ALONG THE VILLAGE ROAD

Born into a modest landowning family in the small village of Ratanpura in one corner of Bihar, my life indeed took strange turns. Land was held as joint property and was looked after by my uncles. My father was a teacher and then went on to become the headmaster of a high school. His eldest brother, a Sanskrit teacher, kept shifting from one school to another. But his stature in society far surpassed that job description. It would not give a full account of everything he did. He was basically a social reformer and a freedom fighter determined to end the British rule. Those days, the more ardent freedom fighters, chosen by their group as the leader, or *dictator* (yes, they were called dictators), were entrusted with the responsibility of leading the anti-British movement in particular areas until they were arrested. Before going to jail, a freedom fighter would nominate another activist as the next *dictator*. My uncle was one such *dictator*, who, too, was arrested and put behind the bars by the British for a few months. As far as his social reforms were concerned, he saw the rigid caste system as the bane of India and worked tirelessly to rid society of this evil. He strongly favoured emancipation

of the downtrodden and women. He made it a point to eat in the houses of people belonging to the lower castes, or the 'untouchables' – then called Harijans, as Mahatma Gandhi saw them. It is a different story that 'Harijan' as a term is no longer in use and has been replaced by 'Dalit'. He was totally against the practice of child marriage, worked hard to do away with the custom and was convinced about its deep link to the lowly status of women in society. He tirelessly campaigned for women's education and their economic independence. We saw him engaged in a struggle against the big landlords and other orthodox elements with vested interests who prevented women from going to school and seeking employment. In most cases, he was successful in convincing such people. More interestingly, we found that many such women who had benefitted from his social reforms, went on to be the main breadwinners of their families. My uncle, Mahendra Shastri, helped and enthused his innumerable admirers to set up schools and run them. Many of them, as we later found, were for girls. He taught at a school and after a while made his way to another – his every move meant more schools and libraries coming up.

He was a well-respected man in the area; his commitment to the cause of freedom and education earned him a large number of followers. They admired him because of his deep conviction and looked up to him for his guidance. He was dead set against smoking or any kind of tobacco addiction. He wrote many poems (yes, he was a prolific poet, good at his art) against evil practices like tobacco chewing. No one dared smoke a bidi or chew tobacco if he was around. Such was the respect he commanded. There was a moral halo around him. People in the nearby villages held him in awe. My father, on the other hand, was primarily an educationist. Beginning as a middle-school teacher, he became a university professor, and among

his accomplishments was valuable research in Hindi literature. Though he too had participated in the freedom struggle, he later chose to devote all his time to education. He was a profound and somewhat orthodox scholar.

My other two uncles were in charge of the household, looking after our land and farming activity. Out of the two, the youngest uncle practiced Ayurveda and worked in a sugar factory during the cane crushing season. Ours was a family of zamindars, though revenues from this source did not add significantly to our family income. Introduced by the Mughals, this system continued through the long spell of British rule; it transferred the ownership of land to a handful of influential and rich people who in turn, leased their acres to tenant farmers and collected revenue from them. A part of the revenue was then deposited in the government treasury while the rest remained with the zamindars. This system of zamindari had a very ugly side to it, as some of the landlords indulged in all forms of repression, extortions, sexual exploitation and cruelty. However, we were the respected ones and nobody could point a finger at the conduct of our family. I distinctly remember that during my childhood days rent receipts were handed to the farmers even if they were not in a position to pay because of their dire straits. Sometimes, they would pay only in kind – bringing vegetables or fruit to our door. We were perhaps the first landlords to allow our tenant-farmers to come into our courtyard and sit with us. They were offered wooden planks, an improvement from the previous times when their only choice was to sit on the ground. Our humane gesture was certainly an attempt to soften the rough edges of the old feudal system, and also, perhaps a hint at the dawning of democracy ending the long colonial rule. Much credit for that should go to my revolutionary uncle and to a small extent – me. One reason for this endearment was the

fact that we were known more as educators rather than feudal landlords steeped in orthodoxy.

