



LOCKSEAL



My paternal grandfather, Krishna, superintending engineer with the Mysore Public Works Department, about 1940.

IN KANNADA, the language outsiders call Kanarese, *beega* means lock. *Mudre*, pronounced *moodh-ray*, means seal.

A long time ago, no one knows quite how long, a man who worked as the guardian of the treasury in the palace of the Wodeyars, the South Indian maharajas of Mysore, took the name Beegamudre, literally Lockseal. Each night when he closed the treasury, he followed a painstaking ritual. He secured the bolt on the treasury door with a padlock. Around this he sewed a scrap of white silk into a bag. Then he dripped red wax along the seams. Onto each circle of wax, he stamped the royal seal of the Wodeyars, which was then, itself,

locked away. During his tenure, the treasury was never broken into; but, true, the ritual would not actually have prevented determined thieves from a robbery. They could have bribed the guards, after all, or overpowered them, and picked or broken the lock. But no matter how carefully the thieves might have re-sewn the silk over the lock, they could not have duplicated the royal seal. In the morning, when the guardian arrived to unlock the treasury, he would know it had been robbed for he would find the seals broken. Lock, seal: *beegamudre*.

When the man grew too old, when his eyes grew too weak and his fingers too shaky to thread his needle and sew the scrap of silk, he stopped going to the palace. His son, who inherited his job, saw little glamour in locking and unlocking a door, even if it did lead to a treasury, and he began to dream of finding a treasure of his own.

One day, some distance northeast of Mysore City, someone discovered gold. It was in a district called Kolar, in what came to be known as the Kolar Gold Fields, and so this younger Beegamudre moved his wife and children and his aged parents to Kolar District; to a village called Nelawanki. As was the custom in parts of rural India, the family adopted the name of its village and came to be called the Nelawanki Beegamudres. The old man who had once locked the treasury door and sealed the scrap of silk died dreaming of the day he would arrive to find the seals broken. Perhaps, though, he died of disappointment, for his son found no gold in Nelawanki. The nearest gold was in the next village, or the next, and so the younger Beegamudre, who could not face returning to Mysore City, became a farmer. The ground was arid and the soil was thin. It yielded nothing more valuable than groundnuts. But over time, perhaps even generations, the groundnuts themselves brought a fortune – if not in gold, at least in silver. The family found itself owning

much of the land surrounding the village. Where once the family had become the Beegamudres of Nelawanki, now the village became the Nelawanki of the Beegamudres.

By the late nineteenth century, the head of the family and of the village was a man called Subbha-Rao. One of his tasks was to collect taxes, which he handed over to the seniormost official in the district, an *Angrez* (an Englishman) called by his title: the Collector. In return for this task, Subbha-Rao received a horse and an annual stipend of sixty rupees. Owning so much land and dealing with the Collector made Subbha-Rao proud, perhaps even vain. When the time came for his two eldest sons to begin secondary school, he sent them all the way to Madras, on the east coast. Their names were Seshagiri-Rao, or Sesha, and Ramachandra-Rao, or Rama.

In Madras they fell under the spell of a *maistry* (an overseer). Burma was at this time a province of India. Wages were higher in Burma, where the economy was booming, than in South India, so it was easy for *maistries* to recruit young men to work in and around Rangoon. Even after selling their schoolbooks, Sesha and Rama could not afford their passage. No matter, the *maistry* told them. He would lend them the fare and they could repay him over time. True, Sesha and Rama did earn high wages, labouring in construction and so on; but, no matter how much they earned, they found themselves unable to discharge their debt. The *maistry* charged them interest on the fare and also deducted the cost of room and board from their wages. Room was space enough for a bedroll in a large hut that was noisy with men. Board was three meals a day, which the men themselves cooked. Sesha and Rama found themselves in Rangoon not as free men but as indentured labourers. They earned a good living, if only on paper, and they promised Subbha-Rao they would send money home. He was furious, but he could do little to them.

He could, however, take his fury out on his one daughter and on the youngest of his four children, also a boy. Subbha-Rao warned the boy never to be dishonest. Ever.

It soon became clear that the longer Sesha and Rama worked, the farther they would sink into debt. Subbha-Rao could not bear this. He had to think of his good name. Swearing that no son of his would remain indentured for life, Subbha-Rao sold his land. All of it. Though he paid off their debts, he never saw either Sesha or Rama again, for he died shortly after this – of shame.

