An Uncommon Love

The Early Life of Sudha and Narayana Murthy

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juggernaut

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Character is destiny.

– Heraclitus

And ninety-nine are with dreams content,
But the hope of a world made new
Is the hundredth man who is grimly bent
On making the dream come true.

– Ted Olson, 'Dreamer and Doer'

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Dreaming the Same Dreams

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On a pleasant October evening in 1974, a slender young woman hurried along a narrow residential street in Pune, her short, bobbed hair curling around her vivacious face. Though she usually favoured light cotton saris in the office, or jeans and T-shirts when not at work, today for some reason – she was not sure why – she had chosen to dress more formally and was wearing a khadi sari in white, her favourite colour. She was headed for the flat of her co-worker Prasanna, a young man with whom she had become friends because they rode the TELCO (Tata Engineering and Locomotive Company) bus together to work each day and because they both came from Karnataka.

This, she recognized, was an unusual excursion for her. She felt a tiny shiver along her spine: a frisson of anticipation and excitement.

The young woman liked Prasanna because, like her, he was a voracious reader. Each day on the bus, he would have a different book with him. She would glance over at what he was reading and feel pleasantly surprised because usually it was something she had read already, like *The Discovery of India* or *My Experiments with Truth*. Sometimes they would talk about the book and she would

dive in eagerly into their discussion with forthright opinions. But recently Prasanna had surprised her. He had been engrossed in a writer she had never heard of: George Mikes. The titles of Mikes's books were unusual, too: *How to Be an Alien*, *How to Tango: A Solo across South America* and *How to Unite Nations*. And on the flyleaf of each book was written, with a confident flourish, a name and a place. The places were unexpected, exotic: Paris, Rome, Munich, Istanbul and Kabul.

The young woman couldn't resist asking, 'How is it you have all these books? And who is this man, anyway? A global bus conductor?'

Prasanna had laughed. 'He's my friend – and now my flatmate. I stay in the front room of a flat he shares with a colleague called Shashi Sharma and his parents. He has certainly travelled to many countries and had many adventures! Why don't you come over sometime and meet him? He's a most interesting man, full of stories. Also, he's a Kannadiga like us. You'll love his collection of books. They've taken over most of our living room. In fact, I'd say that books are the only things he cares to own.'

The woman had hesitated. She had never visited a male friend in his flat. As the first woman employed by TELCO, living alone in a city far from her more traditional home town of Hubli, she knew there were many eyes on her. Thus, she was ultra-careful about her behaviour, about establishing boundaries. When she went on a company business trip with male colleagues and was required to share a company guest house, she kept strictly to herself. When she went out with male friends for dinner, she made sure to pay for herself so there would be no confusion about their relationship. 'Paying my share allows me to keep them at the right distance,' she explained to her women friends.

But this time, on the verge of saying no, she hesitated. It was

too tempting, the thought of an entire room filled with exotic foreign writers she had not read and might never come across elsewhere, shelves and shelves of books she could perhaps borrow. And the owner of the books – she admitted to herself that she was quite curious about him. What would he look like? In her mind, she imagined this intrepid world traveller to be suave and debonair, tall and broad-shouldered. Maybe, she thought, because she loved Hindi movies, he would look like Rajesh Khanna, sporting sideburns and boots.

'All right,' she had finally said. 'I'll stop by tomorrow, just for a little while.'

When she walked into Prasanna's flat, though, she was surprised by the man her co-worker introduced her to. He was thin and slight, with thick glasses and a small scar on his forehead – a far cry from a movie star. He had on a checked coat that was nothing like the fashionable leather jackets the heroes of Hindi movies favoured. He was quiet – almost shy, she thought – until they started discussing books. Then he shed his reticence and sparkled with intelligence and an eloquence that startled her. She discovered that they shared a passion for Kannada writers: Kuvempu, Shivarama Karanth, Triveni and S.L. Bhyrappa. But more exciting was the fact that his bookshelves – as crowded as she had imagined – sported many new and fascinating writers. There were also more books by Mikes. She read out the titles excitedly: *Little Cabbages*, *The Prophet Motive*, *The Land of the Rising Yen, How to Scrape Skies* and *Shakespeare and Myself*.

'It's *Meekesh*,' he said gently, correcting her pronunciation of the Hungarian writer's name.

While the young woman could be prickly when told she was wrong, she found that, for some strange reason, this time she did not mind. Her visit stretched longer than she had intended as she listened to him talk about his favourite writers and describe how he had discovered them while living in Europe. At the end of the evening, before she could ask, he offered to loan her as many books as she wanted. He filled a shopping bag – the simple kind a housewife might take to the market to buy vegetables – with the volumes she chose.

At the door, as she was about to say goodbye, he took a deep breath. 'May I invite you to have dinner with me tomorrow night – maybe at a restaurant?'

It was not her habit to go somewhere with a man she had just met. But to her surprise, she heard herself agreeing. Was it because their conversation, at once frank and deep, had made her feel she knew this man better than she did most of her colleagues, even people she had worked with for months? Was it the way his eyes shone with intelligence behind his glasses? She pulled herself together and said, 'But Prasanna must come with us, too.' In a stern voice, she added, 'And I will pay for my dinner.' She chose the venue: Poona Coffee House, which was inexpensive and unpretentious and served tasty meals and was therefore popular with young people. It was the kind of restaurant where one went with friendship – not romance – in mind.

