is beautiful to read, and ordinary events gain an aura of major significance. Often in the course of reading you come across passages of inspired writing. The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, the publishers are to be congratulated in bringing out a book which gives graphic accounts of our vanishing culture.

M. V. Kamath is a well known journalist having served as a reporter for most of the prestigious papers of India. He is widely travelled person with assignments in cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Bonn, Paris, Geneva, United Nations, New York and Washington D.C. The number of eminent persons he has interviewed is large, including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Ambedkar and a whole lot of politicians who held central stage during the freedom struggle and its aftermath.

Kamath is an admirer of Nehru claiming his autobiography as a classic. It is a pity, according to Kamath, that Nehru found no time till the very end to update it. Kamath pays handsome tribute to C. Subramaniam for restoring to India its self-respect by working at self-sufficiency in food.

The whole book is studded with quotations of great beauty from the Upanishads and the Gita; Browning and Wordsworth and a host of other English poets. Here is one gem by T.S. Elliot:

Where is the life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in infonnation?

It is not possible to provide a summary of the book. Every page is full of interesting anecdotes, all of them worth quoting. I shall however, select a few which seem to give glimpses of events long past reminiscent of the struggle for independence and the age of the Mahatma.

The first event that I have selected relates to *Salt Satyagraha* started by Mahatma Gandhi to drive out the British from India. In order to break the law of the land, Gandhiji had advocated symbolic production of salt. This came to be recognised in history as the *Salt Satyagraha*. This Satyagraha triggered a chain of events all along the west coast of India and the production of a small sample of salt by a bright lecturer from a local college in Udipi led to the following events:.

"..He was holding a packet of salt in his left hand and the Congress flag in his right. The police attempted to halt the procession. But the lecturer kept moving forward. The cops asked him to stop. He wouldn't. They asked him to drop *thirangi jhanda* - the tricolour - but he wouldn't. They then demanded that he drop the packet of salt. He wouldn't obey. At that they started beating him with sticks. It didn't deter him. Infuriated they hit his clenched fists - first the left and then the right. He would neither drop the salt packet nor the flag. Soon both his wrists were a mass of broken bones and bleeding palm and he fell down unconscious. It became the talk of the town. Such was the devotion, commitment and valour that Gandhiji commanded.

To us, boys he became an instant hero. His name was mentioned in awe whenever young people met. It was heroism of the highest order."

The story does not end there but has the following sequel:

"Some time in the nineties I remembered him in some context and mentioned the event in a column I wrote for Mid-Day. I had clean forgotten his name but the memory of that day when he fell down unconscious but still clutching the packet of salt in one hand and the Congress flag in the other was fresh in my memory.

A couple of days later I received a phone call. The voice was that of a man. It was that of the lecturer. He said years had passed and he was deeply touched that after almost sixty years his deed was remembered. Could he come to see me to thank me personally for the courtesy, he said, I had extended to him!

We set a date and time and I was excited at the thought of meeting this man who to me summed up the totality of true patriotism and non-violent struggle. There was a knock at my door. I opened it expecting the man to walk in. But the person stood in front of me was a woman. Apologetically she said that her friend was unable to climb stairs as his knees, too, were broken (this was during the Quit India movement of 1942) and he was waiting down below in a van that had been specially built for him by the government in appreciation of his services. He was, she said, in a wheel chair.

I rushed down to meet my boyhood hero. There he was in his wheel chair unable to move, both his hands and knees in a pathetic condition. "I am sorry I could not come upstairs to see you he said, as if it was his fault, but I had to call on you just to say thanks". If ever I had my eyes full of tears it was that day. Later, I learnt that he was living on a small pension and was being taken care of by friends. That day remains one of my most emotional days in my life."

Gandhiji had in him the spiritual power to turn ordinary men into heroes and martyrs. The above is one such instance.

Gandhiji once recited the verses of Shelly which appears to me as the most appropriate in this context. I quote:

And then if thy tyrants dare,
Let them ride among you there,
Slash and slab, maim and hew,
What they like, let them do.

With folded arms and steady eyes,
And little fear and less surprise,
Look upon them as they slay,
Till their rage has died away.

Then they will turn with shame,
To the place from which they came,
And then the blood shed with speak,
In hot blushes in their cheek.

