Tuticorin

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Adventures in Tamil Nadu's Crime Capital

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juggernaut

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For Kamakshi Vanchinathan, my mother,
without whom this and much more – all of it –
clearly wouldn't have been possible

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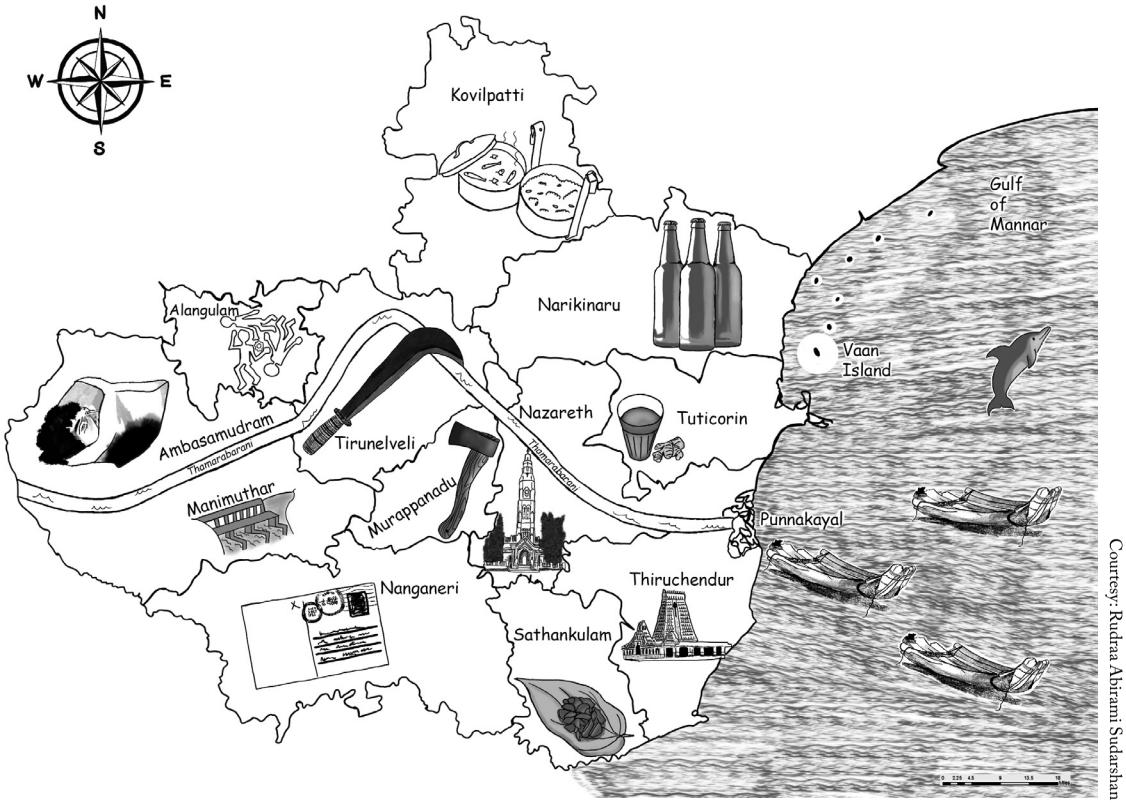

Courtesy: Rudraa Abirami Sudarshan

Sketch Map of Tuticorin District

Preface

Tuticorin, or Thoothukudi as it is called now, is one of the most violent districts in Tamil Nadu. Situated along the picturesque coast of the Gulf of Mannar, it is awash with illicit liquor and populated with fiercely independent fisherfolk and farmers. It is infamous for its smugglers, gangsters and rowdies, particularly in and around the two harbours of the town, and a difficult district to handle for the police.

This large district, once a part of Tirunelveli, has witnessed unspeakable levels of violence, some undoubtedly due to the heavy-handedness of the police. In Kodiyankulam in 1995, eighteen people died after a force of six hundred uniformed men were deployed in the village, and more recently in May 2018, over a dozen died in police action in Thoothukudi.

