

Kamlakar, my dearest elder brother

On Sunday, April 12, 2015, at 7 pm, our phone rang rather unobtrusively in the shrill tone and it informed me that my dear elder brother, Kama, was no more. An uncontrollable spasm of grief gripped my being.

During July & Nov. 2014, we were in the USA in Seattle, hardly a hundred miles from St. Albert in Canada where Kama lived with his family. ~~During~~ In his very first call, he urged me again and again to visit them. In the dozen or more phone meetings, he harped on the same string.

At first I did not think it was impossible. During the number of visits we made ~~it~~ to Seattle, it was almost customary that we crossed the US-Canada border and often called on him at his place. During one visit, I will never forget, he drove us to the fantastic Jasper National Park. I very well remember the battle between life and death, symbolized by the tiny flames below and the ferocious huge iceberg that loomed over them. Visit to the Big Mall in Edmonton with its fountains, Fantasy Land, big lake that resembled a small bay with its wavy ripples and shops belonging to a number of nations in the world. Talas was the only one from India. The Mall was so huge that it would have needed more than a week ^{for} a stroll in all the shops. Kama told me he had designed the Mall. He wanted me to travel with him in the famous Rocky Hurricane Express.

This time, however, the trip to Canada was ^{not to be} impossible because of the terrorist activities across the border,

getting a Canada visa for foreigners like us was a certain impossibility. The White Peace Arch between Canada and U.S. which we had crossed a number of times in the past, stood between the two brothers like the German Wall.

We had, with the help of ch. Rashmi, a number of ~~skype~~ skype calls between us. We saw each other, talked as if we were close by, rehearsed our childhood memories. He appeared satisfied, but he was not. The desire to hold hands, to hug, with teenagers' intensity was not quenched. The helplessness and the hopelessness that his face reflected was heartrending. ~~They~~ We consoled each other with promises of meeting again either during our next US visit or his next visit to India. Providence, however, ruled out even its remote possibility.

On 16th February, he phoned me and greeted me on my 84th birthday and reminded me that he had not received yet, my last letter to him, which he had ^{waged} asked me praising my letters and my handwriting. He badly wanted it as a last relic of our fraternal relationship. The phone call on 23rd Feb., which I made to him was going to be ^{the} last; he congratulated us ^{both} on our 54th marriage anniversary, chided S. ~~not~~ not to quarrel with me ever more, he had received my letter, read it a dozen times and had kept it under his pillow to read it again & again. And that was my last contact with him.

He was the Wall between me and my end. In our family, the children breathed our last in the same order as we breathed our first. Anna went first followed by Nana, sister ARKA and now Rama. As long as he was alive, I felt secure; now with his departure

I feel forsaken, forlorn.

A flood of memories bursts on me when I think of him. As teenagers we were very close. Many took us for twins. We went together everywhere; to school, to games, to swim, to play volleyball, even to catch cobras for the Naga Panchami Festival. We had common friends; we ~~were~~ left Shikala our birth place together and went to Pune for higher education together. He was the last Matriculate, I was the first SSC.

The forties were the days of India's Freedom Struggle; by 1940, with the 'Quit India' movement and the Second World War, the movement had entered a crucial stage. Shikala Taluka was aflame with Congress meetings. Even remote places like Petlond, Arale, Charan, Kokrud, Bilashi welcomed State level Congress leaders and organised programs. Kama and I were good singers. We were transported to these places by trucks and jeeps, and we sang the God's Prayer (Ishastaran), Welcome Song (Swagat Geet) at the beginning, and National Song Vande Mataram ^{at the end}. We were fed a lot and were the darlings of organisations, and the crowds.

Another memory refers to our romance with cobras. Among our friends, Musale was an expert cobra catcher. We used to accompany him in his adventures and often 'play' the cobras from a safe distance. One season, he forced us to try our hand at catching a cobra. Kama was 14 and I was 12. With Musale and a couple of friends we went to the site - a wet muddy field with a few holes where cobras generally resided.

Shirala always had a good amount of rain and at this time, the place was slushy and soft. Musale sighted a spot; there were clear signs of the cobra having entered the hole. Kama boldly took a small spade and began ~~the~~ to disturb the ground around the hole; very soon, the cobra's hood appeared at the hole. Kama shouted to me, 'Baba he is coming, hold the open sack near the hole'. I did so and we awaited the moment breathlessly. Kama gave a final blow and the cobra ~~came~~ ^{rushed} out straight into the sack I was holding open. After the cobra was fully inside, I closed the sack and Kama sealed it with a 'sutaki' string and knotted it firmly. The cobra was struggling inside but he had no escape; he was firmly imprisoned now. We carried the sack to Musale's house on a bicycle's carrier. Musale carefully transferred him to a big earthen pot, capping it with a small earthen pot ~~and~~ ^{and} closed the mouth with a ~~strong~~ piece of covering cloth tied with a firm string. Sounds of struggling cobra inside and his movements shook the pot better shatter. That was our first adventure with a living cobra. Musale patted our backs and congratulated us, 'Well done Kama-Baba'. This was 4 days before Nag Panchami.

