

Rice, trees, and old coins

By Sharon St Joan



Amirthalingam, the third child of his parents, came into the world on January 15, 1961. Nakkambadi, in the Ariyalur Taluk district, in south India, was a small hamlet surrounded entirely by water. To this day, there is no ground transportation, and no cars or buses.

The child's father, A. Murugesan, was the administrative officer of 16 villages. His mother's name was Pichaiyamml. Owning 100 acres of farmland, the whole family worked in the fields, planting and harvesting rice.

A bright and stabilizing force, his oldest sister, Danush, cared for and guided her four younger siblings like a parent. The boy Ramalingam was the second oldest.

Their little hamlet was 280 kilometers (174 miles) south of Chennai, with Ariyalur being the nearest city. There was a small government arts college there.

To go out of the hamlet to anywhere else meant walking two kilometers (a mile and a half) – to the station to catch the train.

Having already earned a master's degree in history, in 1977, Danush passed her preliminary exam in administrative service. With big dreams for herself and for her brothers and sisters, she saw herself as an IAS (Indian Administrative Services) Officer, Ramalingam as a police officer, and Amirthalingam as a forest officer – it was clear that he was drawn to trees and plants, and an occupation in the forest would be a good fit for him.



Most of the other village children attended school only up to the fifth standard (fifth grade) and became agricultural workers like their parents before them. At one point, all five of the children in Amirthalingam's family were in college.

At city college, Ramalingam earned a Bachelor of Science and a Bachelor of Labor Law degree. But when Danush asked him to go on to get his master's degree, he expressed no interest and said he didn't want to. Instead he joined the National Cadet Corps becoming a Senior Under Officer.

As for Amirthalingam, he generally tried to do whatever he was asked to do, and of course, in a traditional family, he would have been expected to obey his elder sister. Fortunately, she always had his best interests at heart, recognizing his keen interest in plants.

In 1980 though, tragedy struck their family. When Danush went to take her main examination in administrative service, she fell ill and passed away suddenly.

The family never recovered from this tremendous blow. The guiding force who had held them all together, Danush, was gone. Without her, everything seemed to fall apart. His uncles started to spend money recklessly. His father and mother fell into despondency. In 1984, Amirthalingam left the village and set off to Madras to work on his master's degree in botany.

By 1990, he got a job offer to become an assistant professor. In terms of his career, this was a good step, but Amirthalingam was all too aware that it might also be a final step, a point beyond which he could not go. Without any funding from his family to continue his studies, he would never be able to become a full professor.

Meanwhile his father had devised quite different plans for his third son. He had arranged for Amirthalingam, then 25, to marry a young girl, aged 13, who was a close relative. A rural custom, this was commonly done. Not to do so would be considered an affront to both

families. This marriage seemed all wrong to Amirthalingam, and he refused to go through with it.

Losing his temper with his son, his father angrily threw him out of the house. Forbidden to ever return, he was given no money, no food, and told not to enter the house again, not even for a drink of water. Surviving on the not-to-clean public water from the common village well, for a year he slept on a cot outside in the open, near his family's house, buying food with the small amounts of money that his younger sister, Selvi, was able to slip to him from time to time.

Devastated first by the loss of his beloved older sister and then by the rejection of his father, he wandered around the nearby villages, following the inner voices that spoke to him – he spent his days collecting animal fossils, reading ancient inscriptions, and digging up old coins left in the dust many centuries before.

Gradually, he began to acquire a reputation as an unusual person who had some special knowledge. People would approach him to ask him questions and to seek information. He first explored ancient megalithic sites, then neolithic sites, covering half of the district.

During that time, he traveled to Madras and found temporary work as an exhibition guide at the C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation.

A year or so later, he received an unexpected phone call one day from Dr. Nanditha Krishna, then Director of the C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation, who remembered the intense interest the young man had shown in exploring the past and his great love of plants. She asked him to come back to Madras to work for her foundation.



In July 3, 1993, he joined the CPR Environmental Education Centre as a Research Fellow. No longer a lost soul wandering the desert, he had found a place where he could pursue his passions, where his interests were valuable and much valued.

He plunged into a study of the trees of Tamil Nadu. Visiting more than 500 temples all over Tamil Nadu, he documented the surrounding trees and plants and wrote his first book, *Sacred Trees of Tamil Nadu*. Next he wrote the *Sacred Groves of Tamil Nadu*; both were published by the C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation.