He agreed to everything, bowing gallantly – like a Parisian might, she thought. Later, he would say, 'Do you know, you lit up the room when you walked into our flat. I'd travelled all over the world, but I'd never met a woman so fully interested in life. I couldn't stop thinking about you after you left.'

The next night, he showed up outside Poona Coffee House half an hour early. Despite what she had said, he tried to pay for

her dinner. But she found herself unable to get angry with him. She could already tell that he wasn't like other men, who might presume there might be a romance brewing if they bought dinner for a woman. There was a straightforwardness in him that, as a straightforward woman herself, resonated with her.

That is how Sudha Kulkarni, twenty-four, and Narayana Murthy, twenty-eight, began a relationship that would open the doors of aspiration for many young people who came from similar middle-class backgrounds and ultimately change the face of entrepreneurship and philanthropy in India.

In a little while, Prasanna, having completed his training at TELCO, moved to Mumbai with a new job. Murthy, in the meantime, was spending most of his free time with Sudha and was barely in the flat. It was a convivial set-up: Shashi was a friendly young man who played tennis, rode a motorbike and listened to lively music on his turntable. Murthy worked with him at a think tank called Systems Research Institute (SRI), set up by his mentor, Professor Krishnayya from the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad (IIMA). The two had almost nothing in common though they became good friends, and before meeting Sudha, Murthy would often share his meals with him and his family. While Sudha and Murthy had common friends, most evenings it was just the two of them. They discovered, to their delight, that they had many similarities. They both loved eating out, and they preferred the same kind of restaurant – the inexpensive, unpretentious cafes favoured by university students and TELCO trainees where one could order a rice plate for Rs 2.50, such as Vaishali, Rupali, Darshan, Cafe Good Luck, and

of course, Poona Coffee House, for which they had a special soft spot. They agreed that enjoyment depends on attitude and not the amount of money one spends.

Murthy would hurry up and finish his work so he could meet Sudha as she got off the TELCO bus. They would then walk over to Darshan, a fruit juice joint, where the waiters – many of them students – were friendly and easy-going and let them hang around for as long as they liked, even after they finished their drinks: always a queen-sized orange juice for Sudha and a king-sized banana milkshake for Murthy. Later they would have dinner at a simple eatery. On special occasions such as a birthday, they walked all the way to the cantonment, to one of their favoured restaurants, Chung Fa, because they both loved Chinese food. They would order fried rice and spring rolls for Rs 9, sit at a rickety wooden table in a corner and spend the evening vigorously debating various issues.

They were both well read and interested in world events; they both held strong opinions and were not shy about voicing them. Sometimes, they would get into good-natured arguments.

One night, Murthy, a staunch socialist who had been influenced as a teenager by his father's ideas as well as Jawaharlal Nehru's open admiration of the USSR, announced, 'Russian is the language of the future. That's why I've been studying Russian and collecting Russian books for the last two years.'

Sudha shook her head determinedly. 'I'm positive that English is going to remain the language of the world. That's why I make it a point to read as many English books as I can, even though I went to a Kannada-medium school and enjoy reading Kannada more.'

Murthy stubbornly held on to his Russian books even after he changed his life philosophy to compassionate capitalism. After

their marriage, it would take Sudha many years of cajoling before he would allow her to dispose of them!

When Murthy waxed eloquent about the rights of the common labourer, she held fast to her own opinion. 'You're speaking theoretically. You'd think differently if you were on a factory floor like me, forced to deal with the difficulty of getting workers to negotiate collectively.'

Though they argued vociferously, they were willing to listen to each other's point of view. Neither of them convinced the other, but perhaps that was never their intention!

In their more traditional native state of Karnataka, such meetings would not have been possible for Sudha and Murthy. Luckily, Pune in the mid-1970s was a progressive and cosmopolitan city. A large percentage of its young workers had come from other states and even from other countries such as Mauritius, Iran and different areas of Africa, and mingled freely with each other. Having lived in France and travelled across Europe, Murthy was already comfortable with conversing with the opposite sex, and Sudha had, for a long time, been used to talking to her male classmates. All these circumstances smiled upon the young Sudha and Murthy, allowing them to hold intellectual conversations, appreciate each other's unique philosophies, become friends – and eventually fall in love.

On some evenings, Murthy and Sudha were joined by friends. Vinay Kaul, a tall and lanky young man who had been a TELCO trainee at the same time as Sudha, was close to them both. One day, he told Murthy why he had chosen to make friends with Sudha. He had noticed her from the first, as she was the

only woman on the shop floor, and he – like most of the other men – had heard the amazing story of how she had been hired. He knew her to be efficient and polite, but she maintained her distance, so he had done the same thing, interpreting her caution as standoffishness. Then he witnessed something that made him realize how wrong he had been.

Vinay told Murthy, 'Around this time, TELCO had hired several blind people to do some simple jobs at the plant. One day, one of the women had grown confused while leaving the plant. She was wandering across the shop floor in the wrong direction and was about to bump into some machines. No one was paying much attention to this, but Sudha noticed. She interrupted her own work and ran over to the woman before a supervisor could shout at her. She took the woman by the hand and guided her all the way to her bus. Along the way, she chatted casually with the woman to make her feel comfortable.

