

Memoirs of a Maverick



Memoirs of a Maverick

The First Fifty Years (1941–1991)

Mani Shankar Aiyar

 juggernaut

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
1. The First Twenty Years: 1941–1961	1
2. Cambridge: 1961–1963	44
3. Towards a Life in Diplomacy	74
4. Sprouting in Brussels: 1964–1968	92
5. At War in Vietnam Hanoi: 1968 (November)–1969 (July)	110
6. Headquarters: 1969–1973	129
7. Brussels Redux: 1973–1976	150
8. Baghdad: 1976–1978	164
9. ‘This Is an Enemy Country, Right?’ Karachi, Pakistan: 1978 (December)–1982 (January)	179
10. A Delhi Interregnum: 1982–1985	235
11. My Years with Rajiv Gandhi: 1985–1991	261
12. The Transition from PMO to CPO	318
<i>Index</i>	363
<i>A Note on the Author</i>	379



Preface

The origins of these memoirs lie in a suggestion made by Chiki Sarkar, founder and publisher of Juggernaut Books, in November 2015 at a reception-banquet on the lawns of my residence when she took me by surprise by saying I really should write up the story of my life. Sonia Gandhi, who was the chief guest at the banquet, backed the idea – largely, I think, because she had no further plans for me in politics. For my part, not having achieved anything spectacular, I could not immediately envision why anyone should be interested in a record of my undistinguished years. But Chiki and her commissioning editor at the time, Nandini Mehta, persisted until their enthusiasm began infecting me. To them, therefore, goes the credit or debit for inspiring this two-volume exercise in reminiscences and the companion volume on Rajiv Gandhi's premiership and after.

While writing it, two songs of my youth have kept buzzing in my head: 'Those Were the Days' and 'My Way'. The first, sung by Mary Hopkin, produced by the Beatle Sir Paul McCartney in 1968, when I was twenty-seven, has remained in my heart since as a kind of summing up of my dreams for myself:

Those were the days my friend,
We thought they'd never end,
We'd sing and dance forever and a day,
We'd live the life we choose,
We'd fight and never lose,
For we were young and sure to have our way.

Preface

And its closing lines:

Oh, my friend, we're older but no wiser
For in our hearts, the dreams are still the same.

The lyric is an English version by Gene Raskin of a Russian romance, 'Dorog Dlinnojou', composed by Boris Fomin with words by Konstantin Podrevsky. The lines seem to sum up the running theme of my eighty-two years.

And as Frank Sinatra sang to lyrics composed by Paul Anka and others:

I've lived a life that's full,
I travelled each and every highway,
And more, much more,
I did it my way.

Yes, I did it my way. Hence the title *Memoirs of a Maverick*. A maverick is defined by most dictionaries as 'an unconventional thinker, independent-minded, one who blazes their own trail' . . . something of a lone wolf, eccentric in their own way.

The inordinate length of this trilogy is the result of N. Venkatraman having joined my staff in 1992 and, over the next three decades, having assiduously archived every scrap of paper relating to me and my doings, then producing them before me in endless succession as I wrote till I lost all control over the length of these memoirs. His fidelity has substantially augmented my recall. To him and to Chandran Pottanatt, my wife's principal assistant, who helped Venkat with the archiving, as well as to Manish Bhatt, the other faithful member of my staff, go my deep gratitude for providing me the raw material for this journey of eight decades.

During a seven-year hiatus when Venkat went off to work with a Congress minister (2009–16), Gulshan Lal Bali filled in to begin with, and then Vandana Seth served a six-year stint during which she contributed original research, kept the archives up to date and taught me uses of the laptop of which earlier I had no inkling. After Chiki proposed this autobiography, Vandana urged me to start writing instead of moping around at the fading away of my political days. To her too, grateful thanks. I also gratefully acknowledge the contribution of a very bright young man from Jammu and Kashmir (and a

Preface

Dosco to boot!), Naushad Qayyum Khan, who interned with me, 2015–16, and has since acted as an intelligent sounding board for much of my thoughts and is an impressive source of information on his home state. He has grown into one of my closest companions.

Many friends of long acquaintance have helped out along the way: Chandrashekhar Dasgupta, alas no more, my college friend and IFS colleague whose engaging wit, usually at my expense, lights up many an episode and provides the scaffolding of my intellectual development (a *guru dakshina* he totally rejected as his views had grown in a radically different direction to mine); Talmiz Ahmed, who joined me in Baghdad in 1977 and for forty years has remained true to his salt, backing me to the hilt, fighting my battles, assisting in every way, especially with the brilliance of his intellect, his treasure trove of knowledge and fetching good humour; Sati Lambah, with whom I worked in Pakistan and whose contribution on the backchannel to resolving issues related to Kashmir will continue to outlive him; Ronen Sen, Rajiv Gandhi's favourite foreign policy aide, whose remembrances often run contradictory to my own; V. George, private secretary to both Rajiv and Sonia Gandhi, who retrieved some documents and refreshed my mind on several key dates and sequences by looking up his diaries for the Rajiv period; Wajahat Habibullah, an old school friend, whose book on Rajiv Gandhi preceded mine; to my nephew, Vidya Shankar Aiyar, an authority on nuclear disarmament and a never-failing source of encouragement; to the Parliament House Library for their well-indexed store of newspapers and other journals and their ever-helpful staff; to Raminder Singh who has gone out of his way to look up records of the Union debates in the Cambridge University library; and to Sunil Binjola, director (operations) in the South Asia Foundation-India that I chair for having taken time off to prepare this work's website of footnotes and endnotes. The reader is invited to read the footnotes to find what has otherwise had to be left out to keep the length of the book within reasonable limits. Vir Sanghvi deserves special mention for his solidarity through thick and thin all these years (and the numerous five-star gourmet meals to which he has generously hosted me).