It is common for junior writers not to be given credit for the research they do and the books they write. It is all too common, in India and elsewhere, to give credit only to senior, well established authors. The C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation does not follow this practice. Instead they give full credit to those who do the work. M. Amirthalingam has written a number of authoritative books about the plants and trees of Tamil Nadu.

While employed at the CPR Foundation, he spent four or five years at Madras Christian College studying botany, earning a Master of Science degree and a Master of Philosophy.

During that time he researched varieties of rice; recalling his childhood working in the rice paddies, he was able to appreciate the true value of rice, a staple of food in south India. He says that there are 66 varieties of rice in India, though really only a handful in Tamil Nadu. He spent much time researching the physiology and biochemistry of rice, especially the Sativa variety. He studied plant growth regulators which cause the rice to grow. Studying the growth rates, he understood the morphological changes and acquired great scientific expertise in his field.

Amirthalingam's wife, Geetha, works as a clerk in a law office, and they have a fourteen year old daughter, Priyadarshini. His younger sister, Selvi, the one who gave him money for food, now also lives in Madras.

The young man who wandered through the villages, lost in his study of rice, trees, and old coins, now shines a light for others on to the amazing the world of plants.



“Ethno-botany is the study of the medicinal uses of plants,” explained M. Amirthalingam, “It is the local traditional medicine.” Ethno-botany is one of his areas of expertise as a botanist and Field Officer for the CPREEC.

“You know, “ he continued, “people don’t reveal their secrets immediately. You have to make friends with them. Then, when they trust you, they will talk to you a little bit. Then more later on.” It is particularly older village people who know the secrets of the plants, not the younger generation. Older folks follow their traditions.

In the little hamlet where he grew up there were Portia trees, medium-sized shade trees, the leaves of which are used to feed cattle. A taller, bigger tree, the neem has medicinal uses; its wood is used for making furniture and the leaves for cattle feed. If someone has measles, the leaves are scattered on the floor, and the sick person sleeps on top of them. Most of the homes in the village had a neem tree.



Amirthalingam recalled from his childhood that there were also guava trees that produced fruit. They grew many vegetables too – including a vegetable called a “drumstick” due to its shape – also tomatoes; brinjal which is eggplant, “ladies finger,” another Indian vegetable; beans and peas; a kind of bitter gourd; radishes; and plantains – the kind used for cooking. The plantain leaves were spread out like plates and used for eating on. This is the traditional way of serving food in south India. If they hadn’t grown plantains, they would have had to walk four kilometers (two and a half miles) to obtain them.

As a young man, having been banished from his house by his father for refusing to marry a 13 year old girl who was his cousin, Amirthalingam found himself without a job and with no source of support other than hand-outs slipped to him by his younger sister when no one was looking. For a year, sleeping outside on a cot, near the house – and without anyone to give him direction in life, he wandered, both literally and figuratively, following the inclinations of his soul.

He spent around eight months studying archeology at the nearby Ariyalur Government Arts College. During this time, he showed the assistant professor and the other students where to find local archeological sites. Because he was native to the area, this meant they could bypass the need to have a government permit, which would normally have been required of outsiders.

They excavated two types of megalithic burial sites: huge pots, several feet in diameter, in which those who had died had been placed along with grave goods, and then buried in the ground; and secondly, long burials where the bodies were laid out as on a bed.

Whenever there were heavy rains, the soil eroded, enabling them to spot the tops of the giant pots. They kept nothing that they found; pots, grave goods, and old coins were placed in a museum. They uncovered four or five sites, and one site might have fifty huge pots, or maybe ten of the laid out graves.

The sites were 8 to 10,000 years old. There was no writing on the pots they found although in some regions further south, pots were found with written inscriptions on them, but not in his area. There they found only black and red ware.

After doing some research, he also uncovered the history of his own family. They had moved south to their little hamlet many centuries before from the town of Kanchipuram. During the Chola period, they had migrated, with the men following the local Chola chieftain into battle. At that time, drums announced the start of wars and the men would follow the sound of the drums to go to fight. His ancestors were warriors, *kshatriyas*, – when a war ended they would settle down in the region and marry the local women.



He found out that he belonged to the Thondaiman clan – a name carried by three Chola kings in the second century CE, who ruled the district of Kanchipuram. He telephoned his brother, Ramalingam, to ask if he knew anything about this and whether it was true. Ramalingam said yes, that was what their father had told him – that the family were Thondaiman. They were of a particular clan, or *gotra*, and they were certain of this information because they needed to be sure of the name of their clan since they were not permitted to marry a wife from the same clan. The local village people had referred to his family as “Thondaiman” – by which they meant that they were different and “from somewhere else.”