'I was really impressed by Sudha's kindness. She was so busy, but still she took the time to help someone who could never do anything for her in return. So I made a special effort to get to know this unusual woman!'

The two of them soon became fast friends, and Sudha even adopted Vinay as her brother, laughingly insisting on collecting a gift from him each time after tying his rakhi. This friendship turned out to be a very good thing, as Vinay would come to her aid in a moment of difficulty, when her relationship with Murthy was in jeopardy.

Vinay's parents, who lived in the area, were very kind and hospitable, and Sudha and Murthy spent many enjoyable

evenings in their home. The relaxed home environment was the perfect place to spend time together and learn more about one another. Sudha discovered that Murthy was an excellent debater and a deep thinker, committed to the altruistic ideals of socialism. Though polite and reticent by nature, when it came to discussing the finer points of socialism, Murthy could get quite passionate. He would often have heated arguments with Vinay's father, who shared some – but not all – of Murthy's convictions. Vinay, too, jumped into these discussions. At one time, the two young men seriously discussed formally joining the Communist Party together, which caused Sudha significant concern. Fortunately for her, this never happened.

While Sudha was more interested in humour, fiction and human drama, Murthy was particularly fond of books with political or philosophical themes. But occasionally their tastes would converge, as they had done with George Mikes. Vinay once gifted Murthy a book that they both liked a great deal – *Chance and Necessity* by the Nobel Prize winner Jacques Monod which argued that life was the result of 'pure chance'. Inside the book, Vinay inscribed a line that Sudha would later recognize as surprisingly prophetic: 'To one who leaves nothing to chance.'

Murthy, on the other hand, observed how emotionally intelligent and empathetic Sudha was. She asked Mr and Mrs Kaul many incisive questions about their family's history and the home they had left behind in Kashmir. Her lighter side appealed to him as well. She loved to sing and tell jokes, dissolving into laughter herself as she got to the punchline. She soon grew close to Vinay's mother and sister, and Murthy suspected that Sudha's bubbly charm was the real reason they were invited to the Kaul residence so often to enjoy the lavish dinners cooked by Mrs Kaul and to stay over at night. Both Sudha and Murthy

were easy, informal guests, happy to sleep in makeshift beds on the floor, Murthy in Vinay's room, and Sudha with Vinay's sister.

One of Sudha's best-loved activities was going to the movies. Soon after they met, she admitted to Murthy unashamedly, 'I'm a "first day, first show" kind of girl.' Once she made a bet with the women in Mahila Niwas, the ladies' hostel where she stayed, that she would watch a different movie each day for 365 days.

'If you can really do that,' her friends said, 'we'll give you Rs 100 and the title of Miss Cinema.'

'Done!' said Sudha, who was never afraid to take on a challenge. She became a regular at all the Pune theatres, such as Nilayam, Natraj, Lakshmi-Narayan and Deccan. She did not discriminate between Hindi, Marathi, Kannada and English films. Where cinema was concerned, she was an omnivore! By the end of the year, she had won the bet and had become an expert commentator on all kinds of movies. Her friends applauded her and cheerfully handed over her prize.

Murthy liked movies, too, but money for entertainment had been in short supply during his childhood and teenage years. He saw only a few movies, mostly when he went to visit his favourite uncle, Kittu Mava, in Sidlaghatta, a small town in Karnataka.

'But there is one movie experience that happened when I was around sixteen years old,' he told Sudha. 'And it has stayed with me all my life! We were living in Mysore at that time. I was in the first year of my engineering studies. One day my closest friend, B.N. Murali, came to me and said, "Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* is showing at Gayatri Talkies. Our group of friends is planning to go, and I want you to come, too." I said I would join

them, but then a family responsibility came up and I couldn't do it. After seeing the movie, Murali could not stop talking about what an amazing film it was, a once-in-a-lifetime experience. He kept urging me to go and see it before it left the theatres. Finally, I promised him, but due to circumstances I could not manage it. After some time, Murali stopped asking me if I had seen the movie.

'Finally, the theatre announced it was the last day for *Psycho*. It struck me that if I didn't go to see it that day, I would have broken my promise. The cheapest tickets were for the night show, so I decided to go at that time. I figured I would be able to get a ticket easily as most people in our area, being working folks, did not like going to the movies so late.

'I was certainly right about that! When I entered the movie hall, I found that I was the only person there! That made this terrifying movie even scarier. I closed my eyes during all the frightening scenes, and I put my fingers in my ear, but that made things worse because I kept imagining that someone was creeping up behind me. I wanted to walk out, but I had promised Murali I would watch the movie.

'At long last, the movie got over. I've never been happier to see credits rolling on the screen! I rushed out and started on my way home. It was around 12.30 a.m., and the road was completely empty. The night was foggy, which I thought was eerie and unnatural, though perhaps it was just that I was never outside at such a late hour. I was certain I heard footsteps following me. When I hurried up, those footsteps seemed to hurry up, too! In spite of the cool weather, I broke out in a sweat. I was so thankful when I finally reached home and stumbled into our courtyard. The lights had been turned off to save electricity, and I knocked on the door for a long time before one of my brothers heard me

and let me in. I went straight to bed and, even though I shared the room with my brothers, for the next several nights I covered myself head to toe when I slept. I don't know why I thought that would protect me!'

Murthy laughed, recollecting his youthful folly, and Sudha laughed with him.

