

DOWN THE MEMORY LANE - LIFE IN KONGU NADU¹

They called them 'line' houses; I don't know if they resemble the 'store' apartments you see in Chennai. First, imagine an empty lot measuring sixty feet long and forty feet wide; we are only talking about an area of one ground or five and quarter cents. From the street you get access to the tenements through a door on the broadside; a five-foot wide pathway serves as a common venue for all the residents – to carry water, park the bicycle, stop a TV bus for boarding, and perform other chores. There are houses on both sides of the pathway – say five or six – depending upon the owner's whim and fancy. With just one hop you can find yourself inside any house.

Let's say there are ten line houses (five on each side); as you enter, you would see two tubs below your eye level – one with water for drinking and the other untreated; they are called sumps. If you happen to enter a house facing south, you would notice a tub on your left; outside, a common wall separating five houses would also be visible. For the entire housing complex, there's only one door and one window looking out to the pathway; there are no other doors or windows. Two bathrooms and two lavatories are located at the farthest corner of the facility. There's no single, continuous roof to protect the entire place; each house has a roof slanting toward the street so that, when it rains, no house would be flooded. Think about it; even as the sixty feet by forty feet edifice with its top stands staring at the sky above, it seems to be looking only inwards.

Do you get the picture? I wish I could draw a map; that would not be an easy task.

Essentially, a line house has a working area ten feet by ten feet. When I state these dimensions please remember you are supposed to back off nine inches from the length and width. That's how you end up with what constitutes the reception room, kitchen, bed room, room for worship and guests, if any. Call it by any name: after all, god too has multiple names.

The next item that interests us is an area ten by seven with a kitchen; at its end is the drainage basin where you can wash your hands after dinner, gargle the mouth, and spit out the fin caught in your throat. You can rinse clothes too, and at night, may even pee.

¹ Refers to the region of Kanyakumari District in Tamil Nadu.

In the area separating the raised platform for cooking and the drainage basin sits a cement tub or a drum, if the owner is more affluent, surrounded by a miscellany of items like large, brass utensils for boiling water or storing drinking water; a medley of plastic and aluminum buckets, including a small one to carry water when attending nature's call. Next to the stove, is a rather tall rack for storing plates, ladles, tumblers, cooking vessels, and a small tin to hold the bottles. The cupboard next to the rack is used for storing mustard seeds, salt, pepper, urud dal, toor dal, rice, sugar, tea powder, and wheat flour.

The kitchen paraphernalia occupying the space under the mounted platform and the floor include the cooking vessels, onions, potato and other vegetables, vegetable baskets, the cooker, the mixer and other kitchen gadgets.

Up in the front there's a single cot, a small table with a TV or a cassette player or a transistor. A rolled up bed lies under the cot and a waist-high bureau makes up the rest of the furniture.

The house can be rented by a family of four with two children, and no more. The owners – even more vehemently than the government – seem keen on denying the renting privileges to any family with more than two children; even when that family of four included elders with a chance of not surviving beyond the next two or three years, the answer would be still a No.

Readers who keep raising questions in anguish how four souls could survive in a house without overcrowding ought to remember something: in places like Dharavi, Govandi, Chunabhatti, Mankhurd, and Koliwada, this line house would be broken into three units where a family of eight – adults, children, couple, and old parents – could survive in every one of them. Where there's will, nothing is impossible; a family of three can easily keep rolling on a woof.

We are all familiar with the story of a family that lived in a shoe. It does not mean that the social outcasts don't have a life of their own. The owners of the town houses had laid down rules and regulations for the residents – some three hundred six of them with clauses, sub clauses and addenda – but life continues on its course: the couples, under the Supreme Court authority, made love, had babies and raised them; they celebrated birthdays, became sick, recovered from illness, and met death when their end came. They received and entertained guests, quarreled with their neighbors and, later, made peace with them. They exchanged tomatoes, and *dosa* batter with one another; when they proffered a fish broth, they made sure that the soup was carefully covered with a lid to avoid contamination.

So, everything was wonderful

There were eight houses in my immediate neighborhood, some across mine and others sideways. I too was, essentially, living in a line house but I enjoyed a special privilege: a room exclusively for my use on first floor, where I could read, write and listen to music. And when I didn't feel like doing anything, I would freely hang around on the front porch, naked above the waist. I would be looking down like an emperor examining his subjects from his perch. Being a writer, I had no personal contact with any neighbors. During the last fourteen years of my life here only a lucky few had a rare look at my Mona Lisa smile, so no one was interested in me. I had fun watching what was going on around and my wife would often tease me that I was keen on watching women only, which may or not be true.

As befits the surroundings there's a marriage hall in our neighborhood and, standing on the terrace, I would be entertained by the sound of music from the festivities held there. When gentle breeze wafts from South, you can also feel the smell of the '*kuruma*' dish and, occasionally, the aroma of jasmine flowers.