The second episode which I wish to recount also relates to the Mahatma and his activity connected with the uplift of Harijans. The Mahatma went round the whole of India with a begging bowl seeking help for the downtrodden. The event related here is an incident when a young girl gifted to the Mahatma a pair of gold bangles. Here is the full story as recounted by Kamath:

"... Just then came a little girl in a white frock, the daughter of the local Congress leader, to make her own offering to the Mahatma, a pair of gold bangles. Gandhi accepted them gladly but then noting that the kid was wearing a necklace and earrings also of gold, told her mischievously: I see you wear a necklace. Won't you give that to me?

Somewhat flustered the girl took the chain off her neck and gave it to the old man. Not content, the Mahatma now looked at the earrings she was wearing and said: "I see you have earrings, too. Don't you want to give them to me?"

The dear child had not bargained for this but it was the Mahatma who was asking and she was too bowled over by his very presence to refuse his request. Slowly, in front of the assembled masses, she now took off her earrings and handed them over to her hero.

Gandhi must have noticed the slight hesitation on the part of the girl but now he asked "Tell me, what did your parents say you should give to me? Everything that you were wearing?"

Truthfully, the girl said: "No, I was told to give only my bangles."

"Very well," said the Mahatma, amused all the while, "tell you what. I'll return your necklace and earrings to you. But will you make a promise?"

"Yes" said the girl, nodding her head, her eyes wet.

"You know" said the Mahatma, "this is a poor country where people often have something barely to eat? Will you promise that for the rest of your life you will not wear jewellery to remind you of their lot?"

"I will" said the child, bravely."

And she was to keep up that promise for the rest of her long life, during which she was to become a gynaecologist and distinguished professor at a Medical College in Pondicherry.

I was greatly moved while reading these episodes relating to India's freedom movement, partly because I had lived through that period and shared the feelings that deeply stirred millions of my countrymen. These events that I have related may not arouse the same feelings in the youth of present day. There are however certain moments unaffected by age and I have a feeling that our people will not fail to be impressed by the rare courage shown by ordinary folk in their love and zeal for securing the freedom to the country. Gandhiji was shameless in emptying the pockets of the poor for the benefit of those poorer than they.

The simple prose style of Kamath and his narration will not fail to impress readers. The sacrifices made by thousands of unknown Indians should not be forgotten. I very much wish some of the anecdotes find an entry in the textbooks of school children. Kamath comments "The sacrifices made gave a spiritual quality to the freedom movement as a whole. When freedom came - no matter how - there was a feeling that it was deserved and well fought for. And in the end that is all that matters.

One last episode before I close. This relates to an incident before the death of Kamath's mother.

"... The last to die was my mother, then in her eighties. When I was informed of her illness.... I rushed home taking the first available flight to Udupi.

I reached home as dusk was falling.... When I walked in she was unconscious. I sat by her body, holding her hand and gently rubbing it. There was not a sound in the room.

An hour must have passed when my mother opened her eyes and saw me, her youngest son, sitting by her side.

She said '*Jaavanjalway puthad* (have you eaten my son).

Those were the words she had said scores of time when I was young. They were words of a mother's concern for her son. And now, on her death bed, regaining consciousness for a few minutes all that she could say was "have you eaten".

The Isa Upanishad, the first and greatest Upanishads among the Indian sacred scriptures has this injunction '*Term tyaktena bhunjeethaa*' (through renunciation you enjoy). This is what millions of Indian mothers are doing today. Service to others is their main duty. The satisfaction of her children are her main concern and pleasure. Indian culture has remained alive because of these selfless virtues. Gandhiji once said that if all Hindu scriptures happened all of a sudden to be reduced to ashes and if only the first verse of the Isa Upanishad were left in the memory of the Hindus, Hinduism will live forever. The incident of the last days of Kamath's mother brings back to mind the essence of the teaching of Isa Upanishad.

The journalistic writings of Kamath are of rare excellence. On occasion they can be termed as inspired prose. It is good to have his memoirs in one volume, an extraordinary work educating and illuminating our minds and bringing into prominence the marvellous spiritual power of the Mahatma in turning ordinary men around him into heroes and martyrs.