Two senior associates who have been unstinting in encouraging me along are former external affairs minister K. Natwar Singh and former foreign secretary Maharajakrishna Rasgotra. To them my respectful thanks. In the

Preface

same category would fall former Jammu and Kashmir governor N.N. Vohra. Other friends who have jogged my memory include former defence secretary and defence minister of Pakistan Salim Abbas Jilani; former Pakistan high commissioners to India, Humayun Khan and Ashraf Qazi Jehangir; former minister, prolific writer and 'foeman worthy of my steel', Javed Jabbar; and my friends Zia Khaleeli and Sameera Naved in Pakistan. I also acknowledge the encouragement and memory-pushing I have received in writing these lines from my Cambridge friends, J. Krishan Kumar, Tim Lankester, Rahul Khushwant Singh, Ajit Singh and former chancellor of the exchequer, Norman Lord Lamont of Lerwick. A special mention is warranted of my Trinity Hall colleague, Khurshid Kasuri, who became for five eventful years (2003–08) Pakistan's foreign minister, undoubtedly the best India has ever had. I have also greatly benefitted from a telephone conversation with Air Vice Marshal (retd) Arjun Subramanian.

I wish to particularly thank Chiki Sarkar and her amazing team – Devangshu Datta, Devangana Ojha, Yashika Dudeja, Rimli Borooah and Arani Sinha, who toiled endlessly over the overlong manuscript to make it more readable. I admire their punctiliousness and persistence.

No work of this magnitude can be undertaken without support from the family. Suneet has consistently displayed the truth of the slogan emblazoned on one of my T-shirts: 'Daddy Knows a Lot, but Mommy Knows Everything'. She has maintained my emotional equilibrium for half a century by gently pulling me up when I despair and gently pulling me down when I float on air. No one has been more persuasive in getting me to get on with the job of writing this book instead of finding arguments not to do so.

My daughters – Suranya, Yamini, Sana – have been founts of inspiration and moral support in everything I have undertaken, including this book. Their individual and collective wisdom far exceeds mine. It is to them I owe a lot of course correction as I churned out these 4,00,000 words.

To their husbands, my sons-in-law – Uday Walia, Adarsh Kumar and Vipin Narang – I have turned for enlightenment on specific points. Adarsh is principally responsible for repeatedly coming to my rescue when this manuscript hit the rocks of my computer ignorance. To all of them, I give thanks.

Preface

I also give thanks to my six grandchildren – Uma and Kabir; Rukmini and Raghu; Ishaan and Leela (aged fourteen to six) – who, I hope, will read and absorb this story of their grandfather and carry it to future generations of the family.

I must also mention my brother Jam (Swaminathan Aiyar), the renowned journalist, and my sister Tara, for their contribution to getting the first few chapters of these reminiscences right when we were being brought up together by a mother (Amma) who left an indelible impression on us. My cousin Kartik Pashupati deserves thanks for finding a number of family photographs.

And where in all this do I fit in the Covid-19 pandemic? Somewhere – for, after all, if there had not been these prolonged lockdowns, this book would perhaps not have seen the light of day.

Finally, I give thanks to Nayantara Sahgal, the novelist and political commentator, a favourite niece of her ‘Mamu’, Jawaharlal Nehru. She has dedicated a book she has written on Nehru’s foreign policy to me for ‘speaking the same language’ as that great man. I have never received a more flattering compliment. So, reciprocally, I dedicate this work to her.

Mani Shankar Aiyar
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A note on the QR codes

1. For each chapter a QR code is given that may be scanned to access detailed footnotes and endnotes.
2. Scan this QR code to know more about some of the book's featured photographs.



The First Twenty Years

1941–1961

My birth certificate

When Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf visited Delhi in 2003, he enquired whether he might be provided with his birth certificate. The municipal authorities failed to retrieve the record while he was in town and it was only months later that the certificate was sent to him. So, when I arrived at my birthplace, Lahore, in July 2008, I couldn't help getting into a little mischief. I was there as the minister for Panchayati Raj, at the head of a fifty-five-member delegation to attend an India–Pakistan conference on local self-government hosted by the Pakistani minister concerned, Daniyal Aziz.

In response to the boasting of the mayor of Lahore, Mian Amer Mahmood of the Jama'at-e-Islami, that they had digitized all their records, I enquired if they could retrieve their birth records for 1941. 'Yes, sir,' came the reply. I then asked if they had the records for April 1941. With just a hint of hesitation they answered that, of course, they had the records for April 1941.

'In that case,' I went on, 'would you have the records for the 10th of April 1941?' Intrigued, they replied they were sure those would be available, but why did I want to know? Because, I answered, that was the day I was born here in this city and I would like to test if they could get my birth record quicker than Delhi had been able to find President Musharraf's.

Next morning there was a suppressed air of excitement when I went down

to the conference. I found a large envelope staring at me when I sat at my designated place. I cautiously opened it and found a duly certified photocopy of my birth record, retrieved literally overnight by the Lahore Municipal Corporation. I joined enthusiastically in the applause at this telling proof of the Lahore corporation authorities outclassing their Delhi counterparts.

There was one detail, though, that puzzled me. I was recorded as having been born on the 9th, not the 10th, of April 1941. It then struck me that my mother had often told me that my time of birth was 12.24 a.m., just after midnight. So, while she had been admitted to the hospital in labour on the 9th, she wanted me to know that my date of birth was actually the next day. Astrologers may please note. They may also note that during World War II, clocks had been moved half an hour ahead. So, I may actually have been born on the 9th, not the 10th, in terms of today's Indian Standard Time – and definitely on the 9th in terms of today's Pakistan Standard Time.

This confusion over my time of birth would appear to have confused my stars as well, which perhaps accounts for the ups and downs of my maverick life!

Mention of World War II brings me straight to the cause of my conception. It is a longish tale.