Some time ago, when my friend Jeya Mohan came here to attend a wedding of his relative, he called me on his cell phone for directions to my house. Such a gesture would have surely shocked many of the folks living here!

Once, during a visit to my home, while traveling with Jeyamohan and A.K. Perumal, in Vedasahaya Kumar's car we visited *Peria Kadu*, *Sankudurai*, and the *Sottavilai* seacoast and enjoyed the outings we heard rumors that the ghosts of the tsunami victims were still hanging around those surroundings. Scared to stay beyond eight at night among the haunted palmyra groves and, after defying Jeyamohan's exhortation to be brave, we hurried for the return trip when Perumal guided us to a nearby *dosa* place. That's when I heard Perumal say that the outfit was famous for its *rava vada* and had attracted many literary giants to its premises; the list went on and on and included C.S. Chellappa, Ka. Na. Subramanian, Nakulan, Sundara Ramasamy, Venkat Swaminathan, Dharumu Sivaramu, G. Nagarajan, N.S. Nagarajan and a host of others.

Jeyamohan wanted to know if the owner was aware of its fame, and he pleaded ignorance. We wondered if the deity presiding over a nearby shrine knew about it.

Would a pot know how the *curry* really tastes?

Where was I? Yes, I am digressing . . .

I used to stand atop the first floor of my house and watch the ongoing fun down the street.

Funerals at unusual hours were a recurring event. The Krishnapuram cremation ground was within a walking distance. No cremation would be allowed from ten at night until three in the morning; once the sun sets, no corpse would be picked up until early the next morning.

During a funeral, flowers and small coins would be strewn at the head of the procession. On Saturdays, dozens of live chicken, innocent and ignorant, heads hung upside down, would be tied to the funeral bier and carried along even as they remain uninformed that neither God nor any of their attempts would stop them from paying a price with their lives.

It was on one of those occasions that my son returning from his elementary school proudly displayed a bunch of coins in his hand and told us he “found a lot of money sprinkled on the street!”

You will notice among the residents of the line houses a sense of communal harmony rarely found in our day-to-day life. There were Malayaalies, Andhras, Kannadigas and, among them, Christians, Moslems and peoples of other faiths. The owner of the line house could be a local *Kongunadu Vellala Kounder, Naikkar, Devar* or a *Naadar*, but no communal feelings would ever be aired in public; the rules were quite liberal as well; to suit the convenience of the tenant, the house rent could be paid on any of the days - from the first to the twenty first of the month. It's only when the unpaid rent accumulated for two months that the other weapons would be deployed – they are always at the owner's disposal- like dousing flames from an active fire place in the house, underlings forcibly entering the house and evicting the sleeping tenants out of their home; a torrent of verbal abuse in the most revolting language or making a scene to cause alienation between the tenants and their neighbors and friends. Sometimes the owner too would be living in one of the line houses: occasionally, that would be a blessing but more often, a curse.

Some city dwellers keep moving and are always looking for a house. You will notice people descending at night in groups to occupy a line house with a load of goods in a hand –driven or bullock cart; occasionally someone would vacate a house and leave with goods in a cart. On a day, early in the morning, you may encounter a stranger washing his teeth and greeting you with an enquiry, ‘How are you doing?’ There were many residents who had moved to houses in different streets in the last twenty five years of their lives in these tenements.

The green is always brighter on the other side; so goes the endless game of life.

Rosie, the little girl who prattled in her pleasant voice and asked for ice cream, is now a full-grown girl. I recall the days when the little Safina came to our house and wanted buttermilk for

fermentation; now, she's a mother to a toddler of eighteen months and the boy keeps waving from the house across mine. Four deaths of senior citizens and a premature death have taken place in the next line after I moved to this house. A girl from the neighborhood recently finished college and moved to Bangalore to take up a job. We no longer hear the stories of a man eloping with his neighbor's wife or the horrors of adolescent love.

It's only after the newcomers had settled down for a while you are likely to come across new faces: milkman, carpenter, electrician, photo-frame shop keeper, carpet maker, the mobile shoe salesman, the vendor of beef at the premises of Vasantha Mill; merchants plying their trades in all kinds of goods, drivers who operated vehicles for the bigwigs; and others who provide services as maids performing domestic chores, nannies and nurses taking care of the patients.

One day, late at night, I finished dinner, watched the TV serials, shed the last drops of tears and was about to change when I heard the majestic voice of a *nadhaswaram*. It seemed a routine bridegroom-inviting ritual, so I ignored it.

After a pause, I heard it again. There's no accompanying sound from a *thavil*, just a single *nadhaswaram* playing.