His widow, Ammiah, pondered her family's fate. If she remained in Nelawanki, her youngest son would have to leave school and find work and would never earn his SSLC, his Secondary School Leaving Certificate, and if her late husband had been proud of his good name, he had been even more proud of his ability to read and write English. He had had to do this in order to represent the village to the Collector and the Collector to the village. Ammiah decided to move with her daughter and one remaining son west to Bangalore. It was the largest city in Mysore State. Shortly after her move, she married her daughter off to a pleader (a lawyer). The main thing now was to ensure that Ammiah's only son, for this was how she sometimes thought of him, finished school.

His name was Krishna-Rao. His full name should have been Nelawanki Beegamudre Krishna-Rao, but he did not belong to Nelawanki any more than it belonged to him. He dropped the name of the village and, for some reason, also dropped one of the three e's in Beegamudre. Krishna, the boy born in Nelawanki, the boy whose brothers had run away to Burma – this Krishna became the first Begamudré. Many years later, when he was nearly sixty-five, he became my grandfather.



MY FATHER, KRISHNA'S SON, would have told parts of this story differently. He did, in fact, tell parts of it differently. I have never questioned him about it, and I do not intend to question him now. The times I would have listened patiently to his stories, the times I might have questioned him directly – such times have passed. It may simply be that he filled gaps for himself the way I have filled other gaps for myself while reconstructing Subbha-Rao's standing in Nelawanki according to what one of my cousins told me. This was during my second visit to India, in 1988. I have wanted to tell his story ever since my first visit, eleven years before – a visit during which I nearly died and my mother did die.

In my father's version, Subbha-Rao did not own all the land in Nelawanki. He owned a mere fifteen acres. He held the title of village headman because he knew how to read and write English. And I must confess that I have reconstructed what happened to his eldest sons through my less-than-thorough reading of Burmese history. Here is my father's version of how Subbha-Rao lost his title and his land:

Burma was at this time a province of India and Sesha and Rama heard about wondrous opportunities awaiting them in Rangoon. The boys thus sold their schoolbooks to buy their passage. In Rangoon they found plenty of work because Burmese men were more interested in gambling than in working. However, Sesha and Rama also began gambling. They fell so deeply into debt that they faced being thrown into prison. Their father swore that no son of his would ever go to prison, and so he sold his land and his title as village headman. He never saw either Sesha or Rama again, for he died shortly afterwards, of a broken heart.

I have only my father's word for what happened to Sesha and Rama after Subbha-Rao disposed of his land. It may be that I will discover, from yet another cousin, that parts of

what followed should be told differently. But it rings true enough to me. During that first trip back, I asked some of my relatives how to contact the “Burmese” branches of our family. Everyone claimed that they did not know. One or two were less protective. “You don’t want anything to do with them,” I heard. “They are all mad.”

About the time that my grandfather Krishna married, his eldest brother Sesha died, young, in Rangoon – but not before entrusting his son to my grandfather’s care. Even as Krishna began his own family, he found himself also raising a nephew as his own son. There may even have been a girl; if so, I know nothing of her. The boy, Nagesha, is now the oldest surviving Begamudré. He is a tall man, taller than others of his generation. During my first visit back, I met him and his wife in Mysore City. They lived in a house called, appropriately enough, Beegamudre House. With three e’s.

The second of Subbha-Rao’s sons, Rama, stayed in Rangoon for the time being. His wife bore him five children. Five who lived, that is. Each time she became pregnant, she returned to Madras to deliver her child. She took deck passage and many a woman gave birth in mid-journey. Sometimes, if the child was born dead, the midwife dropped the body over the side while the mother screamed. Child after child bobbed in the wake. This was how Rama’s wife went mad, or so my father claims. He remembers her as sharp-tongued and hysterical. But even if she did not go mad, one of her children found himself in the midst of madness.

During the depression, Burmese Chettyars, Indian bankers from Madras, foreclosed on millions of acres of Burmese land. The aspirations of Burmese nationalists soon focused on the actions of all Indians in Burma, whether labourers or financiers. Even after Burma separated from India in the mid-1930s, millions of Indians lived in the former province. One of them

was Rama's eldest son. I shall call him BB, for Burmese Beegamudre, though BB sounds uncomfortably close to VB, which is what my father calls me. BB had his own family by now, and although his brothers and sisters had returned to India with their parents – Rama and his troubled wife – BB had not.