Amma

My mother – Amma, as I called her, and Bhagyalakshmi or Bhagyam, as the world knew her – was orphaned at the age of eight. Her mother died in 1917 giving birth to her fourth child. Her father remarried for the strictly utilitarian purpose of having someone to look after the children, and then himself died the following year, within months of his second marriage, in the infamous global influenza epidemic of 1918.

Tragedy had already struck the family earlier. The eighteen-year-old husband of his eldest daughter, Alankaram (who was then thirteen), died within six months of her marriage. Knowing well the dreadful fate of child widows in rural Tamil Nadu, my grandfather, who was far more enlightened than most men of his time, had her admitted to a school for child widows in Madras (now Chennai). This was run by a remarkable woman, Sister Subbalakshmi, who was herself a child widow.

For several months – perhaps more than a year after she was orphaned

– Amma and her two little brothers were farmed out to various members of the extended family who treated them little better than domestic servants. I think all of us – her children – were traumatized by Amma’s description of being savagely struck on the head by an irate relative-employer with an iron ladle that split her crown. She had to walk miles every day to reach the doctor who treated her wound. The scar remained starkly visible, and as children, we would be consumed by a ghoulish desire to see it, even as we dissolved in tears upon listening to the sorry story, no matter how many times we heard it.

Deliverance appeared in the shape of an angel, Sister Subbalakshmi herself. She had learnt from Alankaram about her younger sister and the two almost-infant brothers. My sister tells me Amma was about to be married off to a fifty-year-old man, but Amma herself never told me this, though I knew there was a lot of ‘women’s only’ talk between mother and daughter from which male children were excluded.

Sister Subbalakshmi arrived in Shulamangalam village (which is in Thanjavur district, in my former constituency), quite literally kidnapped the frightened ten-year-old and marched her off to the nearby Pashupathikoil railway station. The suddenly deprived relatives turned up in full force at the station to snatch back their ward and unpaid servant. Amma told us how she cried when the lady of the house threatened to jump in front of the engine if the child were not restored to her, but Sister Subbalakshmi held her firmly by the arm and told her not to be bullied by empty threats. The train lurched and started. The relative wisely desisted from suicide.

Next day, Amma found herself a scholarship student at Sister Subbalakshmi’s home for child widows. The scholarship was Rs 5 a month and generously provided by a ‘rani of Andhra’, though Amma never discovered her royal benefactor’s actual name. When, subsequently, the ‘rani’ died, the Ramakrishna Mission took up the financial responsibility, and that is how Amma came to live in the Ice House on the Madras Marina, where the Vivekananda Foundation is now headquartered. Amma’s only regret was that when all the other children went home for their holidays, she was left all alone in the hostel.

It was at school, I think, that a lifelong rivalry started between my mother and Alankaram *periamma* (Tamil for ‘elder mother’). That sibling rivalry embittered Amma’s life, though the two sisters remained close despite differences.

Amma turned out to be a competent but not brilliant student (in contrast to her elder sister who did not know what 'second position' was). She steadily passed her exams and made it to the prestigious Queen Mary's College to read for a BSc degree in chemistry. Having got her degree, she joined the Madras Education Service and was posted to Visakhapatnam. The officials who had come to the railway station to receive her were quite bewildered to find themselves landed with a single woman aged twenty and still unmarried. Where could they put her up? Someone suggested the vice chancellor of Andhra University be approached as he had a huge house with most of the rooms unoccupied. The vice chancellor agreed to take in Amma. He was none other than Dr S. Radhakrishnan who, decades later, as president of India, was to prove a fundamental turning point in my effort to make a career in diplomacy.

In the meantime, Alankaram *periamma* shone as the brightest star of her class at Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi. In consequence, she won a full set of Shakespeare's plays that now has pride of place on my library shelves. That led to her securing a scholarship to go to England to obtain her MRCOG (Member of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists) degree.

Amma goes to England

Amma, still unmarried at close to thirty, determined that she too must get to England, and get herself a teacher's training degree (she had only an LT – Licentiate of Teaching – by way of teaching qualifications). But from where was she to get the money? She herself had next to nothing. Her distinguished sister was disinclined to help. But Alankaram had assisted at the birth of the first son of a renowned customs officer, A. Sattanathan, who generously loaned Amma the money to travel to England.

Amma quit her teaching job and took a Lloyd Triestino liner to an Italian port (probably Brindisi) from where she was to proceed by an overland train to London. She sailed from Bombay (now Mumbai) in the last week of August 1939. When the ship docked at Suez, the passengers learnt that World War II had broken out. As their destination was Italy, and Italy was an Axis power, passengers were in a panic as to whether, as British Indian subjects, they should risk disembarkation at an Italian port and find

themselves interned for the duration of the war, or just get off the ship at Port Said the next day.

Amma spotted the renowned Gujarati industrialist Ambalal Sarabhai among the first-class passengers. She decided that if he stayed on board at Port Said, she would continue the journey, but that if he got off, so would she. In the event, Ambalal Sarabhai got off and Amma followed suit. After some days of waiting in Port Said, Lloyd Triestino took her to Massawa, a small, flea-bitten port in what is now Eritrea, which was then under Italian colonial occupation. (My brother, Swaminathan, has been there on a World Bank mission, and I ardently wish to visit when I can.)

Amma hung around Massawa for several anxious days until another liner picked her up and sailed to Colombo. From Colombo, she took a train to Madras. But on the way, her trunk was stolen, and the only worldly possession she was left with was the sari she was wearing. She was back at her starting point within less than a month of her departure, with no foreign teaching degree, no job, no possessions, no prospects and a huge debt to pay off.