Murthy and Sudha spent many evenings watching the latest releases together. Amitabh Bachchan and Jaya Bhaduri were two of her favourite actors. And of course, she had a soft spot for the dreamy-eyed Rajesh Khanna. But she enjoyed older movies, too, starring Dilip Kumar, Guru Dutt, Madhubala and Vyjayanthimala. Murthy, who went to the movies mostly so that he could spend more time in her company, was quite happy to let Sudha choose the films they would see. In the cinema hall, he spent as much time watching emotions flit across Sudha's expressive face as he did observing the actors. He was impressed that Sudha could learn a movie song after hearing it only once or twice, and he loved it whenever she sang a current hit for him.

Murthy and Sudha's preferred time to go to the movies was late at night. The last show was when Natraj Theatre was the least crowded, so they did not have to put up with smart-aleck comments or whistles and catcalls during the more romantic scenes. There was just one problem. Mahila Niwas had a strict 10 p.m. curfew, after which a guard manned the gate. So as soon as the show was over, the two of them would have to rush back to the hostel, often being forced to hire an autorickshaw even though it was not too far away.

One night, though, despite all their efforts, they arrived too

late. A guard stood at attention at the gate, which was pulled shut. Sudha's heart sank. She knew that, if she asked him to let her in, he would write down her name and she would get in trouble with the management.

It was the very proper and law-abiding Murthy who came up with a plan to save her. They hurried to the side street that bordered the building, where Sudha counted the windows and figured out which one belonged to one of her good friends. She and Murthy lobbed pebbles over the wall at the window until her friend, waking, peered out to see what was going on. When Sudha explained her situation, whispering so that the guard would not hear her, her friend agreed to help. She went to the doorway of the hostel and called to the guard, telling him she had heard some strange noises in the back of the building.

Once the man left his post to investigate, Sudha slipped in through the gate. It was quite the adventure, and she and her friends had a good laugh over it the next day.

Despite her best efforts, Sudha continued to miss curfew once in a while. But thanks to Murthy, she now had a strategy. And it worked every time.

While Murthy was willing to bend some rules for Sudha's sake, where his deeper values were concerned, he refused to budge, no matter what the cost. This became clear when he accompanied his employer and mentor, Krishnayya, on a business trip to Kolkata around this time.

After the all-day meetings, the clients invited them to a business dinner at a restaurant located in a five-star hotel. Murthy was very hungry and looking forward to a good meal,

but as they arrived at the hotel, he noticed several beggars on the pavement. Emaciated and clad in rags, they stretched their palms towards him. In addition to his socialist leanings, Murthy had been brought up by a mother who believed in sharing what little she had with the poor. Deeply pained by their condition, he gave them some money, but he still felt uncomfortable. He told the clients, 'I'm sorry, I cannot eat at such a lavish and expensive place while people are starving just outside its doors.'

This statement caused considerable awkwardness with the clients as they had made a special effort to plan a celebratory dinner for their out-of-town guests. They, along with Krishnayya, tried to change Murthy's mind, but he was adamant and refused to enter the restaurant. It was an embarrassing situation for Krishnayya as he tried to mediate between his clients and his headstrong mentee. He was also concerned because Murthy's extreme idealism could have jeopardized their deal. Ultimately, Murthy went without food that night.

On their way back by train from Kolkata, another such incident occurred. Murthy saw an old woman sitting uncomfortably on the edge of a bench at night. He gave her his own reserved berth to sleep in and spent the night perched on the bench.

Krishnayya admired Murthy's principles, but he felt obliged to point out that going to such extremes to follow them would lead to a lot of difficulties in his young protégé's life. Murthy listened politely, but Krishnayya could see that he was not going to change his mind!

When Murthy told Sudha what he had done, though, her eyes shone with admiration and empathy, and she told him he had done the right thing. She, too, could be obstinate when it came to her principles. She, too, believed in generosity and helping the less fortunate, and was willing to put up with discomfort and

disagreements if necessary for this. Both Sudha and Murthy were profoundly idealistic young people, deeply influenced by their parents and their values. It's often the case that such people are drawn to each other, each finding a mirror in the other. In this way, the bond between these two began to strengthen.

As they got more comfortable, Sudha and Murthy began to slowly share their pasts with each other. They spoke frankly about the family members who had taught them important values, and the challenging – even painful – events that had shaped their characters. Especially in Murthy's case, some of these incidents were hurtful secrets that he had held inside for many years.

Sudha loved telling Murthy about her grandparents on both sides. As a girl, she spent many of her vacations with her mother's parents in the village of Shiggaon in north Karnataka. She loved the rural environment. To a city girl, it was quite exotic, with its thatched huts, groves of coconut trees, ponds where people bathed and washed clothes, and numerous farm animals that she could see up close. But most of all she enjoyed spending time with her grandfather, H.R. Kadim Diwan, whom she greatly admired. He was a teacher – as was her mother before she got married – and Sudha noticed that, even after his retirement, he was shown a great deal of respect by the entire village. People often stopped by his home to ask his opinion on village matters.

Sudha's love for books was nurtured by her grandfather. Not only would he usually be found with a book in his hand, but he would also take her every evening to their little village library. Soon Sudha, a rapid reader, had finished reading all the books there.

One day she told her grandfather, 'I want you to take me to another village.'

'Why?' her grandfather asked. 'Is there someone you want to meet or something you want to see?'