Even as Japan prepared to invade Burma in the dying weeks of 1941, many Burmese nationalists saw the impending invasion as a way of freeing their country from both the British sahib and the Indian banker. When the Japanese invaded Lower Burma in early 1942, they expelled all the Indians. BB had already sent his wife and children back to Madras, but he was unable to reach India by sea. He found himself among the half million Indians who were trying to reach home on foot. This meant a trek of some six hundred and fifty kilometres from Rangoon to the gateway to Upper Burma, a city called Mandalay. Sometimes his route followed the Irrawaddy River, which waters the paddies of Lower Burma; sometimes his route left the river for dense forest. When Japanese planes strafed the trunk road or highway, refugee columns turned into screaming, fleeing mobs.

At first, British soldiers helped the refugees; but with the monsoons of late spring approaching, the soldiers abandoned their charges. The soldiers made for the Chindit Hills on the India-Burma border. Both of my Burmese guidebooks refer to the British retreat without mentioning the Indian refugees. Military historians have written about this retreat in more detail. The soldiers, many with their feet wrapped in rags, plodded across the border. They knew that if they did not reach India before the monsoon arrived, they would be cut off when the border valleys filled with rain – rain so heavy that it turned into flowing water so swift it could uproot trees. According to one account, a British general waited on a hill in India while his men limped past him to safety. On the day

the monsoon began, he turned his back on Burma; he even turned his back on his men. Meanwhile, no longer escorted by soldiers, BB and other Indians also made for the border. Half a million Indians had set out from Lower Burma; half of them died along the way. BB would have been in his early twenties but the trek turned his hair white. So my father says.

BB rejoined his wife and children in Madras, and they left South India, likely for the North. No one knows where. I should say, instead, that no one will say. For good reason, since four of Rama's children – BB's brothers and sisters – died tragically, by their own hands. One, a classmate of my father, was prone to epilepsy. During one of his seizures, my father says, his cousin took sleeping pills. An elder brother drowned himself in a reservoir called Malleswaram Tank. Both of the sisters had unhappy marriages. One sister hanged herself in her bathing room. The other moved to Bombay with her husband and threw herself into the sea. Like all of her stillborn siblings, she sank and then rose to bob in the waves. I am not sure what happened to BB; I would like to think that he died of old age and rejoined the friends he had left on the road to Mandalay.

"You don't want anything to do with them," I heard. "They are all mad."

There we have it: how my great-grandfather lost his land and other familiar twists of fate.

And here is the prologue of an epic novel that I began during my first trip back. I never finished the novel although I did write one of the later chapters, set in 1947 during the partition of India and Pakistan. The very concept of an epic reminds me of the stories my father liked to tell; the style reminds me too much of his style.

The prologue is handwritten on pages pulled from a notebook, six inches by eight, bound in blue. Among other things, the cover bears this:

VEN BEGAMUDRÉ

WISDOM

Manufactured out of
WHITE PRINTING PAPER

Exercise Book

Retail Price not to exceed Rs. 1.05 (Inclusive Cover)

Local taxes extra

The price has been over stamped Rs. 1.18 in purple ink. Below Wisdom is a generic school crest. It contains a wind instrument and a music book, a flask and two test tubes, an artist's palette and brush, a micrometer measuring a gear. The white paper was off-white even when the book was new.

“Nomads: Prologue” (Autumn 1977)

While most men are content to live and die in their native land, some leave to find greater happiness. Often their journeys are short. But those who leave to escape unhappiness travel far because, like nomads in a desert, they leave every oasis lured by the promise of a distant mirage.

These thoughts occupied the mind of Nelawanki Gopal Raja while he awaited the birth of his fourth child. If the child lived, Raja would father no more. Four children were enough for a man with only ten acres of land. He wondered whether this last child would be a boy or a girl. If a boy, there would be that much less land to divide between his sons. If a girl, he would face the problem of finding a suitable husband for her.

Three years earlier, Raja had given his first and only daughter to the son of a neighbour. The girl had been ten, the boy eleven. Shortly before the wedding, Raja's wife had given birth to their third child, a boy. The birth of a son and the marriage of a daughter had made that year, 1919, a memorable

year, if not always a happy one. Alas, the young bridegroom died soon after the wedding, leaving the bride a widow and she never had a chance to live with her husband.