At this moment of ultimate wretchedness, she was left with no option but to accept her sister Alankaram's invitation to go to Delhi and try to pick up the tattered threads of her life. It took a little persuasion by her sister but Amma reluctantly agreed to catch the Grand Trunk Express. Alankaram then wrote to say that a friend of hers would meet Amma at the first of Agra's two stations – Raja ki Mandi and Cantonment – and that if she wished, she could visit the Taj Mahal with him. Amma was somewhat aghast at this daring suggestion but when the 'friend' turned out to be thin, bespectacled and less than an inch taller than her own five feet one, she decided to risk it.

All went well until they reached the fort where Shahjahan had been imprisoned by his son, Aurangzeb. Aurangzeb had attempted to compensate for this incarceration by providing his father with a small mirror through which Shahjahan could see a reflection of his beloved wife's tomb. It was obligatory for tourists to take a peek at the legendary mirror. The trouble was that both Amma and the 'friend' were too short to raise themselves to the required height. So, when he offered to lift Amma up by the waist for a look-see, my mother was horrified at his insolence. She never told me, however, whether she eventually accepted the offer. At any rate, they were married a few months later – and thus, I owe my birth to Adolf Hitler. For had he not

invaded Poland, I would never have been. Was it worth taking humanity to the slaughterhouse just so I could be born?

My parents' wedding was both unusual and a disaster. It was unusual because it was held in the bridegroom's house, not the bride's, for my poor mother had neither home nor family to 'give her away'. It was a disaster, because they had hardly entered the nuptial chamber when my father announced that he had really wanted to marry my mother's sister. It was a blow from which the marriage never recovered. Nevertheless, four children followed in quick succession: me; my brother Swaminathan on 12 October 1942; my sister Tara on 29 February 1944 (Leap Year's Day); and my youngest brother, Mukundan, on 19 September 1945.

Following the traditions and customs of the day, I was given a name that combined the names of my paternal and maternal grandfathers – Venkataraman and Subramanian – into Venkatasubramanian. Horrified at the baby being burdened with such an unwieldy name, Alankaram *periamma* insisted on a nickname: either Ravi (the rising sun) or Ajit (the unvanquishable). Amma modestly chose the latter. So, I am now easily able to identify those who call me Ajit as close family or people who have known me since infancy. Later, when I was around eight, I imitated Napoleon and crowned myself 'Mani', the usual diminutive of Subramanian, which is the name by which all but my immediate family know me.

Similarly, my brother, known to the world as famed journalist Swaminathan Anklesaria Aiyar, is 'Jam' within the family. As an infant, he not only had a large head and outsize ears, but when he was learning to crawl, would also push along objects that came in his way instead of going round them. Thus, he initially came to be nicknamed 'Jumbo the Elephant' that, over time, got shortened to 'Jam'.

It was this salutary experiment with long Tamil names that led to my sister being simply called Tara (requiring no diminutive) and my youngest brother 'Mukundan', sometimes abbreviated to 'Mukund' or, on northern tongues, 'Mukand'.

Life in Lahore

How did this Tambrahm family come to be living in Lahore? The story has its roots in the political turbulence of Tamil Nadu in the 1920s. My father

was the third son. He stood to inherit at most a tiny share of the ancestral lands. Appa too had shed his given name – Pattabhiraman – and switched to the much simpler ‘Sankar’. He decided to get himself a profession. So he graduated in physics in 1927 at the age of twenty from Pachaiyappa’s College, Madras, the first in his family to get a degree.

One of Appa’s college contemporaries was C.N. Annadurai, who went on to found the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1948. Annadurai became the first Dravidian chief minister of the state in 1967, and remains revered evermore by the people of Tamil Nadu as ‘*Anna*’ (elder brother). Annadurai was one of the social reformers instrumental in ending the Brahmin domination of Tamil Nadu (then the Madras Presidency). Until the mid-1920s, Brahmin domination in the civil services, education, the judiciary and the Bar, and other avenues of government employment had been absolute. Notwithstanding their minuscule 3 per cent share in the Tamil population, Brahmins secured fifteen out of sixteen places in the Indian Civil Service (ICS) between 1892 and 1904; held twenty-one of the twenty-seven engineering positions selected through competitive examinations; constituted 67 per cent of those receiving baccalaureate degrees from Madras University; and overwhelmingly dominated the legal fraternity, the judiciary, academia and journalism.¹

The political movement of the Justice Party and the far more effective ‘Self-Respect Movement’ of the great ‘Thanthai Periyar’ (E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker) meant that, upon graduation, my father found that, as a Brahmin, few or no job opportunities were available. Thus his fond ambition of becoming a clerk in the railways was stymied. Infuriated, he took a train that would take him as far as he could get from Madras. (Perhaps if he had been born later, I would have been a Canadian!) He got off at far-distant Lahore where another Aiyar, P.N.S. Aiyar, had preceded him nine years earlier and set up a firm of chartered accountants and income tax advisers in 1918.

Appa was appointed an articled clerk at Aiyar & Co. and took no time at all to become a living legend in his profession. Such was his reputation that it used to be said – quite apocryphally, I think – that he could recite any

¹ S. Narayan, *Dravidian Years*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2018, pp. 2–3. For more details, scan the QR code on p. 43.

clause of the Income Tax Act backward to the astonishment of any income tax officer challenging him!

His clients were from all over Pakistan, ranging from Peshawar to Karachi, the most prominent being the Dalmia family that owned the biggest cement factory in the region. Appa loathed Ramakrishna Dalmia, the much-married rake, as much as he adored his younger brother, the pious Jaidayal Dalmia. The cement factory was so renowned that when I was posted to Karachi half a century later in 1978, one of the well-known bus stops was still called the Dalmia Cement bus stop, though the company had been nationalized and its name changed after the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war.

