

ROY T JAMES

*Glimpses of  
Autobiography*

What you are going to see  
If ever I write one

## **Glimpses of Autobiography**

Roy T James

I know, autobiography cannot be a natural destination for me, having neither been a rare specimen of my generation nor a captivating figure to make my story worthy of recall, let alone a life replete with achievements where reminiscences flourish. But I find myself singularly lucky to have had the association, be it as parents, relatives or elders, or allies, enemies, or peers, with greatly remarkable and distinctive personalities, each of them, an epic in one's own right. Rather than meeting the main character of a telling story, I offer you all a

unique opportunity of listening to the uncommon anecdotes hoarded by a common man, who, as that label would suggest, likes to remain faceless.

## 1 My Father

The persona of my father was in fact a conglomeration of dormant traits, unseen skills and hidden talents, each of them more notable than all the others for its uniqueness. He was very popular with many among the ‘who is who’ of our small town and was in the habit of spending his spare time (he was accustomed to having that in great abundance, as you are going to agree!) with those gentlemen. For some reason, if he is not able to keep up with an appointment, we at home used to get reminders from almost every passerby walking along the road in front of our house that “such and such dignitary is waiting for him with many of his companions, why he hasn’t been able to join them?” If we happen to share the reason (generally some household chore, like felling a tree, clearing certain hedge or moving some heavy objects) for his delay, they were more

than eager to provide us with all possible help in finishing that job such that my father could release those gentlemen from their inactive and dull reverie by kick starting some enthralling discussions!

My father cultivated a taste for dreaming big, becoming a successful businessman one day being only one of his fantasies. May be constant interactions with his associates, many of who were from fairly wealthy background, kept this dream alive. He always could be seen with a few notebooks full of project implementation details, financial calculations, other necessities and apparent profits of many novel ideas, ready to give valuable input to deliberations on any topic among these budding businessmen. Discussions of such nature being a prerequisite of any gathering among these gentlemen, it is no wonder that my father came to be instituted as an indispensable part of their group! My father also was a devoted parent, wholeheartedly involving in all the activities of his children, which on many instances and to our chagrin, went to the extent of imposing himself on us.

A few of his ideas, some that managed to take off from a rather conceptual stage and break into the foray of business, and a few others that took a significant part in forming what I am, I remember, each one of them, as you shall notice, adding one more shade to his many colored character.

### Maker of Ferment

In the late sixties and early seventies, prohibition was alive in Tamil Nadu and being close to the border between the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, our small town had good market for anything which can act as a substitute for alcoholic drinks. My father proposed an ingenious scheme. Identify an expert to produce certain types of ayurvedic preparations and market the concoction as Kerala Arishtam, (a type of medicine prepared following ayurveda, the ancient Indian healing science) which is in good demand across the state border due to its not so negligible intoxicant value. This idea was well received by

all, many of them agreeing to contribute monetarily, leaving the professional management with a few, of course, including my father. And they started in good earnest.

That the bottles of this item should be well shaped reminding one of some costly and well known liquor brand in addition to having sufficient strength to withstand rough handling, was something that was instantly acknowledged. Further discussions brought another important aspect of marketing to fore – the need to have rich, attractive and colorful label, to which also, everyone agreed. Out goes the purchase order for approximately five thousand bottles and an equivalent amount of labels! (That the design of these labels had my artistic contribution, I proudly recollect!) This was followed by orders related to other requirements, like the paraphernalia of packaging and other needs at various links of the supply chain, ending of course, in the search for a suitable ayurvedic physician to make the concoction.

The search for a ‘vaidyan’, the name such physicians are known by, could not produce any successful result. Most of those

located were found to be already engaged with some other relatively better established organizations or factories. The remaining few demanded unaffordable compensation, justifiably so; this was an area of fierce competition, thanks to its profitability. After relentless search, my father managed to locate an old colleague of his younger days (who used to tell us stories of deer hunting, I remember) as a professional consultant, a jack of all trades who presently was leading a retired life. Not only that this gentleman agreed to start production of the 'medicine' but also convinced the manufacturing team that the secret formula will eventually be taught to some of them, enabling smooth continuation of the production process even in his absence.