'No,' Sudha said. 'I want to get some new books from a different library.'

Impressed by her enthusiasm, her grandfather agreed. As grandfather and granddaughter went on their expedition, hunting for new books for the bright, curious young girl, Kadim Diwan said, 'If life is good to you, Sudha, and if you have more money than you need when you grow up, promise me that you will buy books for at least one library.'

Sudha heard the deep emotion in her grandfather's voice. 'I will,' she said solemnly. She never forgot that promise.

'Let me tell you a story,' Sudha said one day to Murthy, 'a story about rice.'

In her grandparents' home in the village, there were two granaries. The one in the front of the house was used for storing the more expensive white rice; the one in the back stored thick red rice, considered to be of lower quality. The doors to the granaries were small, making it difficult for adults to bend and enter, so if beggars or holy men came by, singing songs and asking for alms, Sudha would be dispatched to fill a bucket with rice from the granary in front. She was instructed to give the mendicants as much white rice as they needed. But at night, when her grandmother cooked for the family, Sudha would be told to go to the granary in the back and fetch red rice for the family's needs. This was a mystery to young Sudha, who never understood

why they had to eat the less tasty red rice while the better-quality rice was given away as alms.

Being a curious and outspoken girl, one day she asked her grandparents, 'Why do we always eat the red rice that is not so good and give the white rice to the poor?'

Unlike elders in many traditional families, her grandparents encouraged Sudha to think for herself. So they took her question seriously. Her maternal grandmother, Krishna, whom Sudha fondly called Avva – mother – said, 'When we give something to others, we should always give the best. God is not in temples or churches or mosques. He's with the people. If you serve them, you serve God.'

Her grandfather quoted a verse from an Upanishad and added, 'Our scriptures teach us to donate with kind words, happiness and sincerity. Donate without expectations because it is a duty. And always donate without caring about caste, creed or religion.'

As she ate her dinner of red rice, Sudha pondered what her grandparents had said. Their words stayed with her and began to shape her character in important ways.

The story from Sudha's childhood that Murthy found most touching involved her maternal grandmother, Avva. Avva was an extremely intelligent woman. Though never formally educated, she was able to mentally calculate the answers to complex mathematical problems. For instance, one day the children's mathematics teacher was quizzing them on their understanding of algebra. He asked, 'A gambler goes out of his house with Rs x. He goes to the first gambling den, loses half his money, doubles it at the second and loses one-third at the third place. How much

is he left with now?' Avva astonished them all by calling out the right answer from the kitchen, stating that the gambler had returned with two-thirds of the original amount! She also had an amazing memory. She could recall, in perfect detail, what people wore for a certain wedding years ago. Sudha would inherit this ability to remember details.

Avva loved stories, just as Sudha did, and one of their treasured activities was reading together the serialized Kannada novels of Triveni (a popular contemporary writer), which appeared in the Kannada weekly magazine *Karmaveera*. Rather, Sudha would read, and her grandmother, who was illiterate, would listen avidly. They were in the middle of reading the novel *Kashi Yatre* when Sudha went away for a few days to attend a wedding.

When she returned, she found Avva in tears. When the distressed Sudha asked her what the matter was, Avva said that the new issue of the magazine had arrived, but she hadn't been able to read it even though she longed to learn how the characters in *Kashi Yatre* were faring.

'You have no idea how stupid and dependent it made me feel,' she told Sudha. 'When I was young, I wanted to go to school, but no one thought that it was important to give me an education. They used to laugh at me – or they would get annoyed. "You're a girl," they would say. "Your job is to have children and take care of your family – there is no need to fill your head with big ideas."'

Her grandmother's sorrow lodged deep in the twelve-year-old Sudha's heart. Until then, she had taken her education for granted and even complained about studies. Now she realized how privileged she was. She made herself a promise: she would teach her sixty-two-year-old grandmother to read, no matter how hard it might be. They struggled at it, sitting together and practising every day during Sudha's vacations.

By the time of the Dussehra festival, her grandmother had achieved her goal! On Saraswati Puja day, she surprised Sudha by touching her granddaughter's feet, showing respect to her as her teacher. Sudha in turn gifted her with a copy of the just-published novel, *Kashi Yatre*, and when her grandmother read the title and the publisher's name aloud, Sudha felt a unique thrill go through her: the thrill of transforming someone's life through teaching.

'But the grandparent who had the deepest influence on me,' Sudha told Murthy, 'was my paternal grandmother, Amba, whom I called Ajji. Ajji was widowed early in life. She looked like any other traditional widow of the time, with a white sari that covered her shaven head. I will always remember the sadness in her voice when she told me what had happened to her once her husband died. "No one asked my permission before chopping off all my beautiful hair." Until then, I'd never thought about the sad plight of widows. Ajji opened my eyes to that – and to many other things.'

Ajji's spirit was undaunted by the hand fate had dealt her. She decided to become a midwife, taught herself the necessary skills, and delivered over a hundred babies. She helped women of all castes and religions. She never turned down someone who needed her help; whether they were rich or poor did not matter to her. Day or night, she was ready to respond to whoever came knocking at her door.

Endowed with practical intelligence, Ajji had developed a series of processes to ensure the safety and success of her 'patients'. People could not visit the mother unless they were healthy and freshly bathed. Everything that came in contact with the mother

was cleaned with turmeric. She made the new mother drink water that had been boiled with an iron rod in it to replace iron lost through bleeding.