Appa specialized in the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal and won many a forensic battle for his clients. While his professional life flourished, his late marriage (he was thirty-three when he married) was fizzling out. Amma found almost any excuse to spend as little time with her husband as possible. Therefore, since Alankaram had been transferred from Lahore to Akola, in what was then called the Central Provinces & Berar, Amma went to her elder sister's for support during childbirth. Thus, while, I was born in Lahore, Swaminathan (Jam) and Tara were both born in Akola. Our stays in Lahore were intermittent. Simla (now Shimla) was where the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal would sit in the summer, giving my mother another opportunity to get away from her husband on the pretext of keeping house for him on his frequent forays to Simla on work.

In consequence, I have hardly any personal memories of Lahore. I had a favourite toy leopard that I seem to remember, though that is probably only from a photograph shown to me often (and included in the photo section of this book). I am told I loved the sobriquet by which I was known – ‘Sher Khan’. When I got married, I learnt that at least one branch of my wife's family had also lived in Lahore's Laxmi Mansions, our home in the city. So, I may have caught my first glimpse of my brother-in-law-to-be, Tejbir Singh, from my pram. I have since been often to 44, Laxmi Mansions (as it is still called), and it is so familiar that I can easily imagine what it must have been like to be nurtured there.

Alas, I think I have now (in May 2018) made my last visit. Number 44 is still standing. Dr Malik, who owns it – and has always been a most gracious host – runs a clinic there. Nevertheless, I am almost certain that Mammon will,

sooner than later, lay a finger on the building, as he has to the two other wings, and I will not be seeing it again. However, the image of my first home is now so firmly implanted in my mind and photographs that I can always recall it.

To return to the chronology, after having three children in the north, my mother announced that she must have at least one child in the south and moved with all the children to Madras, where Mukund was born. Having dallied in the south for several months, she took us off to Simla for the summer of 1946. Family lore has it that I insisted on seeing the winter snow and so this provided her an excuse to stay on in Simla. Winter turned to summer; we continued staying in Simla. Thus it came about that when, in mid-August 1947, the country was partitioned, my father found himself in Pakistan while the rest of the family was in India!

My mother told me years later that my father was considering taking Pakistani citizenship because much of his clientele was in West Pakistan. If, even after conjuring Pakistan into existence, Jinnah intended to spend six months of the year in his palatial Bombay residence, my father was not far behind in thinking, like so many of his fellow Lahoris, that Partition was a temporary inconvenience that would quickly resolve itself with everyone returning to their homes and resuming their age-old harmony.

My father's grocer of twenty years standing had his stall on Beedon Road running on one side of Laxmi Mansions. He told my father that what was happening in Lahore was *junoona* (a madness) that would soon pass. He, therefore, advised my father to place a big padlock on his front door and he, the grocer, would tell anyone who asked that 'Sankar sahib has gone away to Hindusthan'. He also offered to come to the rear door of the ground-floor apartment on the other side of the *aangan* (courtyard) and knock at around three in the morning with the day's supplies – and my father could pay later when normalcy was restored.

The grocer, like Jinnah and everyone else, had failed to reckon with the consequences of the Radcliffe Award, published on 17 August 1947, allotting Lahore to Pakistan though the city (if not the district) had a slight plurality of non-Muslims. Instantly, widespread anti-Hindu and anti-Sikh rioting broke out, resulting in a pogrom and genocide that denuded the city of virtually all its non-Muslim residents.

On that dreadful night of 17–18 August, when my father opened the

courtyard door, the grocer pulled a knife on him. Appa hastily banged the door closed. I have always wondered whether the grocer did indeed mean to plunge the knife into Appa, or whether he was merely flashing the blade to prove his patriotism to whoever had spotted his midnight visits.

The next day, Appa called the Dalmias to send over a truck in which he packed what he could and set off on the half-hour journey to the Wagah–Attari border. This was perhaps the worst day of Partition fever. I deeply regret never having asked my father how he survived where thousands perished. But survive he did.

My father took refuge in his younger brother's flat on Delhi's Panchkuian Road. Later he told me the tale of how he had witnessed a thirteen-year-old Muslim boy begging for his life on Panchkuian Road, pleading, 'I'll say Ram, I'll say Krishna, but please spare me'; the butchers ruthlessly slashed his throat and left him dying on the pavement outside Appa's brother's flat. Partition was a nightmare that haunted Appa the rest of his life. In many ways, it is also the nightmare that has haunted my life and my politics.

Simla at Partition

Meanwhile, in Simla, where we were safe, I have the most vivid memory of a Sikh *jatha* (group) knocking on the door of our first-floor apartment at Three Bridges in Jacko (Jakhu) Hills. It must have been at around seven in the evening as there was a strict rule that I had to be in bed and asleep by 8 p.m. My mother opened the door, and half a dozen fierce-looking Sikhs strode into the hall demanding to know where the Muslims were. Amma said they had gone away to Pakistan. I, on the other hand, knew they were very much in the building – a whole family ranging from an aged grandmother to an infant child. One of them, a boy my age, was my favourite playmate.

I was about to say they were on the ground floor when a look in Amma's eyes that I had never seen before warned me to keep my mouth shut. I didn't speak. The Sikhs wandered around, smashed the outhouse and finally left. Next day, a body knifed to death was discovered on the hillside.

This memory – which has haunted me ever since – is remarkably close to the climax of Bapsi Sidhwa's searing novel, *Ice Candy Man* (though mine has a happier ending). It was many years later that I saw Deepa Mehta's deeply

moving film, 1947, based on the novel. There must have been hundreds of such incidents at the time – all underscoring the madness that gripped a subcontinent riven by communal hatred. Never, never, ever again.

I think the trauma of Partition aggravated Appa's long-festering ulcers. He had to be rushed to Madras for an operation and the whole family moved south for several months. I even had a brief spell in a Madras school before returning to Delhi at the end of 1947.

