

Capture the Dream

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The Many Lives of
Captain C.P. Krishnan Nair

Bachi Karkaria

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*To my grandsons: Kahaan, master chef, and
Kabir, master cool*

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	xi
Introduction	1
1. A Birth That Almost Wasn't	2
2. Just Another Village Childhood	4
3. Protectors, Celestial and Secular	8
4. Willingly to School	11
5. Caste No Bar	14
6. The Verse That Powered a Future	16
7. College, Set in a Diamond Ring	19
8. Seeing Red	21
9. Into the Army with the Kindness of Strangers	26
10. The 6'5" Inspiration	30
11. Chirakkal Interlude	33
12. The Prawn Pickle Password	35
13. Next Stop, Ration Shop	41
14. The Bugle Calls Again	45
15. Enter, Leela	49
16. Failing Uncle VP	53

17. Coconut Husk in a Mercedes	57
18. A Leg-Up for Handlooms	60
19. Let It Bleed	64
20. Lace to the Top	70
21. Curtains for Gregory Peck	76
22. The Path to 'Nirvana'	78
23. Hoteliers to the World	83
24. An Airport, NRIs and Designer Jeans	85
25. Portering Prêt	91
26. A Tale of Two CMs	97
27. Trouble at Take-Off	100
28. (M)anna from Heaven	104
29. Ain't No Airport Hotel	107
30. Winter at Four Seasons	111
31. A Taste of Madhu	116
32. More Bangalore for Your Buck	120
33. Life Is a Beach	125
34. The South Soars North	130
35. The Dowager and the Challenger	136
36. Return of the Native	139
37. The Hurdle Called HUDCO	145
38. The Palace on the Lake	148
39. Landing on Another Planet	155
40. A Capital Idea Killed by Interest	158
41. The Ironies Which Rust	166
42. Jumping on the Brandwagon	171
43. A Man in Full	178
44. A Heart for All Seasons	191
45. In the War Room and Trenches	196
46. For Guest and Country	202

47. Trailblazer in Parrot-Green Blazers	205
48. The Captain's Table	209
49. I Ever Promised You a Rose Garden	216
50. The Spiritual Sensualist	220
51. Friend, Guide, Wife	223
52. Kerala Boy	228
53. Till Debt Do Us Part	234
54. Where's the Crisis?	239
55. Epilogue	244
56. The Inheritors	245
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	250

Foreword

When I first met Captain Nair in the early 1980s, he was in his 60s. In the first half an hour of our interaction, the thing that struck me most was his amazing passion and optimism for life. Always upbeat, at an age when most of us would plan to slow down and dream of blissful days of retirement, here was a man ready to defy all odds to keep changing his life's trajectory, while creating milestones along the way.

A former army captain, he joined his wife's handloom enterprise and created a flourishing business, developing and marketing handloom textiles like fine lace for home décor and the famous 'Bleeding Madras' fabrics – something I related to immediately having been called the 'Madras Monsoon' on the world tennis stage! The success of this business paved the way for huge fabric and garment exports from India.

The unstoppable Captain Nair then embarked on his next venture with equal passion and energy – to create the magnificent Leela Hotels. His interest in the hotel industry was inspired by his love for India and its famous hospitality tradition. He realized that the India of his dreams would need world-class facilities, the kind he had experienced during his stay at some of the finest hotels in the West. He saw it as an opportunity to showcase the resplendent culture of India. Here was a chance to contribute towards the building of a nation by creating world-class hotels and resorts. He was sure that luxury could be translated into exquisite

interiors and beautiful gardens that would recreate the unique grandeur of India, putting the country on the world tourism map.

To my mind, Captain Nair is proof that if we dare to dream, we can transform the course of our own destiny through creativity, hard work and passion. I recall spending so many evenings with him in his lovely suite at the majestic Leela Hotels, where he would share his future thoughts and dreams for India's growth. Today, he lives on through the masterpieces he created, always an inspiration to all of us whose lives he touched.

This book is a small gesture of admiration, appreciation and love.

