CHAPTER 3

The Subjective Scientific Method

M. N. Venkataswami

About 420 kilometers southeast of the south Indian city of Hyderabad, in the eastern part of the state of Andhra Pradesh, is the city of Kadapa. Near Kadapa, in the small town of Gandhi, where the hills border the river Papagni, is a temple to Hanuman. According to legend, in the time of the Ramayana, Hanuman strung a garland of golden flowers between two hilltops to mark a resting spot for his beloved Rama and Sita. Today the garland is not visible to ordinary people. Another legend surrounds Gandhi dating to modern times. In 1827 Thomas Munro, the governor of Madras, who was traveling in this region, which then belonged to the Madras Presidency, saw the garland. Intrigued, he asked his assistants why there was a golden rope hanging up there in the hills. There was silence. Then an old man dared to tell him that those who could see the golden garland were blessed, but they would also die shortly. As it turned out, Munro died from cholera while still encamped in the region. Today in the main hall of the temple, Munro's picture hangs along with images of gods and goddesses.¹

For a long time, this was the only story about Munro's death that I knew. Then I read another Munro story in a collection called *Tulsemah and Nagaya: Folk-Stories from India* (1918). This story was less reverential:

Mundrole Saheb or Dora as Sir Thomas Munro, the Governor of Madras, was termed—was sent by the English on a political mission

to the Nizam of Hyderabad. He negotiated much too favourably to the Nizam and Englishmen came to know of this. Munro too, while returning to Madras, became aware of the fact and being greatly afraid of the anger of his countrymen and the ignominy he shall be put to, took out his emerald ring off the finger and rubbing it on a stone with a little water and mixing the paste in water he drank it off and thus put an end to his life on the way. The English, with a view to perpetuate his unworthy conduct to posterity, set up his statue in Madras open to the skies, the crows and other birds of the air making dirt throughout the year with impunity.²

The avian transgression is unpunishable, and after all, the British precipitated it. I was to learn that rambunctious, not reverential, was the word that rightly described the author of the collection in which this story about Munro appears. I discovered him in 2003 in a secondhand book store in the Charing Cross area of London after a day looking at the Frere manuscripts in the British Library. A book intriguingly titled *Life of M. Nagloo: The Father of the Hotel Enterprise in the Central Provinces, and Head Goomastha to the "Mahanadu"* (1908; second edition 1929) caught my eye.³ Its author was Nagloo's son "M. N. Venkataswami, M.R.A.S., M.F.L.S." (Member of the Royal Asiatic Society and Member of the Folk-Lore Society). The hand-signed copy, which I now possess, includes a date, January 29, 1931, and a note that marks it as a gift to a Reverend Marsh, who I later learned was an American Baptist missionary in Markapur (in what was then the Madras Presidency). "COPIES OF THE BOOK," we are told in uppercase letters, "CAN BE HAD FROM THE AUTHOR." It would take me seven years to track the enigmatic addresses mentioned in the book ("The Retreat, Hyderabad" and "The Hermitage, Secunderabad") and to discover Venkataswami's living descendants. I tell the story of this search at the end of this chapter.

M. N. Venkataswami (1865–1931) was a solitary figure in scholarly circles of his time and is practically unknown today. That night in London, I read Venkataswami's fascinating story of his father, Nagaya. I had read nothing like this before. Nagaya belonged to the caste of bamboo weavers, the Medaras, who were considered Untouchable by "upper castes" in those days. Venkataswami recounts how Nagaya became an enterprising hotelier amidst the turbulent events of post-1857 India, a time when India, for all practical purposes, was irrevocably altered. After reading the biography, I became obsessed with tracing Venkataswami's other writings and discovered that there were only a few extant copies of his books. Because of the treacheries of printing presses and the Musi floods of 1908 in Hyderabad, only a

FIGURE 7. M. N. Venkataswami. Reproduced from M. N. Venkataswami, *Heeramma and Venkataswami* (Madras: S.P.C.K, 1923).

handful of copies remained. In fact, the eminent historian Jadunath Sarkar remarked in a review, "A strange fatality has dogged [Venkataswami's] literary productions: nearly all the printed copies [of his books] have been successively destroyed by fire, flood or other mischance. But Mr. Venkataswami's persistence is unconquerable."⁴ These lone copies are now scattered across

the world—in the state library in Hyderabad, the British Library in London, the library of the Asiatic Society in Kolkata, the libraries at the universities of Cambridge, Oxford, and Chicago, and the Cleveland Public Library, among others.