Ajji treated the entire childbirth process as normal and discussed it frankly with her granddaughters. Sudha even accompanied her to a midnight delivery once – an adventure that left a deep mark on her. It was no coincidence that both Sudha's father, Dr R.H. Kulkarni, and her elder sister Sunanda decided to become gynaecologists. When Sudha herself opted for engineering, a field of study that was considered inappropriate for women, she remembered what Ajii had demonstrated through her lifestyle and stood firm against all the relatives who tried to change her mind.

Ajji also said to Sudha, 'A woman can do a man's job. But a man cannot do a woman's job.' It was a statement that Sudha would think of at a crucial moment in her life.

The values that Ajji stood for and her out-of-the-box thinking were to have a strong influence on Sudha. Her grandmother was a rebel disguised as a traditionalist – a canny strategy that Sudha recognized as very effective. She herself would employ it at the right time in her life.

Sudha's upbringing was quite exceptional for a young Indian woman of that time because she was given the freedom to read what she liked, to go outside the house just like her brother Shrinivas, and to travel alone in buses when she was as young as eight years old. Later, when she decided to cut her hair short and wear pants, no one stopped her. Her father discussed menstruation – considered an 'unclean state' in conservative families – frankly and openly with her and her sisters when it was the right time, pointing out that it was just a biological condition and nothing to be ashamed of. As a result, from a young age, Sudha developed

confidence, a strong will, and an ability to think analytically and independently. She was also very courageous. One foggy morning, when she was walking to school by herself, a man tried to snatch her gold earrings. Instead of being afraid, Sudha yelled fiercely, berating him, and smacked him hard with her umbrella. The startled thief ran away as fast as he could.

Murthy, thinking about how strictly his own sisters had been brought up with the dual 'virtues' of obedience and docility, and with a suitable marriage as their only goal, said to Sudha, 'Do you realize how lucky you are to come from a family where you were never held back because you were a girl? Where you were actually encouraged to study and to stand up for yourself?'

'I do,' Sudha said, suddenly serious. 'It was a true gift. That's why I must make the most of it.'

Growing up, Sudha had a close relationship with her siblings, and they rarely quarrelled. She looked up to her older sister Sunanda. While her younger siblings, Jaishree and Shrinivas, were enrolled in an English-medium school after the family moved to Hubli, Sunanda and Sudha went to a Kannada-medium school in Hubli because that was what they were used to.

But from a fairly young age, Sudha sensed the importance of learning English. Every weekend, she would go to the public library with her brother Shri, who was her favourite sibling. Sudha and Shri shared a deep passion for reading. They would pack their lunches and spend the whole day at the library, reading books in English. Often, Sudha would ask Shri, who was very bright and precocious for his age, the meanings of English words she did not know, and he would tell her. How dearly she loved

him was clear from early in her life when, as a four-year-old, he cut up her dolls with a pair of illicit scissors he had procured from somewhere. Anyone else would have thrown a fit – and perhaps beaten him up. But Sudha, though upset, ultimately forgave him and even protected him from the anger of their parents.

Sudha was not particularly skilled – or interested in – 'girlish' pastimes. While Sunanda and Jaishree occupied themselves with embroidery, knitting and artwork, she would want to play outside or read. But when it was necessary, she rose to the occasion. When Sunanda went off to college, Sudha took over the daily task of braiding Jaishree's hair before school. She was not particularly good at this – and Jaishree was quite fussy – so Sudha often had to redo her braids. But she was always patient with her younger sister. They grew particularly close because after Sunanda left for college the two shared a room. When Jaishree was about to depart for Canada after her marriage, Sudha gave her a pillow that she had slowly and painstakingly embroidered with her sister's name. Jaishree loved this pillow, and she would often hug it during the freezing Canadian winters when she was homesick.

Not all of Sudha's childhood escapades were admirable, but she enjoyed sharing even these misadventures with Murthy because she loved to make him laugh. One of these occurred when she was eight years old. One fine morning, Sudha told her mother, Vimala, who had been a schoolteacher, that she was done with education. 'I don't want to go to school any more,' she explained. 'I can read, write, multiply and divide. That is enough for life.'

This was a shock to her mother. She had never come across something like this in her family. Aghast, she asked Sudha what she would do instead.

'I'll read the newspaper in the morning,' Sudha said. 'And in the afternoon, I'll read magazines and library books.' At first, her mother thought it was just a passing phase, but it turned out that Sudha was serious about this. No one could get her to go to school. She was spanked for her stubbornness, and when that didn't work, her mother turned to the elders in the family to talk some sense into her. Her grandmother pleaded with her to at least study until she graduated from school, but Sudha refused. Other relatives said, 'Somehow get her through Class 10. This girl is clearly lazy and not too bright. You had better get her married off as soon as you can.'

None of this had any effect on Sudha. In the following weeks, she would get up in the morning, have breakfast with her siblings, and see them off to school before settling down to read magazines like *Chandamama*. Her mother was so furious that she refused to speak to her. But soon, Sudha herself got bored. She discovered the *Chandamama* stories were repetitive, regurgitating the same plots and jokes. She missed her friends and siblings. Most of all, she missed the intellectual stimulation of school, trying to answer the teachers' questions, learning new things. After two months, she announced she was ready to return to school. From then on, she dived hungrily into her studies and loved every subject she came across.