Men in our family went with the tide and turned to the professions. Instead of clinging to a decaying feudal system, they embraced the change, took part in the struggle for independence, saw education as a vehicle for mobility and took up jobs available in the market. Their jobs, more than money, earned them respectability and an elevated position in village society. By setting their tenants free from feudal bondages they heralded a new era.

My father was the sole earning member of the family. His older brother's salary was too meagre; perhaps being an idealist he accepted only the bare minimum, just enough to sustain himself and pay for his travels. My youngest uncle, employed with a sugar factory, had work only for the few months of the crushing season, so he too did not have much money to spare for the family. As the family grew and spread branches, the agricultural produce was not sufficient and whatever little my father earned was the only solid support for the household.

I grew up under the tight vigil of my eldest uncle who came home often. He expected me and my younger brothers to work hard and all the time. He resented children loafing around and felt that the best way to relax was to switch over from one job to another, not idle away, playing or chatting. We had a little free time in the evening though games were not much encouraged.

At the age of five I was formally initiated into the world of learning with a slate and chalk in my hands. With a little help from my father I managed to write something. Actually, it was

he who wrote by moving my fingers up and down, left to right and right to left. This was only a ritual on an auspicious day in the almanac. But with this ceremony my uncle began to guide me into the realm of letters. He took up the task of giving me lessons in Sanskrit, his main forte, on a daily basis. It was an oral process: he uttered a Sanskrit word, I parroted it, then its past tense, future, plural…

In the village, life stirs early. We started our day at 3 or 4 in the morning, depending on the time my uncle felt that he must get up. He slept fretfully and only for a few hours. For the radical social reformer sleep was never a priority, rather a necessity, not a luxury but the minimum he could not do without.

The small school in our village, run by one of our neighbours, was not recognized by any authority. It neither maintained any records nor had an office or a building; it was purely a private venture. My distant cousin, though barely qualified, was the organizer and sole teacher, and was happy to run the school with whatever the pupils managed to give – a little money or at times some rice or vegetables!

Certainly this was not a great place for learning, but I must gratefully say, that the school where classes were held under a tree or on the verandah of the nearby temple belonging to our family, inculcated in us the habit of school going, writing and doing arithmetic.

My eldest uncle joined a high school about five kilometers from our village. My mother along with six of my brothers and cousins moved there. They lived in the house of the local zamindar who also worked as a postmaster; he was periodically transferred to different places. That man had seven daughters.

All the daughters were born in the hope that a son would not be far behind. And when the male child finally came, we along with the neighbours celebrated for days on end. Women in the village sang and danced to the beats of the dholak. Their happy songs resonated around the courtyard late into the evening. In the middle of all the festivity I wondered if they would greet the arrival of a daughter with similar fanfare.

In our new home the routine continued as before – learning Sanskrit grammar and some couplets even before daybreak, from three in the morning to be precise, for an hour. The duration could be longer depending on the sweet will of our martinet uncle. All of us received almost an equal share of his generous beating as and when we forgot the lessons. There, I must say, my uncle was very fair. He punished all of us rather equitably. One of my cousins was the biggest beneficiary, while my younger brother Anil was the least, as he paid more attention to his lessons and tried to memorize the lessons the maximum. I stood somewhere in the middle!

The family we stayed with was very likeable and caring; we enjoyed our time there. This period, however, did not last long. My uncle soon left the job as was his wont.

The stay there was quite eventful as I, for a short while, became a very smart thief. I knew that my uncle kept whatever small amount he earned with a local bookshop owner. Ram Dhan was a former student of his. I had also noticed that whenever he needed money he would write a little note and send my cousin with the chit to him. My cousin would then take this money for buying vegetables, cooking oil and other staples. I noted the language used in such chits. One evening I forged my uncle's handwriting and sent a slip to Ram Dhan asking him to give two rupees to my cousin. He, as usual, gave

the amount and we had a party of candies and lozenges! After a gap of a fortnight or so, I sent another slip asking for five rupees, which too he sent. I used this money buying cheap pens (for less than half a rupee) from the Maulvi, who was the Urdu teacher in my uncle's school. I bought three-four pens, kept two for myself and gave one each to my younger brother and cousin. With the remaining money we bought the choicest delicacies from the sweetmeat seller and had a gala time.