We accompanied the gang to many houses on ~~the~~ Nag Panchami Day and took part in 'Playing' the cobras. 'Playing' involves shaking the cobra out of the earthen pot and making him stand on his hind part, the hood tossing

higher and higher. A strong stick a little distance up the hood kept the cobra under control and holding the wagging tail did the trick.

4 days of starving subdued the cobra; otherwise 'playing' with the cobra is a fatal risk. Throughout operations of catching and playing, we bathed our hands with tobacco water; a repellent safety measure.

On the Naga Panchami Day we visited houses of eminent people, mostly Brahmins, with the cobra pot. Musale and his accomplices 'played' the cobras everywhere. 'Playing a cobra' involved shaking the cobra out of the earthen pot by upsetting it and as the cobra adjusted himself on the floor, moving the small covering pot with a few pebbles in it before him. Gradually the cobra begins to raise his head higher and higher to the sound and side-wise movement of the small pot. This goes on for about 5 to 10 minutes. One of the assistants holds a strong stick across the cobra just above his hood [while another holds the tail firmly] our group leader watches every movement of the cobra and is ever ready for an emergency. After the ritual worship by the ladies of the house is over, the risky part begins; the one with the small pot keeps it aside with the cobra slowly lowering its head; the other with the tail slowly lifts the cobra above the floor, vigorously moving the tail and the lower part of cobra's body. The first one brings the big earthen pot under the head of the cobra, while the other one holding the tail directs the cobra's hood to the mouth of the pot. He

all the while continues to shake vigorously, cobra^s so that he does not curl up his head. Generally the weary cobra welcomes the escape and readily disappears into the pot. The small pot is quickly replaced on the mouth of the pot, the covering piece of cloth quickly put in place and the pot is safely sealed; the "playing" operation is over.

~~On the Magpanchami~~ ^{day} our group began to visit houses of eminent persons in the town. Generally, I and Kama were not actors in the 'playing' operation. In one house, however, Musale asked us to take the leading parts. Kama opened the pot, shook out the cobra on the floor and start^{ed} rocking the pebbly pot. The cobra, a fresh one this time, the one we had caught 4 days ago, began to toss his hood enthusiastically. I was holding the ~~tail~~ stick and keeping the cobra under control. After the worshipping ritual was over, I put the stick aside and held the tail in my hand. The cobra's body was slippery and it was a great effort to hold the tail and shake it vigorously at the same time. I somehow managed to do both and I succeeded in keeping the cobra straight vertically. I was concentrating all my attention on my risky part. Kama opened the mouth of the big part; I was slowly bringing the head of the cobra there when suddenly a dog nearby started barking loudly. I and the cobra both were surprised; I slackened the shaking of the tail, the cobra missed the mouth and suddenly up curled its entire body; its mouth just touched

my forearm. The leader ~~saw~~ sensing the danger, quickly leapt forward, took the cobra from my hand pushing me back. Soon the cobra was put back into the pot and safely imprisoned. The leader examined my arm, there was no sting, no tooth mark, only a bubble of saliva. I was safe. Soon a doctor visited the place. He examined me & declared I was O.K. My son ironically I never felt like panicking; I was calm and cool all the time. And that was the end of my romance with cobra for ever. Kama felt guilty for a long time and time and again hugged me lovingly.

Kama was always a bit of a bold and naughty boy; compared to him I was simple and straight as a cotton yarn. One evening, Sindhu, our youngest sister, was sweeping the floor upstairs for making our beds late. She was humming a song and was entirely absorbed in her work. We all were down-stairs. Appa, our father was talking with a couple of his friends. Without anybody's knowledge, Kama went up the stairs and made a frightening sound at the top of the staircase. Sindhu was taken aback and started wailing loudly. Kama had not expected this reaction; he leaped down stairs two steps at a time, wailing all the time. I, who was just behind him, followed his example. There was a lot of a hubbub. All elders down stairs ran to us fearing some cobra was sighted. Everybody had a stick or something in hand. When calm was restored, the truth was revealed.

A few months before or after the cobra event, Kama was afflicted with an attack of rheumatism. His shoulders and knees hurt and he had to be carried from one place to another. Often he would cry with pain and I wept with him. At this time, the famous Deval Circus visited Istampur, a town 11 miles away. Along with ~~many~~ many daring feats, it boasted of the most daring act the manager would ^{put} his head into the tiger's jaws for a few seconds. The spectators would watch the act with abated breath. Kama invited me should visit one of the circus shows.

On one Sunday, we readied our bullock cart and left soon after an early lunch. The circus had camped just outside the town and the huge tent beckoned us from a long distance with its fluttering flags and pennants. We got our tickets and got our seats on the gallery. For four hours we sat enchanted rooted to our seats. Kama enthusiastically clapped and shouted at the end of each feat and the clowning of the jokers. The 'cage of Death' was the most breathtaking show in which two bikers (motor cyclists), a man and a woman rode inside the big circular steel cage round and round increasing their speed every minute. The roaring of the engines and the hair-breadth escape of their motions. It was the most

daring acts. People stood up in their seats and clapped and cheered loudly. After ⁵ 15 minutes the bikers slackened and finally came to a halt, all safe and sound. I remember Kama was so enthralled by the show and the allround applause that he almost forgot his malady.