So bad was the reputation, that in the seventies and eighties, it was said that if a lodger went looking for a room in Madras to stay in and gave a Tuticorin address, lodgekeepers invariably had second thoughts.

The stories that you will read here are all true. They are centred around the experiences of an idealistic young Indian Police Service (IPS) officer, Anoop Jaiswal, who retired as the director general of police (DGP), and was considered a misfit in the larger system. All the incidents you will read about occurred between January 1981, when Jaiswal joined the Police Academy with stars in his eyes, and 1989, when his posting in Tuticorin ended.

The narrative trails him as he grew into his job and adjusted to the reality of maintaining law and order in a difficult district, just as reality adjusted to his unconventional self. It chronicles Jaiswal's story as he found himself in the middle of a massacre, encountering murderers, kidnappers, thieves, sex workers, illicit liquor sellers, and rapacious moneylenders. All this as he came to grips with his accidental calling, and became a superintendent of police (SP) in the newly created district of Tuticorin.

Before we proceed, it would be useful to contextualize how Jaiswal's formative experiences as a cadet officer had crystallized in him, not only his single-minded determination to see justice served but also to reveal his strength of character and his singular dedication.

We will learn more about him in the following pages and the reader might be surprised that he ended up becoming a policeman, when he had actually wanted to be a scientist and had almost become a fighter pilot.

Jaiswal was born on 23 June 1955, in Gorakhpur, UP, into a humble family. He passed the UPSC civil services

exam in 1980 and was offered a post in the IPS. By then, he was married to Neelam and had reported to the National Police Academy (NPA) in Hyderabad in January 1981 for training, after the obligatory stint at the Lal Bahadur Shastri Academy in September 1980.

As a cadet officer, Jaiswal had been thrown out of the NPA in Hyderabad, a very rare occurrence, and was allotted the Tamil Nadu cadre, almost on the eve of passing out. This was essentially as punishment for merely being unconventional and questioning the system during training.

With his second child already on the way, he had sought justice in the courts. What followed had been a lonely battle to clear his name. The Delhi High Court had dismissed his claim, and he had then appealed to the Supreme Court. Eventually, he had won his job back after more than two and a half years of court hearings. The Supreme Court judgement (*Anoop Jaiswal vs Government of India & Anr on 24 January, 1984*) is a landmark one, cited in the All India Reporter (1984 AIR 636, 1984 SCR (2) 453).

That was a turning point in his life.

I first met Anoop Jaiswal at the Home Ministry, in New Delhi's North Block, while he was working as the Deputy Director of the 'K Branch' of the Intelligence Bureau, which was on the ground floor to the right of Gate Number 7 as you entered. This was sometime in 2000. I was cutting my teeth as a journalist, reporting on New Delhi's travails in Kashmir, and I was in the North Block more often than I would care to admit. I didn't know what Jaiswal was doing

there. Looking back, given the way things are today in Kashmir, I must say, neither did his colleagues, seniors and juniors. But I digress.

I caught up with Jaiswal later in the middle of 2007 in Chennai where I had become a newspaper bureaucrat. Jaiswal had been posted there some years earlier and he was soon to become Chief Minister Karunanidhi's 'Intelligence Czar', holding the rank of additional director general of police (ADGP).

The following incident happened in early 2009 and it should give the reader some insight into Jaiswal's attitude towards his profession.

Inside Hall No. 3 of the Madras High Court, 17 February 2009

Dr Subramanian Swamy, dressed in a spotless white kurta, appeared before Justices P.K. Mishra and K. Chandru to implead himself in a case to challenge the Tamil Nadu government's takover of the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram. What happened thereafter had no bearing on the Nataraja temple.

This was Tamil Nadu, where the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Velupillai Prabhakaran had cast a powerful spell of magic on Tamil Nadu's politics before Prabhakaran was meted out a death you could not have wished even upon a rabid dog. During the proceedings, twenty or so advocates barged into the courtroom and

hurled rotten eggs on the Harvard-educated politician. Scuffles ensued. There were reports of manhandling as well.