In Delhi, my brother, all of five, and I, just under seven, were taken to see Gandhiji at Birla House. My aunt, Dr Alankaram, was a close friend of Dr Sushila Nayyar, Mahatma Gandhi's personal physician. They had been students together at Lady Hardinge Medical College. The story goes that Mahatma Gandhi took the two of us in his arms and declared, '*Yeh mere aankhon ke chand aur suraj hain.*' (These are the moon and sun of my eyes.) I do not know if this is true. It sounds so good as to perhaps be apocryphal. But I was told the tale so often that perhaps this actually happened, and we have both grown with the Mahatma's blessings. Anyway, this is a bit of family lore to treasure.

What I am absolutely sure of is that on the evening of 30 January 1948, my brother and I were being walked by the family domestic help towards Birla House when we heard Gandhiji had been assassinated. The boy rushed us back home. There we found Amma bathed in tears, her hair all dishevelled, a picture of misery.

Appa goes abroad

Soon after the Mahatma's passing, my father embarked on his first journey abroad, spending three months in the UK and the US. He brought back a fascinating technological innovation – a 16-mm projector – along with a Laurel and Hardy film and a documentary on the building of the Boulder Dam in Colorado. This fascinated Jam and me. We must have seen 'Boulder Dam' at least a dozen times – we had no other reels to project.

On my father's return, he set about trying to find accommodation in a Delhi overflowing with refugees. There was just about nowhere to live – except with Members of the Constituent Assembly who were only occasional occupants of their government-allotted flats. Appa inveigled a Madras member,

O.V. Alagesan, to let us have a room in his apartment at 16-E, Ferozeshah Road – one room for six of us: father, mother and four children.

After a gap of nearly four years, my father was reunited with his family. But my mother saw that studies were impossible in this one-room set-up. Her attempts to put us into Modern School on Barakhamba Road backfired when we were sent for an admission test and the teacher got angry with us. My doting father declared he was not going to put us in a school where the teachers scolded his darling children. So we were left free to run around all day, play cricket and generally amuse ourselves, leavened by Sanskrit rituals taught us by Srinivasan, a young man who was articled to my father's company and later married my first cousin, Vishali. Their son, Venkataraman (Raja) now heads V. Sankar Aiyar & Co. from its Mumbai headquarters.

Amma watched all this with dismay. While she thought the priority was to get us into boarding school, my father wouldn't hear of it as he did not want to be separated from his boys. Amma had a college friend who had married the head of the Forest Research Institute (FRI) in Dehradun. Their son was among the most distinguished boys at the Doon School. So when my father flew out to Bombay on work, she literally kidnapped us and caught a bus to Dehradun.

It poured buckets of rain that day. The bus was a rattletrap that frequently broke down, and we smashed into a bullock cart. We got to Dehradun very late, very tired and terribly hungry. Finally, arriving bedraggled at FRI, we were helped out of our dripping clothes, fed and put to bed. Next day, bright and early, we were driven to school – and left to fend for ourselves.

Welham: 1949–1952

I was about ten days short of my eighth birthday and Jam was a few months over six. (Mukund, who joined us the following year, was not even five!) I found myself in Ambala House and Jam was accommodated in Bethany.

We were marched off separately to lunch. I was seated next to a boy with a topknot who asked me whether I played marbles. I confessed I did not. He offered to teach me. Beside myself with gratitude at having found a friend so quickly, I readily agreed.

After lunch, we repaired to the end of the garden that spread out before the

dining room and went to the far end where Nater Prakash Singh scooped out a small hollow in the ground and asked if I had my marbles ready. I demurred, saying I did not have any marbles as I had not yet learnt the game. He rather grandly offered to loan me his marbles. Thus began the competition. Of course, I lost. He then said I owed him sixty marbles! I was horrified at the number but comforted myself with the thought that Amma would come to see us next day and I could get her to pay off my debt.

After a brief nap in my new house, I walked across to Jam at Bethany (for five- to six-year-olds). He startled me by saying we were at the wrong school; it wasn't Doon at all. Thoroughly alarmed, I asked him where he thought we were. He walked me to the gate and just outside was a board emblazoned 'WELHAM PREPARATORY SCHOOL' and below it the coda: 'FOR INDIAN BOYS'. I was stunned. My mother had dropped us at the wrong school and would never be able to find us again. And now where would I get sixty marbles to repay Nater? I spent my first night crying myself to sleep.

Next day, Amma arrived. I demanded to know why we had been put in the wrong school. Unfazed, she replied, 'Doon/Welham, what difference does that make?' I was appalled but also relieved and put to her my question about the sixty marbles. I don't remember her answer; I don't remember whether she got me the marbles; I don't remember whether I discharged my debt with honour; but Nater became a lifelong friend and I never played marbles again!

It did not take me long to adjust to a parent-less life. My initiation into the politics of protest began in my first term when I joined the rest of the class in objecting to our being made to sing 'My Bonnie lies over the ocean' (which was about Bonnie Prince Charlie of Scotland). Someone circulated a rumour that 'My Bonnie' meant 'My girl'. At eight, we wished to have nothing to do with girls and insisted on 'My Bonnie' being changed to 'My cricket bat lies over the ocean!' The teacher was compelled to fall in line with our amendment.

A highly dedicated band of English and Anglo-Indian women, along with one German Jewish refugee, made up the staff which built up the school under the inspiring but strict leadership of the remarkable Miss Hersille Oliphant: Miss Meisenheimer, Mrs Baron, Mrs Simon and Mrs Malik. They stayed on long after Independence saw most of their compatriots sailing home. They had made India their *karma bhoomi* (land of devoted duty). There were also a few young Indian teachers, of whom I remember best Mr Kurian and the physical

training (PT) instructor, Mr Gaur, who gave me the appellation ‘Cotton Wool Baby’ because I was so terrible at PT and all other sports.