The appointed day came and the process of preparing the blend began with much fanfare, but to everyone's agony, what turned out was only a tasteless liquid without having the potential to produce any alcohol like sensation. The main 'physician' had an immediate answer; some of the constituents used must have been fake or spurious! All were heartbroken except my father, who, rather than sharing the somber mood, exclaimed aloud

“Good that it is proven worthless now itself rather than afterwards, in which case we would have invited the wrath of all those who bought our product as well as that of the government”

By this time, all the business associates who had supplied items like bottles, labels and other paraphernalia started losing their patience. With no sight of any income to enable repayment of their dues, my father and his colleagues took the last option by disposing off all those items and using the sale proceeds in settling the account, at least in part, that too to avoid an imminent legal dispute. This effectively brought the curtains down to one more project which promised great returns!

## Maker of Lamps

This in fact is the very first business venture of my father and perhaps needs to be acknowledged as the event that made him very comfortable with failures.

In those days bicycle was the main mode of personal transport and the inconvenience of cycling, especially at night, was felt by all. A small dynamo attachment taking drive from the cycle wheels (the wheel tyre, really) was in use but was not very popular as it could maintain a reasonably good level of illumination only during high speed cycling. In short, this drive considerably increased the pedaling effort required, especially in hilly terrains that too in some cases much beyond a man's strength. Not only that people were forced to walk with their cycles while on the up-slope, the additional wear and tear caused by the dynamo ended up necessitating more frequent replacement of wheel tyres.

Another device in use was a kerosene lamp which had the inconvenience of not having a beam bright enough to light up ones path well, though it was considerably more economical and effortless.

My father proposed a kerosene lamp with focused light, where the main lobe of the light beam is formed using a set of concave-convex lenses and its alignment, similar to the ones used in the popular cycle of Malaysia – Singapore,

Silverking. To demonstrate the optics of beam generation, he procured few lenses (Good quality ones from Coimbatore, I remember) and one set of 'dies' for the lamp. Though the actual lamp could not be shown, he demonstrated (I was his eager apprentice) the possibility of producing many different beams using the lenses and variations in focusing. Imbibing my father's rudimentary knowledge of optics, I too (I was studying in school, third or fourth standard), joined him in successfully dispelling the doubts of many a colleague.

Finally, the design of the lamp was accepted by all (the earlier mentioned optical demonstrations standing to good stead!) and the proposal took off, all the promoters agreeing on the name 'Silverqueen', obviously paying obeisance to the original source of the idea, the Silverking.

To meet the financial demands, all share holders, my father and two of his cousins, agreed to put in equally. My father resigned from his job and invested in full, whatever was his terminal benefits, just about meeting his share of the project. Of the other two partners, one disposed off his business, a training institute for

teaching typewriting and short hand, together with all its machinery assets. The other one had a functioning flour mill, the sale proceeds of which met his share of the capital comfortably.

All of us, about nine children, six parents, four grandparents and two great grandparents were thrilled as the procurement department (Of course, my father!) went to many places near and far to fetch the necessary hardware. For days together, much of the machinery spares and other articles lying around in our place, and we children could do experimenting to our heart's content. And I was in great demand, both at school and at home, to show optical experiments to a substantial gathering of our home folk and neighbors, utilizing the collection of lenses and colored (red and green) glasses. I even managed to assemble a rudimentary projection system to show film bits, discarded pieces of which could be fetched from the waste dump of a local movie theatre.

All the machinery ordered having arrived and found in good condition; a small manufacturing unit was being established in a nearby industrial estate. We all were eagerly awaiting its successful completion and sadly,

one of the cousins (The one who had a typing institute) succumbed to a heart attack and collapsed. Money was needed immediately and they took the only available option – scrapping their venture.

To our relief, one gentleman sprang up from nowhere and promised to buy the venture in ‘as is where is’ condition, that too offering a good price. Most of us could not believe our luck, may be our project was very well planned, my father exclaimed aloud. (He did the planning!) We agreed to sell, the buyer offering some money to the deceased partner’s widow and promissory notes to the other two partners.

We children grew up dreaming about the maturity of those promissory notes (This had to be very much with us, any demand, like a new watch or a good pair of shoes, used to elicit a standard reply, “Let the promissory notes mature!”) till one day that good gentleman was arrested along with few others for running a counterfeit currency racket.