By now, I had become an ace swindler spiriting away my uncle's money and blowing it up. But my overconfidence finally did me in. In Maharajganj, a small town not very far from our place, a makeshift cinema tent had been pitched. I, being a bit of a show-off, invited a few gutsy girls from the village for going to a movie with me. My purloining tactics remained the same – sending a chit through my cousin to the stationery seller. After the first few successes I was a little reckless this time round, asking for a much bigger amount – ten rupees. This amount was also disbursed. With that money I bought the movie tickets for my new girlfriends. On second thoughts, however, I decided not to accompany them. We were allowed to watch movies on very rare occasions though the theatre belonged to a relative.

Despite my caution, this time round my luck ran out. Surprised by the unusually big withdrawal of ten rupees Ram Dhan mentioned it to my uncle. Mostly indifferent to material things, the idealist teacher was shocked; he recalled he had not sent for this amount. The matter was investigated. Suresh, my cousin, immediately confessed and to save his own skin, did not hold back anything. Within minutes I started receiving the blows and punches. Thinking of the thrashing I still feel the pain in my ribs and joints – a good sixty years later.

As a little boy I was fascinated by the fountain pens which had just come into the market, a novelty in our rural hinterland. A guest came to our house and a while later discovered he had lost his pen. It required no Sherlock Holmes to detect the crime and I had the privilege of being treated to a very special kind of beating. This time round from my mother. Had it been brought to my uncle's notice it would have been much worse. Well, I had a little comfort when I read somewhere a few months later that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister, had stolen his father's pen. I was so elated to learn that there was, at least, something in common between the illustrious man and me!

When my uncle left his job, we had no choice but to go back to our own village and continue with whatever studies we could in our small school with the help of a very good family library that contained books in Hindi, Sanskrit and English. There were quite a few books on history and geography too on the shelves. When I was twelve years old, one afternoon it dawned on me that this kind of desultory reading would not do. One of my father's students from another village, Giri, had been talking for some time about formal and regular schooling. He also told me about the school-leaving examination after Class X known as matriculation, which was the gateway to college. And it was only after graduation that one could think of a good salaried job. The whole economics of education and employment was so well explained that I realized our casual schooling would take us nowhere. I still wonder why my father, himself a college professor, did not tell me to move to Chapra, a small centre for learning, where he was working. A somewhat nervous man not too sure about himself, he perhaps thought that raising the children in Chapra would mean more responsibility for him, ending his carefree existence. My uncle, a very progressive

man, should have known the importance of modern education. Strangely, he insisted on our continuing with Sanskrit learning only. Even now when I look back, I cannot fathom their reluctance to put us on the right course. Did they think that good schools and proper education would mean more expenses and greater responsibility for them?

I was happy that during my childhood itself the zamindari system was totally abolished in Bihar, but the respect for our family and its scions continues even today. This may be because of our education or the important positions we held, but I feel it is more because of the tradition we established and the freedom our tenants and other villagers could enjoy without the burden of paying for it.

Heeding Giri's advice, I wrote to my father in Chapra with a request to let me move over there to start formal education. To my surprise, within a week Giri came to our place carrying his reply. Yes, he wanted me to join him in Chapra. My father was living there in a rented room, and he rented another one for me. To keep me company, or perhaps to share the rent, a senior college student from a village near ours, was also accommodated in the same room.

The day after coming to Chapra, I was admitted to Class X even though I was just twelve years old. There was no age bar those days for admission to schools and colleges; had it been so it would have taken me another three years to reach Class X. I started school enthusiastically, attending classes regularly and had to appear for the final examination within a month, with very little preparation and without knowing much about

what I was studying. However, I cleared the class examinations and was promoted to Class XI, the final year before one could go to college. I tried to put in as much hard work as possible and cleared the final examinations without much problem and secured reasonably good marks. So my entire schooling that should have taken a minimum of eleven years was completed in thirteen months or so. Barely an adolescent boy much junior to my classmates, I became a showpiece of sorts in college. I joined Rajendra College, Chapra, under the hawk-eyes of a disciplinarian father who was teaching there. I trembled in apprehension when he took our classes. Once I suffered terrible humiliation when he asked me to get out of his class, which I promptly did. My offence, according to his account to my mother, was that I was frequently looking at a girl in the class; what made my situation irredeemable was the fact that the girl too had looked at me and more frequently! Perhaps there was a grain of truth in the charges but I did not have a hand in all that. Did I? Pretty girls naturally captivated me and some of them who met me later in life said that they had found me handsome and charming as well. But they never took me seriously as I, in their words, was still a kid among the big boys in college.

