Colours of a Kerala Life

A Memoir

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Monsoon Mornings in Thrissur

Our family nalukettu in Thrissur

I was born in a nalukettu — a traditional Kerala house built around a central courtyard — in Thrissur, the cultural capital of Kerala. The house had been in my family for four generations, its red oxide floors worn smooth by the feet of countless relatives, its wooden pillars carved with lotus motifs that my grandmother said brought good fortune. The monsoon was the rhythm of my childhood; from June to September, the rain would pour in sheets, filling the courtyard with a shallow lake that reflected the gray sky.

My earliest memories are inseparable from the sounds and smells of that house. The patter of rain on the clay tiles, the fragrance of jasmine from my mother's garden, the sizzle of mustard seeds in coconut oil as my

grandmother prepared breakfast. She would make appam and stew on rainy mornings, the thin, lacy pancakes served with a coconut milk curry so rich and comforting that I can still taste it when I close my eyes. I would sit on the kitchen floor, watching her work, and she would tell me stories from the Mahabharata, her voice rising and falling with the drama of ancient wars and divine interventions.

Thrissur was — and remains — a city defined by its festivals, its temples, and its deep reverence for art and learning. The Pooram festival was the highlight of the year, with its magnificent procession of caparisoned elephants and the thundering melam drums that you could feel in your chest. My father would lift me onto his shoulders so I could see above the crowd, and the spectacle of it — the gold, the fireworks, the sheer devotion of thousands of people gathered together — made me feel that I belonged to something ancient and beautiful.

A Chalk and a Dream

College campus in Kerala

I was the first woman in my family to attend college. When I left for Maharaja's College in Ernakulam in 1983, my grandmother pressed a small gold coin into my palm and told me to study hard, because knowledge was the one thing no one could ever take from me. She could not read or write herself, but she understood, with the clarity of someone who had lived through real hardship, that education was freedom.

Maharaja's College was a revelation. The campus was beautiful — whitewashed buildings with arched corridors, shaded by old rain trees and coconut palms. My English professor, Mr. Kumar, introduced me to the Romantic poets and to the power of language as a tool for thought. He was a

small, precise man who wore white shirts and spoke in a measured cadence that made every word feel important. It was Mr. Kumar who first encouraged me to consider teaching, telling me after a seminar that I had a gift for making difficult ideas feel accessible.

Those three years at Maharaja's gave me more than a degree. They gave me confidence. For the first time, I was evaluated not by my family name or my father's position, but by the quality of my mind. I graduated in 1986 with a first-class degree in English Literature and a quiet determination to become a teacher — not because it was the expected path for a young woman in Kerala, but because I had discovered, in the act of learning, a joy so deep that I wanted to share it with others.

First Day at St. Mary's

St. Mary's School exterior

I joined St. Mary's Higher Secondary School in Ernakulam as an English teacher in June of 1990. The school was a large, whitewashed building with green trim and a courtyard shaded by mango trees. The classrooms were airy but basic — wooden benches, a blackboard, a ceiling fan that moved the humid air without cooling it — and the students wore crisp uniforms that became progressively less crisp as the day went on. I was twenty-four years old, newly married, and terrified.

My first class was a group of eighth-standard students who regarded me with the frank, assessing gaze that only thirteen-year-olds can manage. I had prepared meticulously — lesson plan typed, notes organized, examples

carefully chosen — and within fifteen minutes, the lesson had gone entirely off script. A boy in the back row asked me a question about Shakespeare that I could not answer, and instead of panicking, I heard myself saying, 'I don't know, but let's find out together.' It was the most honest thing I had said all day, and the class, sensing my sincerity, leaned forward.

That moment taught me the most important lesson of my teaching career: that vulnerability is not weakness. The students did not need me to be perfect. They needed me to be present, to be curious, and to treat their questions with the same respect I wanted for my own. Over the years, St. Mary's became more than a workplace. It became a community, a second family, and the place where I discovered that teaching is not about transferring knowledge from one mind to another, but about creating the conditions in which minds can grow.

The Boy Who Almost Gave Up

A classroom at St. Mary's

Vinod came to St. Mary's as a tenth-standard transfer student in 2005, sent by parents who had exhausted their options at three previous schools. He was intelligent — this was obvious to anyone who bothered to look — but he was also angry, withdrawn, and convinced that the education system had nothing to offer him. He sat in the back corner of my classroom and refused to participate, answering questions with shrugs or silence, handing in blank exam papers with a defiance that felt like a plea for attention.