Long time during the night he talked with me about all the acts and particularly about this 'Death Cage' enthusiastically. I am sure, he must have, that night, dreamt only about the circus.

All life Kama loved sports. When we were teenagers in Shirala, Kama was fond of Volleyball and played it very well. The then Police Inspector in Shirala was a good volleyball player. He formed a team of 9 players, of which Kama was the hero. The motor-stand in the evening had little traffic and he had prepared a nice volleyball court there. By 5 pm, most of the players would assemble, set the net, the ball would be aird and the game would start.

As the game was sponsored by the Police Inspector, who, those days, wielded a lot of authority, nobody obstructed and the players came on time, ~~any~~ before time.

The Police Inspector, Bhau Sahab to others, and Bhayya to the players, always selected Kama in his group, placed him at the centre and fondly called him Baccha. Kama was an expert volleyball ^{player}. He hit the ball so viciously that ^{it} would go scorching the upper part of

the net and only Hirabai, an able Police man
player of the other ^{side} could counter ^{it}. Teams from
other places would visit and competitive
~~the~~ matches would be arranged and Kama
would almost always emerge as the Champion
player. I was ~~not~~ a tolerably ~~so~~ good player
and would generally play by his side, left or
right. He would often cover me and see that
I do not miss. Even after our departure to Pune
for high school study, we would return to Shirah
during vacations and Kama would again be
invited to his 'Centre' place.

After Kama's Matriculation and my Inter-
Science examination, our ways parted. He went
to Baroda to study Architecture in Kalabhavan.
My studies took a vicious turn and after wasting
a couple of years, I became an RMS soster. I
opted for Western Railway and ^{was} posted at Surat in
Gujarat. I selected Mumbai-Ahmedabad region
largely because I wanted to be with ~~to~~ or near Kama.
For the 3 months' training in Baroda, I lived with Kama
in his room in Sayaji Maratha Boarding. ~~I shared~~
Again, his friends were my friends and we had our
meals in Maharashtra Boarding. It was a golden
time, those three months. I met Ushavahini there who
also studied Architecture in Kalabhavan; she resided
in the Palace Compound, Baroda. Later I knew
Kama and she were in love. I joined all their
trips, such as Ajwa Lake, Pawagadh ~~and~~ ^{as} almost one
of them. It was so nice to be together again.

After 3 months, I joined my duties at Surat, but whenever I got an opportunity ~~to~~ ^{I would} sneak to Baroda and be with him. After a few years, he got his B.Arch degree and opted for a job in Rangoon, Burma (now Myanmar). After some time, Kama and Usharagini were joined in wedlock in Kolhapur. Anna, our eldest brother, arranged that wedding. Soon Usharagini left for Rangoon to join Kama and I remember, I accompanied her upto Calcutta. She left by plane or ship, I don't remember, and I returned to Surat to my duties.

Kama did not stay long in Burma. He saved money, secured an admission to Town Planning Degree in London and left for U.K. Thus began their adventure to the West. I do not ^{know} much about Kama's progress in the West. After he got his M.T.P.I., he worked for some years in London Metropolitan Council. Then he saw an opportunity in the developing Canada where he was offered a pioneering job. Working for a few years in Toronto and the eastern cities of Canada, he settled in St. Alberta. He had a leading part in the planning and executing the construction of the Great Mall in Edmonton, St. Alberta's capital. It was an idea of four German Brothers (Was it?) and they were a lot grateful to Kama in visualising it. In one of our visits to the city, we visited the Mall; it was huge, beautiful and fantastic with its baylike lake, the fantasy land, the main ~~at~~ artery decorated by beautiful ever springing fountains. It was so huge it took us 4 days just to have a full look at all its

800+ shops. It was fabulous; I felt proud of Kama.

When I got my MA and a Lecturer's job, he wanted me to come to him in England and make it my home; he promised help, but I was not adventurous enough to grab the offer.

In 1978, when I visited France and later England he offered me a plane ticket to visit Edmonton and spend a few days with him; I did not have time and I could not benefit by his offer. In London I lived with his (and mine too) friend Trimbari Patil and made my fortnight in London comfortable and enjoyable.

It was sometime during our visit to Seattle in the U.S. that he drove to Ch. Abhay's Place from Vancouver to see us. It was an unforgettable trip. We had missed our air connection at Singapore - our Air India flight was late and our further journey was a bit of an adventure. We took Cathay flight to Hongkong on to San Francisco, straight across the Pacific. A small flight took us to Eugene, where we were stranded for 3 hours.

We were really alarmed by this arrangement of our progress by Air India. We made frantic calls to Ch. ~~At~~ Abhay in Seattle and he kept on assuring us and finally we arrived at the domestic airport of Seattle 40 hours after our destined time, sans (without) our baggage; it ~~was~~ followed 2 days later. All our tension and desperation disappeared when Kama received me in his outstretched arms.

Thus Kama kept me ~~at~~ these company all
these ^{70 odd} years, through thick and thin, sunshine
and showers — even upto my last U.S. trip and —
now, with him gone, I feel so lonely!