I was particularly attracted to three girls in my college days. They were my classmates and one of them continued studying with me till my graduation. She was the one responsible for my ouster from my father's class. I had no courage to speak to the girls even once during the years we studied together. That was how things were those days. One of these girls met me later and our friendship continues even today, though our meetings are getting more and more infrequent. Another girl, who had also made me suffer my father's wrath, met me later, when I was doing my master's at Muzaffarpur, and only then were we

able to speak to each other for a couple of minutes or so.

I met the third girl after my Intermediate examination and we got close for a while. Her parents told me to help her with her lessons. I do not know how they were so sure that a boy of fifteen would be able to teach a girl who was much older, though she was struggling in Class IX. I had a flair for teaching and I rose to the occasion. We had our private moments during the coaching sessions, a few minutes left together alone. She belonged to a respectable family, but they had fallen on bad days, surviving on loans and borrowings from others. Once during a conversation her father told me he was deeply into debts – borrowing from one to pay another in addition to meeting the family expenses. I do not know how long this process continued or if it came to an end at all.

While playing Holi that year, I put some *gulal* on her face as people do to everyone they meet that morning. Next day, she showed me the colour adorning the parting of her hair and said that she had not purposely washed it off. For her it was *maang bhari sindoor,* the mark of a married woman. She claimed that, though unknowingly, we were now married. This thrilled me for a while but later had me worried. In fact, I trembled with fear imagining my father's reaction and things that would happen to me. I, very reluctantly but finding no other way out, told my mother everything. She laughed it away. "All this makes no sense," she allayed my fears.

I never had to face this kind of embarrassment again, but the incident stayed on in my mind. Whenever I met a girl again, I kept telling myself that I should consider the promise of marriage before I let our friendship deepen. I always felt any kind of intimacy should begin with this promise only and

nothing more must happen until marriage. This was the moral milieu in which we were raised. Needless to say, for a long time I was careful to see that meeting a girl meant only a little chat and nothing more than that. While doing my master's at the university, however, I had a serious affair with a girl outside my caste. My father came to know about it; he raised strong objections warning that this inter-caste marriage would ruin the chances of getting suitable boys for the girls in the family; my cousins would always hold me responsible for their misfortune. He complained of heart problems and blamed my misdemeanor for this. Heartbroken and devastated, very, very reluctantly I had to give up the idea of marrying the girl I loved.

I was always very regular in my classes even during my formal school days which, however, lasted a little over a year. This grew into a habit under the watchful eyes of a martinet father in college; I learnt to be punctual and regular, and this sense of discipline stood me in good stead in later life. A sharp memory saved me from unnecessarily slogging for examinations. I did very well in college and even better at university. After clearing my Intermediate examination, I wanted to move to another college, my preference being one of the big ones in Patna, the state capital. But my parents, mainly my father, thought I was too young to be living alone in a hostel in such a big town. He asked me to do my graduation from the same Rajendra College. So I remained stuck in the college where he was teaching and from where I had done my Intermediate. Clearly, he wanted me to remain under his tough guardianship, which was precisely one of my reasons for trying to get out of Chapra and going to Patna. But the overriding consideration was to pursue my Honors course in Political Science or English Literature; I was fascinated by both subjects but they were not

available in Rajendra College. So I had to settle for Honors in Hindi Literature. The college offered Honors courses only in two subjects – Hindi and Economics. Economics, which otherwise had always interested me, was not one of my subjects in the Intermediate, and therefore I could not take it up for Honors. And, I was determined to finish college as an Honors graduate.