I recognized something in Vinod because I had seen it before — in myself, during the difficult months after my loss, and in the students Mr. Kumar had championed at Maharaja's College. Beneath the anger was a mind that was

hungry for meaning, and I made it my quiet mission to reach him. I started lending him books — not textbooks, but novels and poetry collections — without comment or expectation. He would return them a few days later, also without comment, but I noticed that the books were well-handled, their pages dog-eared, and once I found a penciled note in the margin of a Kamala Das poem that showed a sensitivity and insight far beyond his years.

Over two years, Vinod transformed. Not dramatically — this is not that kind of story — but steadily, like a plant turning toward light. He began participating in class discussions, cautiously at first, then with growing confidence. He wrote an essay about his grandmother that made me cry at my desk after the students had gone home. When he passed his board exams and earned admission to a college in Kochi, he came to my classroom and stood awkwardly by the door until I looked up. 'Thank you, Teacher,' he said, and it was enough.

Our Growing Home

Our home in Ernakulam

Arjun was born in August of 1993, three years into our marriage. He arrived during the monsoon, as if Kerala itself was celebrating, and Suresh's mother said the timing was auspicious. I held him in the hospital room and felt the same thing every new mother feels — that impossible mixture of love and terror, the sudden awareness that you are now responsible for someone else's entire world.

Anjali came three years later, in February of 1996, during the brief, luminous winter that Kerala calls 'cold season' though the temperature rarely drops below twenty degrees. She was a different child from the beginning — quiet where Arjun was boisterous, observant where he was impulsive. Together,

they filled our modest Ernakulam flat with a noise and energy that Suresh and I had not anticipated but quickly came to need.

We moved to a small house near the school when Arjun started kindergarten. It had a tiled roof and a garden where I grew curry leaves and jasmine, and a verandah where Suresh would read the newspaper in the evenings while the children played in the yard. Our life followed a rhythm dictated by the school calendar and the festival calendar — Onam, Vishu, Christmas, the Thrissur Pooram that we always drove back for. It was a simple life, but it was full, and I knew even then that I would look back on those years as the happiest of my life.

The Grandchildren Years

Aadya was born in 2019, Arjun and Priya's first child, and she arrived with a cry so lusty and determined that the nurses laughed. When they placed her in my arms, I felt a love so uncomplicated and joyful that it startled me. With my own children, love had always been tangled with worry — was I doing enough, was I present enough, was I the mother they deserved? With Aadya, the love was pure, unencumbered by the anxieties of primary responsibility.

Ishaan followed in 2020, Anjali and Rahul's son, and then Vihan in 2021, completing our family with a symmetry that pleased Suresh's mother enormously. Our house, which had grown quiet after the children left for their own homes, was suddenly full again — of small shoes by the door, of cartoons playing in Malayalam, of the particular chaos that only young children can create. Suresh, who had always been a reserved father, became the most attentive grandfather, telling the children stories from the Ramayana with dramatic voices and feeding them payasam from a spoon.

Being a grandmother in Kerala is a role that comes with centuries of tradition and expectation. The ammamma is the keeper of stories, the maker of special foods, the warm presence that smells of sandalwood and coconut oil. I embrace this role with joy, but I also try to add my own stamp — reading English picture books alongside the Malayalam ones, encouraging Aadya's fierce independence, and making sure all three grandchildren know that their grandmother was once a girl who left a nalukettu in Thrissur with a gold coin and a dream.

The Arranged Meeting

Traditional Kerala wedding decorations

In Kerala in the 1980s, marriages were arranged by families with the careful deliberation of diplomats negotiating a treaty. My parents began the search when I was twenty-one, consulting horoscopes, comparing family backgrounds, and exchanging photographs through a network of relatives and matchmakers that spanned the entire district. I had agreed to the process — it was expected, and at that age I had no strong objection — but I had privately resolved that I would only marry someone who respected my desire to work.

Suresh Rajan came to our house on a Sunday morning in January of 1988, accompanied by his parents and an uncle who served as the intermediary. He

was tall and serious, with a neat mustache and the careful manners of a well-raised young man. Our families drank tea and made conversation in the formal sitting room while Suresh and I were given a few minutes alone on the verandah — the customary allowance for the prospective couple to speak privately. I asked him directly whether he would expect me to stop teaching after marriage. He looked surprised, then smiled, and said, 'Why would I want you to stop doing something you love?'

We married in May of 1988, in a traditional Hindu ceremony at the Vadakkunnathan Temple in Thrissur. The mandapam was decorated with jasmine garlands and marigold chains, and the brass oil lamps cast a warm golden light over everything. My mother cried through the entire ceremony, and my grandmother, who was eighty-three and had barely left the house in years, sat in the front row with an expression of such profound satisfaction that it remains one of my most treasured memories. I walked around the sacred fire with Suresh seven times, and with each circuit I felt I was stepping into a new life — not leaving the old one behind, but carrying it forward.