December 2021
Los Angeles, California

Vijay Amritraj

Introduction

‘And one man in his time plays many parts.’

– William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

Those who live till the age of ninety-two often have a ringside seat as history unfolds. Some even manage a role in shaping some of the drama. But there are a few who dare divide their world into several stages, and stride across each of them with a performance to remember. Captain C.P. Krishnan Nair was one such serial player.

Leftist and capitalist. Freedom fighter, rationing overseer, soldier. Promoter of humble handloom and manufacturer of Scottish lace. Finally, and most remarkably, the hotelier who redefined luxury. The child who could only get rice gruel for breakfast went on to dine with kings.

This is his story.

A Birth that Almost Wasn't

'In the midnight shadows of a forest clearing, bounded on one side by a moonlit paddy field, on the other by the darkness of a rubber plantation and a green canopy of coconut palms, lit only by a bonfire and a carpet of flickering camphor lights, a large crowd has gathered . . . They are waiting and watching for the moment when, once a year, the gods come down to earth, and dance . . . For 20 minutes now, a troupe of six, sweat-glistening, half naked, Dalit drummers have been raising their tempo. The insistent beats they are rapping out on the goat-hide chenda drums is getting louder, faster, more frenzied. The first of the dancers has just been "seized by the gods".'

– 'The Dancer of Kannaur', *Nine Lives*, William Dalrymple

In that rapt crowd sits a skinny five-year-old, holding on to his mother with clammy hands. She brings him every year to the sacred ritual that is unique to this part of Kerala's northern Malabar coast. The sight of the gaudily painted Theyyam dancers pirouetting, shimmying and

leaping around in a trance with swords unsheathed would terrify even an uninitiated adult.

However, with lullaby and legend, Madhavi Amma has ingrained in her son the power of the community deity, Muchilot Bhagavathi, who is now ready to possess the dancers. Despite the fanged, red-painted face and huge red-gilt mirrored headdress flashing a myriad reflected light, little Krishnan is not afraid. Subconsciously, he is being rooted to his Vaniya culture as firmly as the sentinel palms to the land. Like their fruit, he will be carried across a sea of continents and careers but will remain moored to this core of his being.

Yet, C.P. Krishnan Nair may not have been at all. Infant mortality was a fact of life in 1922, even in India's big cities. Modern medicine was unheard of in Kunnavil, a village in Kannur district, Kerala. When she was pregnant with him, Madhavi Amma often gazed upon her belly bump with dismay. Her fourth had died immediately after birth just months earlier, and she dreaded a repetition of that trauma.

She had collected a bunch of herbs and already pounded them ready to swallow when her friend Mani Amma fortuitously arrived and flung away the abortive mush. Not only did she save the unborn child, but also put him to her breast soon after he emerged. She was also nursing her own infant.

Gregorian calendars being as unknown as pre- and postnatal care at the time, the new baby's date of birth was determined by a totally extraneous event: the marriage of the son of the nearby Victoria Weaving Mill's owner. Madhavi Amma had gone into labour just as the groom was being welcomed with drums and firecrackers, and that's what determined 9 February 1922 as the fifth child's date of birth. He would be one of seven siblings who survived from nine pregnancies. Back then, no one knew the enormity of tiny Krishnan's escape into the world.

Just Another Village Childhood

Kunnavil is a pin-sized dot of a village some distance from Kannur, the main cantonment town of the eponymous district. Krishnan's parents owned 2 acres of land there and had built a thatched hut amidst palms which provided shade and income. Madhavi Amma, who came from farming stock, sold the dried kernel as copra or crushed it for oil. Her husband, Appu Nair, was a cog in the revenue machinery, accompanying the village headman to collect taxes. You might call him a peon if you were being blunt. Still, this job cushioned the harshness of his lowly Vaniya caste, even in this region's rigidly stratified system. He was empowered to enter any house in the course of duty. His monthly salary was Rs 9, not princely, but not a pittance. Like an obedient member of a matrilineal society, he would hand over most of it to his wife.