Though my marks were equally good in all the subjects, my father wanted me to study Hindi Literature for Honors, with Political Science as an optional subject. English and Hindi were compulsory for everyone. I started college with a lot of interest and enthusiasm. The faculty at Rajendra College was excellent evoking awe and respect in students. Those were the days when bunking classes was unheard of. The Principal, Prof. Manoranjan Prasad Sinha, was a well-read scholar, a highly skilled English teacher too. A poet of considerable merit and a freedom fighter, he had a great sense of humor, his speeches full of wit. But he was a tough and no-nonsense administrator, a stickler for discipline. Nobody, not even senior professors, could take him for granted.

I enjoyed my BA (Honors) course immensely and continued to be a serious, attentive and regular student. Among the subjects, I liked and enjoyed Political Science much more than the others. All the three professors who taught us the subject were knowledgeable and explained the finer points of politics very well. The Head of the Department, Prof. Manoranjan Jha, inspired and encouraged me much more than the others. I did very well in the final examinations. I remember, in one of the Political Science papers (there were three), none of the fifteen questions guessed by our professors figured in the final question paper and almost all my classmates had a tough time

writing the answers. I, however, depended on my memory and started going back to the professors' lectures and recalled most of their sentences. I somehow managed.

I finished college as an Honors graduate at the age of seventeen and a half, and ranked first in the University of Bihar. This was an honour not only for me but also for my college as I was the first student ever to have topped the university in all of its nineteen years of existence. My picture appeared in all the daily newspapers of Bihar and I received many letters of congratulations.

I was naturally very happy but worried too, as I still wanted to do my master's in Political Science and had secured very good marks in the subject. My father, however, insisted that I continue with Hindi Literature. Perhaps he thought that taking up any other subject would be a direct insult to the subject he was teaching – Hindi Literature. He had another point: changing the subject in which I was a university topper, would mean a loss of the sixty rupees that I was getting as scholarship. This was undoubtedly a big amount those days.

Finding no way out, I took my admission in Langat Singh College, Muzaffarpur, Bihar, which was a premier institution. In no time I moved to Muzaffarpur and lodged in a hostel. As a topper I had no problem finding accommodation in the hostel. Not only that, I occupied the best single room and I became the prefect of the hostel. This responsibility meant looking after the students in the hostel, keeping an eye on them to make sure they were regular in classes and did study. I was most unfit to do this job as I was hardly available during the study-hour. I preferred spending my afternoons and evenings with a family known to my eldest uncle. On my way to or from

that house, I never missed visiting a place where some of my father's favourite students from Chapra were lodging; they had found jobs to support themselves.

I was often scolded by my hostel superintendent for being negligent in my duties. A number of times I requested him to relieve me of my responsibilities. He could not oblige me as he said he had no authority to do so, but he never wanted to complain against me to the principal. He was actually very lenient towards me.

We had excellent teachers. I cannot forget some of them, particularly our Head of the Department, Prof. Devendra Nath Sharma, who was undoubtedly the best of them all. He was very fond of me but also scolded me a number of times when he got to know that I hardly studied after college hours. In my daily schedule I had three to four study hours but I was focused and my concentration level high.

I became more attentive to my studies when I moved into the outhouse of the principal's quarters. An eminent scholar of Hindi and Sanskrit, Dr D. B. Shastri had come from Patna. The principal kept me under close watch since he was a good friend of my eldest uncle's. There were four rooms in the outhouse and all were occupied by students known to him through their parents or other relatives. My younger brother also took admission in the same college with English Honors and shared my room. Our studies became focused thereafter as the principal was a strict disciplinarian. It was compulsory for all, including himself, his wife, children, and the students living there, to do some *shramdan* (voluntary labour) in his fairly big compound and after that gather at one place and pray by singing some devotional songs. All this infused a great

sense of discipline in all of us.

The strong sense of discipline exhibited by the principal and my brother Anil deeply influenced me; I began to take studies more seriously. Moreover, in the second year of the masters programme, (it was a two-year course) I woke up to the challenge of holding on to my topper's position. I must be second to none in this course as well, I told myself. So, even without electricity, I made the best of the study hours. Competition was in the air with friends telling me how hard others were studying and wondering if I would be able to retain my place. Meanwhile, we heard that one of our Sanskrit teachers, who was the principal's favourite as well as that of the department head, was thinking of taking the Hindi examination along with us. This was bad news for many. I, however, never bothered about all this. Some friends warned me that it would be a loss of face for me if I did not secure the first position this time around and that it was advisable for me to sit out a year and prepare for the next year by putting in more effort. None of this worked for me.