Given the furore the incident raised, the judges passed an order to the police to take criminal action against the perpetrators. The lawyers pleaded that they were on boycott of the court since 29 January 2009 – a boycott that included fasts and processions – all in support of the Sri Lankan Tamils; they clearly stated that they were not supporting the LTTE. Dr Swamy had demanded persistently that Velupillai Prabhakaran be deported to India to stand trial for the assassination of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The rotten eggs were mere tokenisms hurled in the name of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. The Armed Reserve Police were called in and they entered an already murky situation. A complicated Mexican stand-off developed.

A day or so later when fifteen advocates were led into the B4 police outpost in the Madras High Court premises, all hell broke loose. A police video of the events established the basic plot. At 3.45 p.m. the police arrested some lawyers and herded them inside a van. A general scrimmage began during which some lawyers ran into the court building. A couple of minutes later, stones were thrown. The lawyers had started it and the police returned the compliment, though it was clear that they were not giving as good as they were getting. (I would say 5:1 in favour of the black-coated advocates.)

By 4 p.m. stones littered the area, and there was shattered glass in the court buildings and the car park. By 4.15 p.m.

police had withdrawn to the area in front of the B4 police station, that had a sanctioned strength of over a hundred policemen (the court registrar would write to the Home Secretary on 24 February, requesting him not to post any policewomen in the court premises). The police were almost barricaded by motorcycles and scooters laying prone on the ground. At 4.42 p.m. the video footage recorded a fire breaking out on the court roof. At 5.02 the lawyers advanced throwing stones. By 5.30 the police had withdrawn well behind the B4 station, the lawyers overrunning the area vacated by the police. Obscenities flew in all directions. At 5.37 p.m. papers and chairs were set on fire, and a metal cupboard from inside the police station was dragged out and thrown into the fire. A fire engine screamed its way upon the scene but then, under the onslaught of stones, it retreated. With B4 station flaming both inside and outside, the police carried away an injured colleague. As the light faded at 5.45 in the evening, the police rushed in swinging their lathis. This marked the end of the video.

Unfortunately, no video of what happened later was available, when the lathis did all the talking. The lathis, we journalists, would report, spoke emphatically and equally to cars, motorcycles, advocates, journalists and even judges, though the last-mentioned category preferred not to advance complaints. The Supreme Court took suo moto cognizance of the happenings in the Madras High Court and asked Justice Srikrishna to look into the matter.

The Chief Justice of the Madras High Court issued

written directions to the government to suspend the additional commissioner of police (ACP) for mishandling the law and order situation. The chief minister too wanted to suspend the ACP. He called for a meeting to discuss the development.

It was at his spacious office in Fort St George that Jaiswal got the message about the incident in the evening. He went to the SP Special Branch and wrote a small paragraph in English. More or less, this is what he wrote: 'Suspension is a judicial function of the suspending authority. Which means that the suspending authority has to apply his mind on the available evidence and proof about the errors or lapses of any officer. The suspending authority cannot be directed by someone else, as it has been done, in this instance.'

The SP Special Branch translated it into Tamil. Jaiswal took both the English and Tamil versions and walked into the chief minister's office wherein hung a giant likeness of Thiruvalluvar, the poet saint of Tamil Nadu. The chief secretary, the home secretary, the DGP were all there, all inclined towards his suspension.

Jaiswal, after going around the enormous desk behind which Karunanidhi sat, his dark glasses shielding his inscrutable silence, handed over the Tamil version to the chief minister. The DGP read the English version and passed it around. ADGP Jaiswal sat, isolated, in one of the chairs that faced the chief minister. In the debate that followed, Jaiswal pointed out that no enquiry had been initiated against the additional commissioner, neither by the state government

nor by the police. The Supreme Court had appointed the Srikrishna Commission to look into the incidents at the Madras High Court, and the report was being awaited. Hence there was no basis for suspension.