Salary day was also boys' day out. Fathers and sons would go to town – literally. They would walk 10 km from the village to big, bustling Kannur, which explains why the child would remain so fit into adulthood. The trip combined business with pleasure. Their first courtesy call would be to the main coconut oil trader, 'Meeshakkaran' (moustachioed) Kunhiraman. Little Krishnan looked forward to this because his precocious charm was rewarded with a shiny Re 1 coin – a gesture which also indicated

the regard the dealer had for Madhavi Amma, his industrious supplier.

In his Malayalam autobiography, *Krishnanleela*,¹ released in Kovalam on 25 July 2011 by Kerala chief minister Oommen Chandy, Captain Nair records that more than the rows of administrative buildings in Kannur, he was awed by its many greens ‘which lay spread like the skies. Municipal Maidan, Fort Maidan were the trademark features of Kannur. Large assemblies and protests to do with the freedom struggle took place in these venues. If one were to put one’s ear to the ground here today, one might hear the old rumbles again. However, now the maidans are all in pieces and resemble a mutilated body. Kannur developed slowly and when this happened the first victims were what constituted the heart of the town.’

These sentences reveal how the child is father of the man. Nature would remain the alluring call on all his travels, and Krishnan became not merely the observer, but also the creator in his seventies – lush gardens were a signature touch in the hotels he built, signifying one among his many passions. It was in Kannur’s expansive green spaces that he attended political rallies that inspired his teenage slogans as he fought for freedom from social inequalities.

The boy Krishnan looked up to his father, but his heart belonged to his amma, who doted on him more than any of his three elder siblings. He was probably considered even more special because like the fourth child, the sixth had also died at birth. As ‘Kochukrishnan’ lay on a mat with its distinct Malabar weaves, she would croon him to sleep. He was lulled by her hymns to Muchilot Bhagavathi but would listen wide-eyed to the songs about the mythic warriors from northern Malabar. These ballads were enshrined in a collection of medieval Malayalam ditties called *Vadakkan Pattukal*, though the simple village woman was unlikely to have heard of this tome. Madhavi Amma had imbibed them in the same way that they had been passed down for four centuries: as part of

¹ *Krishnanleela* by Captain C.P. Krishnan with Thaha Madayi (DC Books, 2007). All quotes unless otherwise indicated are from the English version, *My Leela, My Life*, translated, updated and recast by T.C. Narayan in 2011.

the strong oral cultural tradition that binds rural communities everywhere in the world.

Thrilling to the martial arts prowess of Aromal Chekavar and Thacholi Othenan, the child cast himself in these heroic roles. Not in his most fanciful dreams would he have thought that he would become something of a Malayali folk hero himself, acquiring a larger-than-life reputation as a creator of wealth and jobs.

Gently shaking her tiny warrior awake, Madhavi Amma would spoon out the traditional breakfast: last night's rice mixed with fresh buttermilk, diluted with the water in which the rice had been boiled, all of it spiked with the brine of pickled limes. The older Krishnan would write in his autobiography that this humble gruel 'accounted for the brawn and brain of every North Kerala child of my generation'. Previous and successive ones too.

When he was a little older, he helped by sweeping the area where she dried the coconuts, happily munching on the slivers of copra that flew from her blade, as lethal as the *urumi* swords of his *kalaripayattu* heroes.



Madhavi Amma had grown up in Kootali in a place surrounded by perfumed trees. Her home was in the benign shadow of the Muchilot Bhagavathi temple, where her father was a *komaram*, one who knows and understands the deity. In an age still unmarred by the human-wildlife conflict, elephants from Coorg often landed up in the forests surrounding their home. Madhavi Amma passed on her love for these intelligent, gentle giants to her son. Krishnan's second school was in paddy-rich Etakkad, not far from Kootali. On weekends, she would take him to see the lumbering visitors, let him stroke their trunks and play with their calves.

Eight decades later, he would gaze at her faded photograph and softly whisper, 'Amma, this naughty son of yours, Krishnan, who grew up on

that morning gruel is approaching 90 years of age. I would still love to go back to our old home and see the elephant that lost its way. But those elephant tracks, those forests and the trees that exuded fragrance have all gone far, far away!