Examinations came and went. I thought I had done well. Back in Chapra, one day I got a call from the new principal of Rajendra College. A chemistry professor and moreover my father's colleague, he knew me well. When I met him the principal made a surprise offer. "Why don't you start here? After all, this college is your alma mater." I was really surprised since I, yet to get the master's degree, was not technically qualified to teach. He told me how I had brought great honor to the college by standing first in the university. "This is the minimum we can do," he smiled. Perhaps he was sure that I would get a first class. I, being very much interested in teaching, accepted the offer and joined the college as a lecturer on 9 August 1960. Always fascinated by this profession, I began my teaching career

in right earnest by taking Honors classes. Later, of course, I taught junior classes as well. I soon realized that I had become very popular on campus. I could see that many students, even from science and commerce faculties, attended my classes with my permission and dozens of others would wait outside the door, listening to my lecture in pin-drop silence. This gave me a lot of encouragement and confidence.

My results were announced on 20 September – one-and-a-half months after I began teaching – and I was amazed to see that I had again topped the university winning the gold medal one more time.

The college governing body interviewed many candidates and finally selected me along with another batchmate of mine as lecturers.

I must add that I had not taken any salary from the college for the first two months or so until my formal appointment by the governing body.

Feeling mature and confident after my academic success and induction as a college lecturer quite early in life, I was keen on getting married. My father was not averse to the idea as he felt that, left to myself, I would marry a girl who might not be to his liking or of his choice. And I did get married. But more about this later.

Teaching at this college was a very good experience, particularly because I received a lot of affection and support from my principal, senior colleagues, who were mostly my teachers, and above all from the students.

The assignment ended after eleven months or so when the principal of DAV College, Siwan, who vaguely knew about my results and teaching skills, approached my father and asked

him whether I could be relieved and spared for his college. The college was in desperate need of someone having results and experience such as mine. In the absence of a bright, young teacher; they ran the risk of losing their affiliation to the university for offering Honors courses. The principal was also distantly related to us. Since my current position at Rajendra College was against a leave vacancy, my father advised me to consider the offer. I did so and took up the new assignment.

So far, I had been living with my parents at Chapra. Now, I had to look for some accommodation in Siwan and, as suggested by many, I chose a students' hostel. I shared a room with another lecturer. The so-called hostel had hardly any facilities. It simply had a cot in the room and we had to bring in our own bedding and other things of daily use. I had to share the most ordinary food with the students, but that was not much of a problem. What posed a serious problem, however, was using the open fields for toilet purposes. Luckily, the hostel was situated far away from the campus, in one corner of a village. I stayed there for a few months and frequently visited my in-laws in Patna, where my wife was living. On my way, I stopped at Chapra to visit my parents. My frequent trips meant salary deduction for the days I was absent at the college; new in the job I did not get the full salary for many months.

Uncomfortable with the arrangement, I moved into the house of a senior colleague after a few months. He was related to me. They looked after me very well, giving me good food, though I had to stay in the outer room of their modest house. This room served many purposes – my bedroom and their drawing room as well. This arrangement did not last long too and I shifted to a one-bedroom house with another colleague of mine. However, the perennial accommodation problem ended

with my selection for the prestigious Ranchi College, directly managed by the University of Bihar.

Teaching at Siwan was as rewarding and satisfying as at Chapra. Here too I received the same support and affection of my students and, indeed, of everyone who came in contact with me. The earlier picture was repeated all over with students from other classes seeking my permission and taking the empty seats to listen to my lecture. Quite a few would be flocking around in the verandah and listening to me.

My selection in Ranchi College was a big achievement as I had to compete with many, and the process was conducted by the highly respected Bihar Public Service Commission. My teaching method was appreciated by the selectors.