While I was all thumbs at games, and thus the object of derision of most of the boys, what saved my honour and gave me some social standing in the school was my ability to construct cricket stories out of my imagination and provide a running commentary. The stories usually had my classmate Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi, better known as ‘Tiger’ Pataudi, in a stellar role. He went on to become one of India’s best-known and best-loved cricket captains. We shared the same dormitory with about a dozen others.

One of our dormitory mates was Preminder Maliah, whose claim to fame was that he had seen Kishore Sahu’s Hindi version of *Hamlet*. After lights out, he would regale us with stories of Hamlet’s friends calling out from the ramparts as the clock struck midnight: ‘*Arre, Aamlette, Aamlette, tere baap ka bhoot!*’² At which we would cower in our bedclothes shivering with fright until someone called for my imaginary cricket commentary.

One episode from the real cricket field remains etched in my memory. Tiger’s father, the nawab of Pataudi, who had captained one of India’s first cricket teams to tour England, visited his son at school and entertained us on the main field. Lined up on the embankment, we would call out for a four and sure enough the next ball would be smacked to the boundary. Then we would call for a six and the ball would soar into the sky and fall far beyond us. We were bewitched at this display of cricketing legerdemain. Tragically, just about a year later, the nawab suffered a heart attack on the polo ground and was dead before anyone could rush to help him.

I also fared well in writing ‘compositions’, as essay writing was known. When I visited the school more than half a century later, as chief guest for their Founder’s Day celebration, the principal, Mrs Gunmeet Bindra, retrieved my first-ever piece to appear in print, in issue no. 12 of the *Welham School Magazine*.³

My youngest brother, Mukundan, was put into the school before he had quite celebrated his fifth birthday. Another boy of the same age had also

² The line is virtually untranslatable. ‘*Aamlette*’ is Hindi for ‘omelette’. This is what makes the Hindi rendition of ‘Hamlet’ so funny. And ‘*Tere baap ka bhoot*’ only means ‘Your father’s ghost’ but is idiomatically hilarious in Hindi. Scan the QR code on p. 43 to find out more.

³ Reproduced on this book’s website. Details can also be accessed by scanning the QR code.

been put into the school. Missing their mothers, the two of them would cry themselves to sleep in each other's arms. On hearing this, my mother moved to Dehradun and we found ourselves enjoying home-cooked food most weekends. My father too would drive up from Delhi from time to time. On one of these trips, he started back very early in the morning, around 4 a.m., fell asleep at the wheel and crashed into a tree. He was extraordinarily lucky not to have been killed on the spot.

My mother moved back to Delhi in 1951 because, by then, Mukund had been well drilled into school routine. Another factor behind her return was that at long last, the Dalmias, my father's principal clients, had allotted him a commodious apartment above their own offices in Scindia House.

Singular holidays

My father's practice was flourishing and so our holidays at home were often marked by novel experiences. One morning, he suddenly announced that all of us were to fly with him to Bombay. On landing, we were met by a liveried chauffeur and a luxury limousine. My father ignored the driver's overtures to get into the car and instead bundled us into a taxi, asking us where we would like to go. We were unanimous in suggesting Juhu Beach.

The taxi drove us there, but we were intrigued to find the limousine following us. We spent the entire day playing on the beach, with both the taxi and the limousine parked side by side in the shade. When the day's frolicking was done, we were again bundled into the taxi and driven to our usual place of stay in Bombay, Deepak Mahal on Marine Drive, with the limousine patiently shadowing us. On arrival, the taxi driver asked for his fare, which had ticked up to a humongous sum. My father directed the taxi driver to the chauffeur following in our wake and asked him to collect the fare from the chauffeur.

We later learnt this was my father's way of paying back Ramakrishna Dalmia for his insult in sending my father a cheque of Rs 500 for services rendered. Appa had contemptuously sent it back with a note attached on which three letters were scribbled: 'GTH' – Go to Hell! Terrified he might lose my father's irreplaceable advice and assistance on tax matters, Ramakrishna Dalmia had sent the limousine with the liveried chauffeur by way of a gesture of reconciliation. My father's telling revenge for

Ramakrishna Dalmia's act of *lèse-majesté* was to get him to pay, through his chauffeur, for this picnic.

Dalmia complied because he desperately needed my father's legendary professional skills. But they both came a cropper when the Bharat Life Insurance scandal broke the following year. I knew nothing of the details but my father found it prudent to sell his firm, V. Sankar Aiyar & Co., for a pittance to one of his partners, exit the company altogether and set up as an independent tax consultant. Dalmia went to jail. My father didn't.

The same winter, 1951, my father took the whole family on an Italian liner, the *Ugolino Vivaldi*, on a cruise to Ceylon (Sri Lanka). One of his clients, Pioneer Sports, couldn't remit their dues to my father in India due to the newly independent country's foreign exchange regulations. So, to liquidate his accumulations in Colombo, he took all of us on a quick five-day round of the island: Colombo–Peradeniya–Kandy–Nuwara Eliya–Ratnapura–Colombo, with my mother buying emeralds, sapphires and rubies as if they were marbles.

'Elections' at Welham

We returned to an India gearing up for the first general elections. I was utterly fascinated with the hoardings and posters; the jeeps roaring down the streets, loudspeakers blaring; the crowds that gathered around makeshift platforms and the orators who harangued them; and the colourful processions shouting slogans and singing patriotic songs. I determined that I would organize a mock election in my class at Welham.

All went well until the naughtiest boy, Anand Chakravarti, wrote up on the blackboard: 'Preetinder's Mom and Pop are Commies.' (Preetinder is now emeritus professor of chemistry at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)). A fistfight followed and the principal, Miss Oliphant, had to step in. The Welham School general elections were countermanded. Democracy at Welham was strangled at birth!

The seed of my lifelong infatuation with elections, win or lose, was laid by this first general election of December–January 1951–52. Through school, college and the Cambridge Union, and well into parliamentary and party elections in later life, if there was an election to be fought, I could not restrain myself from standing, and if I could not stand, avidly following every twist and turn.