*'Chakkani rajamargamu undaga
Sandhulo duranela, O manasa'*

Oh mind! Why would anyone disregard the royal path of Bhakti and wander into an odious alley?

Only the first two lines from Saint Thyagaraja's composition were heard and, after a short pause, there was, again, *chakkani rajamargamu*. I have often noticed, in our village festivals, that whenever a *nadhaswaram* was played to greet a new bride or bridegroom, new listeners would invariably shrug off their ears and walk away; you keep hearing only a couple of claps on the *thavil*. Invariably the first stanza of every composition would end up like a piece of cloth that's faded, torn and dumped – like flowers that are offered to a corpse and are ignored by the passersby.

This was no such thing; this was sheer, pure music . . .

But I sensed some struggle in the *nadhaswaram* player. I peered down the street and noticed an old man seated on a porch in the opposite line facing the rising sun with the musical instrument raised aloft and held as if in a gesture of begging. It was a bright moon-lit night and because of the approaching local elections, the municipal lights shone bright and yellow.

He wore a dhoti that extended well beyond his waist; the cloth over his body reminded one of a banian with a side pocket; a chain with *rudraksha* beads hung around his neck, and close to him lay a shining silver box containing betel leaves and nuts.

The residents – some sleepless, others with their sleep disturbed and vendors, who usually shut down their shops by eleven at night and opened before four thirty in the morning - watched the *nadhaswaram* player from their perches. They numbered anywhere between ten and fifteen. The scene unfolded before their eyes and continued in the same vein: first, the player struggled to catch a few moments of breath, followed by the first two lines *chakkani raja margamu*, then rested for a while, and again played the instrument.

This was an old couple who had moved to one of the houses in the opposite row. May be they had a son or daughter in a house on a different street but couldn't afford to have their children with them or the rule of four per house could be a valid reason. Old age has taken a toll on the couple as can be discerned from the outer signs – hunched backs, arthritis, and damaged hearing. I have noticed the daughter visiting them now and then, tidy up the house, and prepare food for the couple before leaving. Quite often, the old man would buy four idlis in the nearby Kongu Mess and take home a packet of four for his wife. Occasionally I have seen him holding two packets of lemon rice. None dare call that food!

During the days when I was going to work I would notice the couple on their front porch propped against two thick pillows and watching the fun on the street. While returning home at nights I would feel ill at ease in their presence, and briskly pass the pair.

Old age never ceases to hurt;

Every living soul is condemned to endure the burden of its own making on the earth.

I see myself as Sinbad, the sailor, carrying an old man on the back. The old man would never come down; so I am cursed to carry him forever.

Recently, the old man's wife slipped on the floor inside the house and had to be rushed to a hospital where she survived only two more days. Like a storm, the separation has overwhelmed the old man leaving him twisting in the winds. Solitude makes him huff and puff - like a snake hissing after an attack.

A girl hurried up from a neighboring street and took away the *nadhaswaram* from the player's hand and put it away somewhere inside the house. The listeners – every one of them watching

the scene – erupted into laughter. The old man limped back into the house, and we once again heard those two lines in perfect harmony: *chakkani rajamargamu*.

“You can play tomorrow; people have to sleep . . .”

There’s a tussle; the old man refused to give away the instrument. So, the girl pulled out the blow-piece from it.

The old man said something in a gruff voice; he yelled at her and threatened her.

“Okay, play once more and you must return it,” the girl said and threw the blow piece at him. The old man stuck the blow piece to the *nadhaswaram* and made the sounds *pee pee* from it. Again, the same two lines followed:

Chakkani raja margamu

The music had the right pitch, tone, and filled the air.

The listeners were now exchanging laughs and comments –some mocking at the old man and others adding remarks to humiliate him.

I felt disgraced and even wanted to cry out aloud.

For no particular reason, I recalled one of Thyagaraja’s compositions in raga *denuka*:

“*Teliyaledu Rama*
Rama Bhakti margamu”

“They rise early in the morning, smear the sacred ash on their foreheads, pray meticulously counting on their fingers, and seek wealth while straying from the right path and dreaming all day. They haven’t realized the right path that Rama, the Lord worshipped by Thyagaraja, embodies.”

Have they stashed it away?

Have they lost it?

With the *nadhaswaram* snatched away from his hands, the man now looked utterly beaten, his command of musical melody and pitch broken; did he cede his title to music? Like a wager who lost his bet, he remained quiet with his head bowed down. The vendors concluded there would be no more customers for fruits, cigarettes, and arcea powder and were ready to shut down their shops.

I remained for a while enjoying the company of the moonlight.

The old man, during the day, keeps limping while walking around. I am afraid he’s spending his last days just like the *nadhaswaram*.

What else? I had never again heard the sound of a *nadhaswaram*.
Or, did they consign it to flames?

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