Two other events had made 1919 a highly memorable year. One had been the signing of a peace treaty somewhere in France. It had signalled the end of “the war to end all wars.” Raja liked that phrase. The other had been a massacre in a northern city called Amritsar. It had signalled the beginning of the end of British rule in India. Still, nothing had changed: wars continued breaking out; the Raj survived.

Raja secretly pitied his fellow villagers. Births, deaths and marriages were the only notable events in their lives of routine hardship. However, life was more exciting for him because he understood world affairs. Although he considered himself an educated man, he was only literate. His knowledge of the world beyond his valley came from week-old issues of *The Hindu*. He had not even been to Bangalore Madras, the city where it was printed. Since he was the only man in the village with an ability, however limited, to read and write English, Raja was its *karnam*. Once a year, he collected taxes and held them for the *thaluk*.

Raja disliked the task. In a poor place like Nelawanki, tax collection was a frustrating business. Few people earned enough through selling the produce of their farms to pay any tax. Raja knew that the District Collector suspected him of withholding a portion of the moneys, but Raja was one of the few *karnams* who did not. He was content with his annual stipend and the gift of a horse. The sixty rupees was enough to feed his family, but the horse was now of little use. Once, he had ridden it through the village and surrounding countryside on the days he collected taxes. Now the horse was lame and blind. Raja pulled it behind him led it by a rope. The animal was a symbol of his rank: like the rolled-up, out-of-date newspaper he carried

under his arm when he visited anyone. Reflecting on the poverty in the village brought his thoughts back to emigration.

His family was the only one in Nelawanki that knew its lineage. Gopal was no unusual name in a country where herding cows was a common vocation. Gopals are the Smiths of South India, and Raja's household claimed descent from court herders. Moreover, they had a famous ancestor in the person of Raghavendra Swami, one of the great ~~faith healers~~ mystics of India. And the Gopal lineage extended well beyond the fifteenth century yogi. In the eighth century after the birth of Christ, a dozen families had migrated from Persia, through Afghanistan and into India. One of them was the Beegamudre tribe.

Raja's maternal grandfather had been a Beegamudre, a guardian of the king's treasury. Every evening he had closed the doors, wrapped a cloth around the lock, and sealed it with wax. The first Beegamudres had been of Aryan stock, taller and fairer than the Dravidians of South India. Even centuries of intermarriage had not completely dissipated the strain. Raja examined his hands. In truth, was he not fairer than most other villagers? Some of them were almost as dark as untouchables.

He could not understand why his ancestors had eventually settled in this particular valley. Perhaps they had hoped to find gold here. But when they had found that the gold fields of Kolar did not extend this far, why had they not moved on? Farming was a poor substitute for mining when there was little water and only groundnuts could grow. Had his ancestors come here in search of happiness? If so, they had found it, in some form, here in Nelawanki. Or had they come here to escape unhappiness? If so, their settlement here was but a brief respite. One day, the Gopals would move on, but Raja would never do so willingly. He would be content to die ~~in Kolar District~~ here.

A voice asked, "Appa, what are you doing?"

Raja opened his eyes. His daughter, Usha, stood before

him. On either side of her was one of his sons. The elder, Srinivas, held her hand while he stared at Raja. Younger, naked Krishna was perched on Usha's hip. He saw only the banana poking from Raja's pocket.

"I was thinking," Raja replied. He peeled the fruit and divided it into four pieces, three of them for his children.

"So, you are eating again!" a shrill voice exclaimed.

Raja turned to confront his wife's mother. "There is no shortage of food in our house," he said. "Thank God." He threw the peel to one of his cows. The other cows slept.

"If you call this hut a house!" she exclaimed. "You may go inside now. Rani has given you another son." The woman scowled at Usha.

The girl lowered her gaze and wandered away with Krishna on her hip.

"Do you still wish to find her another husband? Who will marry a widow?"

Raja shrugged. "There is no hurry," he said. "It was ill luck that the boy died before she could join him. It was not her fault."

"Still, she should live with her father-in-law's people, not with ours."

Raja clucked his tongue. "*Thi!* The boys would cry if I sent her away."

The woman spat red juice at Raja's feet. "*Thup!* Do you want to see your newest son or will you stay here and think some more?"

"I will come." Raja took a last look at the cloudless sky. Preparations would have to be made for the naming ceremony. For a third time, he would write a boy's name in sacred rice. This time, it would be Rama, after the god-king of Ayodhya.

"Where is my son?" Raja called, entering his house. "Where is my prince?"