Murthy was both amused and amazed by this story. In his home, he told Sudha, such stubbornness would have resulted in severe punishments from his father. In fact, neither his siblings nor he had ever dared to stand up against their father, even if he insisted on something that was not right.

'What an exceptional upbringing you had!' he said to Sudha.

Murthy's family background was similar to Sudha's in several ways. They were both Kannadigas; they were middle children; and they came from families that valued education highly. Like Sudha's grandfather, Murthy's father was a schoolteacher – and later, an inspector of government schools. However, the atmosphere and culture of his home life couldn't have been more different. Money was often short in Murthy's household, and his father was a very strict man. He had to work very hard to take care of a large family, on a government teaching job, and was not as close to his children as he would have liked. He focused instead on teaching them about literature (introducing them to Shakespeare and Wordsworth), politics and Western classical music. He was an admired teacher, extremely good in English, mathematics and physics, and often rated as the best in these subjects in his school. His children, including Murthy, respected him deeply and were in awe of him, although they were somewhat distant from him.

Sudha's father, Dr R.H. Kulkarni, was an affectionate, even indulgent parent, willing to discuss all her important life decisions with her. She idolized him and, at the same time, thought of him as her dearest friend, someone in whom she could confide. Murthy's father, Rama Rao, in contrast, was a reserved man who had faced many disappointments in his life. Though he had received a scholarship to study abroad, his mother, who was very traditional and believed that crossing the ocean (the kala pani) would make him lose his religion, had refused to allow him to go. Despite the fact that he had never visited London, he could draw a map of the city and explain to his children where the Houses of Parliament and the Imperial College (to which he had been admitted to) were. Rama Rao finally took up a teaching job and

later became an inspector of schools, but he always felt that life had been unfair to him. These feelings were compounded by the fact that his first wife had died, leaving him with children to look after. This shaped his personality: he was strict yet affectionate, a disciplinarian, extremely upright, idealistic and honest but had a temper. His problem was that he was never satisfied with whatever he or his children achieved. He always wanted them to aim higher and would constantly lecture them at mealtimes on issues and philosophies, telling them to put the interests of society ahead of themselves. Even when he took them on a rare Sunday outing to the Maidan, it would be so that they could listen to political speeches (sometimes by Nehru). Everything, for him, was a lesson that he needed to impart.

While Murthy did not particularly enjoy these daily harangues, he was young at this time and thus very impressionable. His father's speeches on the glories of socialism, coloured by Nehruvian philosophy, and the importance of contributing to nation-building went deep into him. These ideas would guide him in his twenties and make him an admirer of socialism. Even after he decided to become a compassionate capitalist and entrepreneur, they would shape the way in which he envisioned his dream company. On the other hand, having learnt of the negative effects of his traditional family on his father, who had been robbed of a chance to study in London, and seeing the persecution of the lower castes in the villages and small towns where he lived, Murthy became extremely averse to such behaviour. He particularly detested the fact that lower-caste men were hired to clean toilets in upper-caste homes. He vowed that such a custom would never be followed in his own home. Once he moved into his own place, he always cleaned his toilet

himself. Another custom that Murthy disliked was the fact that some Brahmins proudly flaunted their caste superiority, expecting better treatment at temples or during festivals. Once he became an adult, Murthy refused to wear anything that indicated his caste.

While Murthy learnt many positive values from the lectures Rama Rao routinely dispensed to his captive audience, he also sometimes had to face his temper. One Sunday afternoon, seven-year-old Murthy was playing at home with a friend from the neighbourhood. His father was sleeping, and Murthy's mother, Padmavathamma, warned them not to disturb his father's holiday nap. But the boys were immersed in their game and did not listen. In their excitement, they became quite loud. The next thing Murthy knew was that he was flying across the room. He heard a thud and felt a sharp pain in his head. Shocked, he realized that blood was pouring over his face. His mother later told him that his father had awakened due to the children's racket, stormed out, slapped Murthy's friend, and kicked Murthy so hard that his head hit the sharp edge of a steel trunk. Despite his mother's frantic efforts, Murthy lost a good deal of blood. And the scars from that day, both physical and mental, remained with him.

It was a story he had never told anyone before. To the aghast Sudha, Murthy said, 'I never forgot that incident. It affected my relationship with my father and distanced me from him. But I learnt an important lesson that day.'

Sudha was afraid to probe further, but finally she could not remain silent. Touching his scar gently, she asked, 'What lesson was that?'

The answer revealed to her something crucial about the man sitting in front of her and perhaps made her fall a little deeper in love.

'I learnt never to be violent with children,' Murthy said sombrely.

Fortunately, like Sudha, Murthy had an affectionate extended family. He spent many of his holidays with his grandparents or with his maternal uncle, Krishnamurthy Rao (his dear Kittu Mava) in Sidlaghatta. He told Sudha these were some of his happiest memories. While not rich, his uncle was generous-hearted and made sure he sent Murthy home with at least one or two sets of new clothes. Perhaps he knew that money was in short supply in Murthy's household, and new clothes were often considered an extravagance.

'I especially remember watching Telugu films like *Devdas*, *Pelli Chesi Choodu* and *Mayabazar* with friends and family, and memorizing and singing popular songs, such as "Vivaha Bhojanambu". My friends often asked me to sing for them.'