One morning it was raining heavily. I was in two minds about taking a class of the science students. Elementary Hindi was a compulsory course for these students. "Only if I can get a rickshaw or something to get to the college," I told myself resignedly. Normally I would walk down to the college though from my place it was more than a normal walking distance. At last I got a rickshaw and after reaching the class, I was pleasantly surprised to see that the attendance was like any other day. "Isn't the weather bad enough to stay home?" I smiled looking at the students. "I had no choice as I was paid for this," I joked. "Just because it's your lecture, sir!" they shouted in one voice. Nothing could be more rewarding and satisfying for me.

Soon I was joined by my wife and Anil, my younger brother, in Ranchi. Accommodation was not a problem nor did it bother me. We landed at the house of a relative, my mother-in-law's uncle. Though this was an unannounced arrival, I could make

out we were not unwelcome at all. We were given what could have been their drawing room. But theirs was an open house without any need of a separate drawing or sitting room. There was an air of easy informality around the house. We started taking our meals with them and whenever we felt like having something else we would quietly walk to some snacks corner nearby. This outing was particularly necessary if we felt like indulging our taste buds with something unusual – maybe some South Indian food.

After a few weeks of my arrival, I learnt that the chief minister of Bihar, Binodanand Jha, was visiting Ranchi. My father-in-law belonged to his camp of the Indian National Congress, which was the ruling party in the country and also the state of Bihar. I, unlike now, was quite an extrovert those days and lost no time to visit him at the chief minister's residence. It may be mentioned that though the state capital was Patna, the governor and all the ministers and senior officers of Bihar had their homes in Ranchi, which was supposed to be the state's summer capital. All of them used to retreat to Ranchi in summer. Though, the practice was stopped long back, the elegant bungalows would be occupied by them whenever they were in Ranchi, the most important city in the mineral rich south Bihar – mostly in summer.

The chief minister was very happy to see me and asked about my accommodation. I told him about my problem. He immediately asked me to move into his house which was hardly occupied. I, however, preferred to move into a smaller yet nice enough house meant for his secretary. This place was both spacious and comfortable as it gave us the required independence. My earlier host who was a superintending engineer – quite a senior position – asked one of his juniors, a very resourceful assistant

engineer, to help us in settling down.

Meanwhile, I became a great favourite of the Vice-Chancellor of our university whose residence was almost next to ours. Soon I became part of a troika reputedly belonging to his inner circle. Naturally, many of our colleagues were very jealous of our proximity to him and say in the university administration. It may be mentioned that the Ranchi University Vice-Chancellor was a strong man with equally strong likes and dislikes, and we indeed had some say in decision making. We did not do anything to harm anybody but still jealousy could not be helped. It was surprising that the head of my department took a dim view of my closeness to the VC and started disliking me. This was reciprocated by me in an almost equal measure.

I was having a good time in my new spacious house and on campus as well. My differences with the head of my department, though frustrating at times, had a positive impact on me. I started preparing for the civil services examination that could enable me to join the Indian Administrative Service. Meanwhile, my younger brother joined the same college as a lecturer in the department of English and he too became very popular for his teaching abilities. With his arrival and staying with us, my preparations got a new boost as he too started studying with me and, more importantly and interestingly, for me.

The political climate soon changed and Chief Minister Jha had to resign giving way to K. B. Sahay, his archrival, who took up the reins of the state. I felt very uncomfortable as the new chief minister visited Ranchi frequently and the people around him started suggesting I leave the house meant for his staff's use. Early one morning – around 5.30 am – I visited the new chief minister who had already taken a bath and was busy meeting

the visitors. Looking fresh and sprightly, he was talking to an industrialist when I reached the visitors' room. He immediately called me in. I entered and politely asked him if I should vacate the house for the use of his staff. He scolded me: "You fool, you think now that Binoda has gone and your father-in-law is in his camp, you would be asked to move out of the house? *Bewaqoof*, go and live there happily without any such thoughts. And yes, wake up early. Many times, when I go for a walk around 4.30 am, I find your door still closed. And yes, next time I am here, I will come home for a meal with you." With this, he drew up a menu of his preferred dishes. I continued living in the house happily. It so happened that the chief minister could never have a meal at our place as I permanently moved out of Ranchi.

A new chapter in my life began.