Further insight into the meaning of “Thondaiman” has been given by Dr. Nanditha Krishna who is a historian. “Thondai” means creeper or vine. An ancient Tamil text, *Perumpanatrupadai*, a book of ten songs, mentions that a king, Ilan Tiraiyan, was found as a child floating on the sea with a creeper wound around him. His name means “one given by the waves,” and his family name “Thondaiman” means “he of the creeper.” It is believed that this king, Thondaiman Ilan Tiraiyan, is the ancestor of two early Tamil dynasties, the Palavas and the Cholas. The northern Tamil Nadu region has long been known as Thondaimandalam after this king who was brought ashore by the waves.

When Amirthalingam was growing up, there were two other clans of warrior people in his village, the Kongurayar, from the Coimbatore region, and the Kadanthaiyar, from the Pennadam and Vridhachalam regions, also from the Chola period. Some of the families living in the village still had the swords of their ancestors which they had kept in their homes for nearly two thousand years. Traditional societies tend to have very long memories. Many of the village children were Agamudaiyars, who were the dominant people of the village. When Amirthalingam was growing up, there were around 100 families in his village. Now the village has grown to around 1,000 families.



Always fascinated by plants and trees, Amirthalingam has thought deeply about them. “The plant can observe. It can’t talk but it can observe. Whenever there are natural calamities, it knows. It has an indication of what is happening. Sometimes plants shed their leaves when they are upset. Some have premonitions of disasters like earthquakes. If you keep on looking at a tree, you might learn a lot.

“Like dogs that cry and run just before a flood or an earthquake, the tree senses impending disaster. We may not notice their behavior at the time, but afterwards, we may look back and realize that they knew.”

He remarked that he knows this from studying trees and from observing them and the animals. He noted that plants suffer when the natural world around them is disturbed – or if they are taken out of the soil and transplanted. The condition of the soil is also a factor in the response of the tree.



People often take a vow to plant a tree. At a sacred grove run by the Meenakshi Temple near Madurai, one of the first sacred groves restored by CPREEC (the C.P.R. Environmental and Educational Centre), people can plant a tree that matches their own constellation. (In Indian astrology, each person belongs to a constellation.) Amirthalingam provided the list of trees that match the constellations from a book, *Kumaraswami Desikar*, written as a guide to choosing plants to go with the architecture of buildings. He felt that people would more willingly give for a tree to be planted if they felt a connection, and hoped to receive a blessing, from their own constellation.

Every temple in India has a sacred tree. In fact, the tree came first before the temple. Amirthalingam described the way this happens. In the countryside, there will be “a self-created lingam” under a tree. A lingam is a symbol that represents Shiva. It may be a natural stone, i.e. “self-created” rather than man-made. When a lingam stands under a sacred tree, it will be worshipped by the *devas*, that is the gods or the shining spirits, and also by the local people. Perhaps after several centuries, a king will come along. Seeing that this is a sacred site, he will want to build a temple there. As kings tend to do, he will clear the forest, but he will not harm the sacred tree, which will remain standing beside the temple, as the sacred temple tree. These trees are still found all over India, next to every temple. When the tree becomes extremely old and dies, the dead tree is kept respectfully and still worshipped, and a new young living tree of the same species will be planted in its place.



These are a few of the temples and their sacred trees: A bamboo tree at Tirunelveli Temple; a kadamba tree at the Madurai Temple; a thillai (mangrove) plant at Chidambaram; a banyan tree at Tiruvaalangaadu; a panai (Indian palm tree) at Tirupanandhal; a punnai (Alexandrian laurel) at Kapaliswarar Temple.

Now M. Amirthalingam is working on environmental history, collecting information all the way from 3500 BCE until today, on floods, famines, earthquakes, epidemics, and other disasters.

Simultaneously, he is researching ecological history and the sacred sites of India. This is for a series of books, the Ecological Traditions of India, published by CPREEC. He has just completed the eleventh and twelfth books of the series, on Gujarat and West Bengal. He does two states at a time.

He noted that, “You have to be dedicated to the subject you are working on. That is what is important – that and having good relations with other people in your field – academicians and scientists.”

In all his inspired work for the C.P.R. Centre for Environmental Education, as a brilliant botanist and scientist, M. Amirthalingam remains a poet at heart, sharing his wisdom and his depth of understanding of the natural world.

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