A question curled in the air – 'Wouldn't it be tantamount to contempt of court?'

'We could tell the court we are in receipt of your communication and we are looking into it,' Jaiswal responded. The chief minister agreed.

This is the eternal dilemma of Indian police officers: Will they get the necessary political backing for their actions? This situation arises because they are carefully nurtured in a culture where they seek/require political direction for every little action they take, not knowing the kind of political connections the person against whom the action is sought might possess. The police are controlled, and interfered with, not only on day-to-day basis but from hour to hour, too.

The law envisages the police to be as independent as the judiciary. The police derive power from the law, but while exercising it, that power becomes delegative. In the army, the soldier shoots at a person because they are ordered to, and the person who gives the order becomes responsible. In theory, an inspector of police can never say they were ordered to do so; they can only say as an investigative officer this was the action they took based on what was uncovered during the investigations. Yet in practice, day in and day out, all over India, all sorts of executive oral orders are issued to the police to do this or that. This perversion of the chain of

command is rampant. Leadership is the first casualty in each of these myriad everyday situations.

The stories that you read here are rooted precisely in such everyday situations. They are therefore crime stories but with a difference. These are real stories. They are not arranged in any chronological order but rather shuffled to present a slice of life in the districts that make up the larger, invisible part of India, with its hard life and harder choices, where millions seethe unseen and unheard, lost to the English-newspaper-reading people. This is a nether region where criminals are also human beings, and yes, where policemen also make mistakes, and nothing is in black and white.

In a sense, this is R.K. Narayan territory – it is a small town in South India, possessing all the life and colour of a bustling commercial centre. But instead of being seen through the eyes of sign-painters and tour guides as in Narayan's novels, it is seen through the eyes of a policeman who must engage every day with the dark side of that small town and its rural surroundings. It is Malgudi seen through a dark, distorted lens.

I wrote the first of these stories, that of Ganiammal, way back in 2009, and it appears here almost in the same form and tone. The rest I heard over a period of time, whenever I met Anoop Jaiswal, and I carried them around somewhere in my mind where they lurked furtively. When I finally sat down to give life to them on 23 June 2021, I drove to Manapakkam in Chennai every evening, where Jaiswal lives after retirement. He spent most of his time immersed in

physics experiments, and we would go over the stories, one per sitting. And each sitting would end with the delicious soup Neelam Jaiswal prepared, a different soup every day. And, to my satisfaction, she even garnished some of the stories with her reminiscences of the same time.

Incidentally, it was Manoj Das, the Odia bilingual writer and Sahitya Akademi awardee, who had originally wanted to write about the incident that I recounted now in this book under the heading 'Post paid'. Das lived in Puducherry at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Chennai, and the Jaiswals had met him there, and when he heard the story, he was eager to write about it and asked for the corroborative material, which was then sent to him.

But just after six months, he passed away in April 2021. In that respect, I am thankful that fate seems to have been kinder to me. When the manuscript was all done and had a rough form and shape, we travelled, Jaiswal and I, to Tuticorin to add vividity and detail, among other things, to the stories.

Things had changed of course, in these three decades that had elapsed since Jaiswal was posted there. The roads were better, with more vehicles visible, and more pucca buildings. Everyone now used cell phones; there was electricity in almost every village of the district, but the grinding poverty was still evident in the small village of Narikinaru.

But some things had not changed. The elderly people remembered Jaiswal and those long-gone days. However, caste conflicts, crimes, and, I was told, even the moneylending

continues to this day. The more things change, the more they remain the same.

The people I met provided additional details and perspectives that had escaped Jaiswal's notice, even though he has a photographic memory, for which I was thankful. Truism though it might be, I daresay each of these stories would, inevitably, have had a different ending had Anoop Jaiswal not been present in their moments of occurrence.

The stylized sketch map of the district uses the old place names as given in the narrative. It should help the reader get a sense of the locations. Some names and nicknames have been changed to protect privacy.

Mumbai, March 2022