My farewell present at the school was portentous. I was only the vice-captain of Ganges Company, but the captain could not be found when the principal announced that our company had won the games shield. So I was invited to stand in for him. It was the start of a lifetime of coming second and rarely first, yet gaining a reputation of being top of the class!

Doon: 1952–1958

I had done extremely badly in the Doon School entrance exam and got in only because Miss Oliphant persuaded Headmaster J.A.K. Martyn that I should be admitted. I was put in Eb/Eb, the lowest sections for both the arts and the maths/science sections. But after listening to me read about the Great Limpopo River from Kipling's *Just So Stories*, the class text, Martyn pushed me up to the 'a' section for the arts.

I never rose above 'b' for maths/science. One half of my brain just failed to develop. This did not faze me. One of my mother's favourite stories of her schooldays was of how she could never work out the time in which a train of such-and-such a length, travelling at so many yards per minute, would take to cross a fixed pole on the side of the railway track. She said she would be so busy conjuring up images of how the train looked, engine hooting, smoke billowing, and whether the sky was blue or overcast, and whether there were plains or hills in the background, that she never got around to solving the simple mathematical problem. I inherited from her my perfervid imagination and my inability to understand science or technology, or solve anything practical or mechanical.

All of us first-termers were lodged in a single dormitory in Holding House, under the benevolent guidance of S.P. Sahi and his French wife. One day, one of the boys hinted at the way we were conceived and the rest pounced on him, saying his parents may do things like that but ours didn't. The fracas ended when Housemaster Sahi intervened and gently explained what was what. I don't think any of us really understood!

If the first general election had fired my imagination, an event in my first term at Doon kept me hooked. We were told we had to gather in the assembly hall after dinner for a 'debate'. None of us eleven-year-olds knew what a debate was. I sat open-mouthed as the speakers took their turn, one

by one, at the podium to support or oppose the motion 'This House believes in breaking bounds'. I was fascinated by the rationality of putting forward arguments and rebutting them, as against the fist fights with which arguments had hitherto, in my experience, been settled. I also loved the fact that brains were scoring over brawn.

P. Gopinath, a reputed intellectual much senior to me, who went on to a brilliant career as an international civil servant with the International Labour Organization (ILO), was the star. The cut and thrust of reasoned argument, laced with wit and repartee, has been an obsession with me ever since (throttled only now in my dotage by the inanity of TV debates of the Arnab Goswami kind).

In the next term, the spring term of 1953, my younger brother Jam joined us at Doon. He was not only academically unbeatable; he was also an avid and able sportsman. It took me a while to figure out that instead of being haplessly jealous of him, I would be better advised to simply make his achievements mine by taking pride in them. I have tried almost all my life to follow this golden rule but often failed. After all, how does one, as an elder brother, react when the geography teacher calls for silence in the school assembly to announce that he has awarded Swaminathan 51 out of 50 'because Swaminathan knows more geography than I do'? In comparison to him, I was an indifferent scholar and at sea when it came to any sport, I came into my own only in debating and to some small extent in acting on stage.

One morning, in April 1953, I was getting out of the boxing ring when I spotted a familiar figure waiting patiently. It was my father. He had unexpectedly come to Dehradun on work and had dropped in on the off chance of seeing me before he drove back to Delhi. The school schedule was so tight that I couldn't squeeze out more than ten minutes to spend with him. Little did I know I would never see him again.

Appa's air accident

One day, on the morning of 9 May, I was told to meet the headmaster in his office after assembly. He said I and my brothers (including Mukund, who was at Welham) were going to be escorted by the house captain, Chicky Ranganathan, in a taxi to Delhi for a 'religious ceremony'. Quite delighted at

this sudden holiday, we hopped into the waiting taxi with sixteen-year-old Chicky in charge. He tried in vain to suggest that we might on arrival find something amiss. We were too excited to ask for more details.

I was, therefore, astonished to see an army of people sweep us up and swoosh us to our apartment on the third floor of Scindia House where my mother was sitting distraught on a white sheet. It took several minutes for me to gather that 'something amiss' related to my father, and still more time to comprehend that he had been killed in an air crash. It all became starkly clear when I was later led to the ground floor and saw his dead body lying motionless on an ice slab. As dusk fell, we were taken to Nigambodh Ghat where, as the eldest son, I was required to complete the rituals and light the pyre. That is when the horror of what had happened struck me with full force.

I was twelve and my father was no more. It now fell on me to play the role of the senior male. My first duty was to protect my mother. If she rose from her bed at night, I would follow her to ensure that she did not harm herself. My second duty was to my siblings. Jam seemed to have immediately comprehended our new situation but Mukund, at under eight, needed to be gently slipped into it. The most bewildered was my nine-year-old sister, Tara. She was the only one not in boarding school and my father adored her. I think the trauma affected her the most and has lasted a lifetime.

What I did not know was that in the two minutes it took the aeroplane to fall from the skies to the ground, we had gone from being of the family of a highly successful professional to being dead broke. During the Bharat Life Insurance scandal, my father had believed it prudent to rid himself of the ownership of the audit company that bore his name, knowing this would not deprive him of his personal brand name to continue in the profession. So, my mother learnt to her shock from S. Srikrishnan, the dazzlingly brilliant young man hand-picked by my father to head the firm, that apart from Rs 8,000 in my father's bank account, there was nothing else the family could access. We had no further stake in the firm and no other assets.

However, rummaging through his papers in his office, Amma came across a life insurance policy drawn on the London & Lancashire Insurance Co. that Appa had told no one about. It was for around Rs 3 lakh, a princely amount in those days, translating in today's money to about Rs 3 crore. Financially, we were saved. The fly in the ointment was that neither my mother nor my sister