

Encounter with different species.

B. Mohanachandran

It would be unfair on my part, if I do not dedicate these articles to my hero, the energetic Yorkshire Veterinarian with a lot of sense of humour Dr. James Herriot. I have read all his books a number of times and would have laughed my heart out, had it not been caged in a strong rib case. Even the slightest resemblance of my style of writing to that of my hero may please be excused on the grounds of his possible influence on me and not as an attempt to emulate the great author.

Twenty sixth June Nineteen hundred and seventy eight is the day written in golden letters in my service career, which abruptly came to an end on the eighth of April Nineteen hundred and ninety five. I decided enough is enough and chose to have a practice of my own, after voluntary retirement from government service. My first posting while in service was at Veterinary Dispensary, Pangode, one of the oldest veterinary institutions in Trivandrum district, which is about 35 kms away from Kazhakootom, my home village. Pangode was and still is a beautiful village surrounded by lush green hillocks, a village with lot of animal husbandry potential and innocent farming community, majority of which are muslims. The literacy percentage was a little lower than the other parts of the district. Being a remote village, the government servants posted there were reluctant to take up appointment, but being my first appointment I had no other options, a decision which I appreciated later on in my service career. It was Pangode which made me understand the pulse of the poor farming community, which was later on to become a part and parcel of my day to day life.

The first thought that flashed through my mind, as I occupied the official chair, was the words of Dr. E. P. Paily, my Professor of Medicine for whom I have great regards. "Those who do not study their lessons in the class room will be taught a lesson or two by the farmers." I was one among those who did well in my studies, but still the thought of farmers collaring me gloomed largely over me. So I decided to be cautious in all my dealings

My Livestock Assistant was Mr. Abdul Rasheed, a good man who would be thrown in to fits of laughter even on the slightest provocation. I had never seen him gloomy and his grin extended from one ear to the other. He was the one man who made me change my opinion of Livestock Assistants, who were projected as the arch rivals of the Veterinary Surgeons by the seniors of our profession. Working hours of Veterinary Dispensaries in those days were from 8 AM to 12 Noon and from 3 PM to 5 PM. I had to wait till 9AM for my first patient to arrive. In between, a stray dog that passed by peeped in to my room, to say hallo, may be just out of curiosity. He wagged his tail as an approval of my friendly nod and later on we were to become good friends as he was there to share my lunch every day.

By 9 A.M a queue was taking formation in the Veterinary Dispensary comprising mostly of ladies carrying baskets, utensils and other house hold items. Later on I was to understand that Tuesdays and Saturdays were the local market days and farmer women folk came from all the surrounding hillocks to sell their farm products in return for household articles.

I was thrilled as I was going to attend my first independent case. I took the case sheet which was duly filled in by the Livestock Assistant. I enquired the middle aged lady what her problem was. "Sir, we can't sleep at night. The house is full of lice and ticks. I want some ant powder." She meant B.H.C. powder. I was surprised. Having studied subjects ranging from Anatomy to Surgery for five years at the veterinary college, my first case let me down. The illiterate woman had diagnosed the problem and suggested the treatment also. My only duty was to dispense the medicine and make her happy. Abdul Rasheed appeared with about fifty packets of powder and placed it on my table. A separate queue was formed for medicines for ticks and lice and another one for the universal pink coloured medicine. Potassium permanganate solution was the only acceptable medicine for poultry during those days. By afternoon about fifty to sixty poultry cases were attended to and I became a poultry

specialist on the first day itself.

"Sir, it is time for lunch", Rasheed woke me from my avian thoughts. "Is there any good hotel near by," I enquired. "There is a potti hotel in the junction," I was told. He meant a brahmin hotel. I wondered if Rasheed was playing a trick on me. It is difficult to read the thought from that ever smiling face. Leave alone a brahmin hotel, even a Nair hotel, in a muslim hamlet was a very difficult proposition to digest in those days. I walked along the muddy roads towards the junction which is just a stone throw distance. Enroute I met the postman, who introduced himself and on my enquiry pointed towards a partially dilapidated building which was supposed to be the brahmin hotel. The board in front of the hotel said so. Whatever doubt remained in my mind was also swept away when I saw that 'Trunkless Ganapathy' like baldy figure sitting at the payment counter, a high bred brahmin in all aspects except for the diagonal sacred thread across the vast expansion of a huge pot belly. The hotel was partially full with agricultural labourers working in the near by rubber plantation and farmer folks who came for the weekly market day. I was soon the centre of attraction. I sat down gazing around, a little bit embarrassed by the curious looks. Rice was served on a big banana leaf, topped up with sambar and other vegetarian delicacies. A plate of fish curry appeared later, which was soon followed by steaming beef. I tried to conceal my surprise and soon filled my tummy and came to the payment counter. I thought I would make friends with

the funny character and so enquired, "what is your name, Potti?". 'Ismail Potti', came the reply from a warm friendly face. That was my first encounter with a different species, a Muslim Potti, who was later on to become my best friend in Pangode.

The story of Mohammed Ismail's conversion to Ismail Potti was very interesting as it was revealed to me by Abdul Rasheed the next day. In the late fifties a brahmin was appointed as the first Veterinary Surgen of the Pangode Veterinary Dispensary. A highly orthodox brahmin hailing from northern Kerala, he preferred fasting rather than eating from a non-vegetarian hotel. He was trying for a transfer back to his native village, when the villagers for fear of losing the doctor introduced Ismail Potti in to the scene. He was the natural choice, as he was gifted with in born brahmin looks. Sandal wood paste on the baldy forehead and the diagonal sacred thread across the pot belly erased all the doubts the doctor had about Potti. He led the life of a pious brahmin, a pure vegetarian, for the next two years till the doctor was transferred out. As soon as the doctor left, changes were to take place soon. First to disappear was the diagonal sacred thread. Then appeared non-vegetarian delicacies on the dining table. But the broad sandal wood paste on his fully bald head and his designation 'Ismail Potti' were to remain till his death three years back. I came to know of his death much later on, but that noble gesture of his in coming to the rescue of a veterinary surgen shall haunt me for ever.

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Thiruvananthapuram 695001**