When Silence Spoke

Temple garden in Kerala

In the spring of 2001, I lost a pregnancy at fourteen weeks. We had not told the children — Arjun was seven and Anjali five — and so the grief had to be carried privately, between Suresh and me, in the spaces between our daily responsibilities. I taught my classes with a smile that felt like a mask, graded papers with hands that sometimes trembled, and cried only at night, in the bathroom, with the tap running so no one would hear.

It was my mother who saw through the performance. She arrived unannounced one Friday evening, took one look at me, and said, 'Meera, you don't have to be brave for everyone.' She stayed for two weeks, cooking meals I could barely eat, sitting with me in silence when words were too much, and

telling me stories about the women in our family who had endured similar losses — my grandmother, my great-aunt, women whose grief had been absorbed into the fabric of their lives without anyone ever speaking of it.

The healing was slow and incomplete, as grief always is. But it was during this time that I began visiting the Vadakkunnathan Temple on Saturday mornings — not for prayer, exactly, but for the silence. The temple garden, with its ancient banyan tree and stone paths, offered a kind of peace that I could not find elsewhere. I would sit on the stone bench beneath the banyan and let the stillness wash over me, and gradually, over months, the weight of the loss became something I could carry rather than something that carried me.

State Teacher Award

State Teacher Award ceremony

In September of 2012, I received a letter from the Kerala State Education Department informing me that I had been selected for the State Teacher Award, based on recommendations from the school management, the district education office, and — as I would later learn — a petition organized by former students. I read the letter three times before I believed it, then walked into the kitchen where Suresh was making tea and handed it to him without a word. He read it, set down the teacup, and embraced me in the silent, steady way that is his signature expression of pride.

The ceremony was held at the state capital in Thiruvananthapuram, in an auditorium decorated with flower garlands and official banners in English

and Malayalam. The Education Minister presented the award — a brass trophy and a certificate that now hangs in the school's staff room. My family was there: Suresh in his best white mundu, Arjun home from his engineering studies, Anjali in a churidar she had chosen with great care. When my name was called and I walked to the podium, I thought of Mr. Kumar, who had died the previous year, and of my grandmother, who had pressed a gold coin into my hand and told me to study hard.

My speech was brief — I have never been comfortable with public speaking, despite thirty years in front of classrooms. I thanked my family, my colleagues, and my students, and I said that the award belonged not to me but to every teacher who had ever stayed late to help a struggling student, who had ever believed in a child when the child could not believe in themselves. When I returned to St. Mary's the following Monday, the school had organized a small assembly in my honor, and the children sang a song that I did not recognize until Anjali told me they had written it themselves.

What the Rain Taught Me

I am fifty-nine years old, and I have been teaching for thirty-five years. My hair is streaked with white now, and I wear reading glasses that Anjali insists make me look distinguished. St. Mary's has changed — the blackboards are now whiteboards, the students carry smartphones, and the curriculum has been revised more times than I can count. But the fundamental transaction of teaching remains the same: one person offering what they know to another person who is ready to receive it.

Kerala has taught me that life moves in cycles, like the monsoon. There are seasons of abundance and seasons of scarcity, seasons of noise and seasons of silence. The rain that seemed interminable in my childhood — those endless gray mornings in the nalukettu — became the backdrop of my most meaningful memories. The sound of rain on a tiled roof is, for me, the sound of home, of my grandmother's stories, of the particular safety that comes from knowing exactly where you belong.

Suresh and I still live in Ernakulam, in the house near the school where we raised our children. The jasmine I planted in the garden twenty-five years ago has grown into a magnificent bush that blooms every evening, filling the verandah with its fragrance. On weekends, the grandchildren come, and the house is loud and full in the way that I always hoped it would be. These are the colours of a Kerala life — jasmine white, monsoon grey, temple gold, schoolroom green — and they are the palette from which I have painted my story.

Glossary

People, places, institutions, and organizations mentioned in this life story

People

Aadya Rajan — granddaughter

Anjali Menon — daughter

Arjun Rajan — son

Deepa Prakash — colleague

Ishaan Menon — grandson

Mr. Kumar — teacher

Priya Rajan — daughter-in-law

Rahul Menon — son-in-law

Suresh Rajan — husband

Vihan Rajan — grandson

Vinod — former student

Places

Ernakulam

Fort Kochi

Kerala

Kochi Trade Centre

Thrissur

Vadakkunnathan Temple

Institutions

Maharaja's College — Education

St. Mary's Higher Secondary School — Workplace

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