That is how Sudha learnt that Murthy, too, had a good singing voice! After this, she would sometimes ask him to sing for her, and he would shyly oblige her.

Murthy told Sudha, 'My closest friends there were the son of a dosa maker in a small restaurant near my uncle's place and the son of a grocery shop attendant. Our dreams were small. Our pleasures were inexpensive. They taught me to enjoy small things.' It was a habit that would remain with him all his life.

When Murthy was young, Rama Rao was transferred often – from Tumkur to Srinivasapur to Mandya to Madhugiri and

finally, when Murthy was in Class 10, to Mysore – and as a result Murthy had to learn to make new friends in each new place. Often, he did this by causing mischief in school and clowning around to make his classmates laugh. When, in 1954, his father was sent to Mandya, a middle-sized town in Karnataka, the eight-year-old Murthy developed the habit of sitting in the last row in class. He was particularly naughty in geography class, which was taught by a man who was lame in one leg. Every time the teacher noticed that Murthy was up to some mischief in the back of the class, he would physically drag him from the last row to the first and resume his teaching. But as soon as he turned his back to write on the board, Murthy would run back to the last row, and the poor teacher had to repeat the process.

'It would be accurate to say that more dragging than teaching happened in that class!' Murthy told Sudha ruefully.

Sometime later, this teacher passed away and there was a memorial for him in the school. Perhaps regretting his pranks, Murthy composed a song in his honour. Knowing that he was a good singer, his classmates urged him to perform it at the memorial, in front of all the teachers and the headmaster. The song went like this in Kannada: '*Kodiyalada kunta kanmarayadano; Ganita shatradali jaana / Sangeetadali nipuna / Boogoladali praveena / Charitryali prachanda*.' It commemorated his teacher for being very bright in arithmetic, a maestro in music, an expert in geography, and unbeatable in history. Unfortunately, the song began with a description of the teacher's lameness.

Murthy was singing his composition enthusiastically, his eyes closed, when he was shocked by a hard slap to his head. It was his English teacher, yelling at him for making fun of his dead colleague – though that had not been Murthy's intention at all.

'This incident put a damper on my public performance plans for quite some time!' Murthy told Sudha.

Like Sudha, Murthy also went to Kannada-medium schools. It was only after he went to Mysore that he learnt the importance of learning English – and that, too, from a most unusual source.

'We had a grocery shop opposite our house,' Murthy told Sudha. 'I was often dispatched there to buy items we had run out of. Many times when I got to the store, I would see the old shopkeeper deeply absorbed in reading the *Deccan Herald*. He told me it was the best English newspaper in Karnataka at that time.

'For some inexplicable reason, this shopkeeper took an interest in my education. Often, he would quiz me on international news, including political events, sports and science. I would invariably fail. One day, he gave me a long lecture on why English was important for my career and asked me to read the English newspaper every day. When I told him that we did not get one at home, and that my father would never agree to the extra expense of buying one, he offered me the first use of his English paper. From that day on, I would be eagerly waiting for his shop to open every morning at 7 a.m. I would immediately run there and read the paper for half an hour before going to school. This is when I got into the habit of reading English.'

While Sudha and Murthy had many things in common because of their shared Kannada background and their love for reading,

their very different childhoods shaped them in unique ways. The warm, encouraging attitude of Sudha's parents, along with the affection of both her grandparents, made her into a sweet-natured, bubbly and confident person who laughed and befriended others easily. It is possible that several of the young men who knew her were in love with her!

On the other hand, all the young Murthy could hope for – especially from his father – was a gentle exhortation to do even better. As a result, Murthy grew into a young man who was bright, intense and, like his parents, principled – sometimes to an extreme degree – but never satisfied with what he had achieved and always aiming higher, solitary by nature, and unwilling to compromise. Paradoxically, it was their differences, more than their similarities, that drew Sudha and Murthy to each other. Together, they completed each other, like a yin–yang circle. But differences can also lead to severe challenges, especially under stressful circumstances. Though they had no inkling of this at the time, many such challenges awaited them.

One such challenge was the template of marriage that Murthy carried in his subconscious, based on what he had seen of his parents' marriage. (He would only become aware of it and the assumptions that rose from it, and the challenges that it created for him and Sudha, much later.) Murthy's parents' relationship was a traditional one of that period: affectionate yet also formal. While his parents co-existed in the same house – his father earned and his mother provided her husband with all the daily necessities such as food and clean clothes, and looked after the children, including those from his first marriage – they rarely sat down to chat. Murthy's mother was Rama Rao's second wife. Unlike him, she had had only a few years of schooling and although the two would speak openly about matters to

do with their children and family issues, it was not a modern companionship where they exchanged ideas and listened to each other. Rama Rao was caring and dutiful towards his wife and offspring. He would, for instance, nurse the children when they were sick and take his wife to the cinema but would rarely show any outward signs of affection towards her.

This marital model left a strong impression on the young Murthy. Although his relationship with Sudha was very unlike this, especially in the early years, and they spent much time discussing important issues and advising each other, as things got very busy and stressful with Infosys, Murthy would find himself reverting to this old template where he took care of the 'outside world' and expected Sudha to handle 'home issues'. And like his father, he would have little time for companionship. Instead, he kept whatever worries and fears he had – and the loneliness they engendered – largely to himself because as a child he had learnt that that was what a man was supposed to do.