Though my mother was inconsolable to find all of us in varying stages of misery with our dreams shattered, my father was having a

hearty laugh, “Thank god he was arrested before he paid us our due”

That he lost all his earnings made no dent in his ebullient nature and the belief that huge profits lie hidden with every project that is on the drawing board.

## The Rational

My father was a firm believer that in all circumstances and at all times, whatever we do should be consistent with or based on good reason. He perhaps stretched this a little too far, as the following incidents show.

We (My elder brother and I) were in school, studying in seventh and sixth classes respectively. Normally we used to carry our lunch, packed in a banana leaf appropriated as a container, the best, for use and throw. For some reason, my father decided to procure a lunch box (tiffin carrier, in popular parlance) and after much calculation and critical comparison

between the costs of buying two separate ones (one for each son) and a big one for both the sons, he reached the conclusion that one big lunch carrier for both the boys is economically more meaningful. Accordingly he procured one big tiffin carrier (with five partitions!) for me and my brother.

The novelty of handling such an extraordinary and big artifact made it an instant hit, leading to celebrations, revelry and feelings of possessiveness. The excitement of using the partitions selectively to carry different menu items, along with the opportunities that arose for showing off the newly acquired possession, only reinforced it. But all this vanished into thin air when the burden of handling this object with care and safety started to make its appearance. This was compounded by the looming threat of a decree by the father, specifying the need to certify to its good condition at regular intervals. Added to that were the frequent taunts from classmates, which we could easily stand, and the curious, sometimes sympathetic, look from a few elders we used to come across on the way to school, which we couldn't easily stand.

Out comes a mountain of issues – Who will carry? Who will clean? Who will ensure safekeeping? And a horde of other questions that called for a meeting of elderly minds to settle the issue once for all. I remember, my excuse for avoiding any responsibility was that being a small boy, carrying this heavy weight shall interfere with my studies, whereas, my brother's argument was that this shall interfere with his sports routine. Also, borrowing from father he pointed out, as his younger brother does not take part in regular sports activities, carrying the tiffin carrier will greatly benefit him in physical development.

We brothers were finally made to accept a compromise; whoever finishes his meals last shall take charge of the tiffin carrier in its return journey from school, the forward journey when the vessel is heavier will be under the charge of the elder one. My habit of finishing off with meals in a flash might have had its origin in those lunch breaks, for, I used to complete my part of lunch before my brother could even begin his share, thus successfully passing on to him, the responsibility of looking after the tiffin carrier in its return trip as well. This little trouble remained with us (My father in his wisdom had

dictated, “This should be used for at least three years to justify the investment!”) causing hot tempers, fist fights and many other unpleasant exchanges between the brothers till we finished schooling and the tiffin carrier was laid to rest.

My father was of the considered opinion that young age generally sport a high rate of growth and if dresses are not stitched taking this fact into account, children shall very soon overgrow the dresses, necessitating replacements to be provided for, before the earlier one can complete its service life. Adding to this was another favorite dictum of his, making two dresses from a single cloth piece of suitable size is economically more beneficial compared to stitching two dresses from two separate cloth pieces. These might have been based on sound reasoning, but both the brothers going to school and back dressed in shorts and shirt of same cloth material and of identical (family signature!) design that too, stitched in the same oversized pattern, certainly gave rise to many comments and giggles en route. When reported to him, his answer was another one of his favorite refrains “No one will dare to continue laughing at you, if you also join the laughter!”

## Robert the Bruce

That his very first attempt ended in dismal failure, instead of causing discouragement, made my father's resolve to excel in business, even greater. Total lack of monetary support (all his savings, by then, completely spent) could not be a deterrent, he, as his earlier partners (cousins) were averse to jumping into further ventures especially without solid financial support, found new collaborators who would never be held back by such monetary preconditions. These new entrepreneurs were in possession of even greater ideas than those of my father but they needed to be fine tuned by adding certain numerical calculations of income and expenditure to make them look feasible, which of course, was my father's forte.

Though he had resigned from his job as I had mentioned elsewhere, many of his old colleagues were in constant touch with him,

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