Venkataswami was the first literate member of his extended family. He was born in Nagpur (which was part of the then Central Provinces, and is now in the western Indian state of Maharashtra) and grew up speaking Marathi, the local language, and Telugu, his mother tongue. He attended high school at the Free Church Institution and graduated from Hislop College in Nagpur; both institutions were founded and sponsored by the United Free Church of Scotland.⁵ Migrating from Nagpur to Hyderabad shortly after the deaths of both his father and his wife in 1893, he became a sub-librarian in the nizam's State Library (Kutubkhana Asifia) in Hyderabad, the capital of a Muslim-ruled princely dominion. Between 1900 and 1930, in addition to the biography of his father, Venkataswami had rendered a work from the Telugu oral epic tradition into English and published three collections of oral narrative and a book of short essays.⁶ Although he wrote only in English, his writings are suffused with Telugu, Hindi, Hindustani, and Marathi. In a departure from his usual writing on everyday life and cultural forms, he wrote the introduction to Ralph Griffith's translation of the Valmiki Ramayana, published in the prestigious Chaukhamba Sanskrit series.

Venkataswami's story challenges our understandings of anthropology in colonial India in significant ways. Unlike the majority of Indian scholars who came from so-called upper castes, he came from a so-called lower caste; unlike most colonial-era anthropologists whose books were published by well-known publishing houses in London, he self-published a limited number of copies of his books, relying on Christian presses and printers in south India (SPCK, Methodist, Diocesan, and Solden). Although neither Venkataswami nor his family converted to Christianity, Christian missionary activity was intense among the Medara and Mala communities in south India, a fact that would have made him familiar with the press as a powerful missionary tool for disseminating Christianity. Missionary presses voluminously published Christian prayer books, catechisms, and translations of the Bible in various Indian languages, attempted to enter the lucrative market of school textbooks, and also undertook non-Christian printing work for the government and private individuals. It is hard to know whether Venkataswami paid these presses to publish his books, but we do know that during World War I, Christian presses were strapped for funds and staffing, and non-Christian publications became a revenue stream.⁷ To return to Venkataswami's unusual position in colonial anthropology, unlike many Indians who "collaborated"

as pandits and *munshis* with British officials, Venkataswami never played the part of assistant or native informant for British anthropologists. This chapter explores Venkataswami's authorial persona across three of the genres he wrote in: the biography, oral epic, and folktale collections. It shows how he allows the subjective to suffuse the hallowed ideal of scientific objectivity through a narrative craft that exposes the hollowness of objectivity.

The Subjective Lens, the Looking Glass of Science

By the early twentieth century, the notion of objectivity had become the totem of colonial anthropology and folklore and the sanctum of the discipline of history, where a fetish developed about "original sources."⁸ In this vision, if knowledge about "other" people was to be authentic, reliable, and universally decipherable—that is, objective—it had to be abstracted from living contexts, fitted into various taxonomies standardized by European institutions. Charlotte Burne, the president of the Folk-Lore Society, insisted, "The scientific study of folklore consists in bringing modern scientific methods of accurate observation and inductive reasoning to bear upon these various forms of Tradition, just as they have been brought to bear upon other phenomena."⁹ To be considered a scientific endeavor, a collection of folklore had to gather cultural specimens (such as stories) through specified methods and provide notes and annotations. A narrative collection's scientific stock went up if it engaged debates on origins and primitive mentality and if it included a vetted typology of motifs. An index that listed beliefs, practices, and other exotica for easy reference added to its scientific utility, and its scientific aura was enhanced if the author noted that the work was the fruit of labor conducted beyond the call of duty—an image that went well with the nineteenth-century idea of the scientist, who, as the historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison put it, was the "insightful self, the diligent worker."¹⁰

But could a *native* anthropologist claim a scientific self? European scientists could realize the cherished ideal of objectivity through various filters on the self.¹¹ Native anthropologists, by contrast, could be objective only if they performed a rather fundamental negation: erase their belonging to, and participation in, their everyday worlds. In nineteenth-century anthropology, the word "native" was a retrenched category, without the complexity the term carries today.¹² Natives were invisible or voiced-over informants. After *Old Deccan Days*, there was never again a "narrator's narrative" in the hundreds of collections that followed; instead, we are more likely to see variations of "narrator's name not given" or "boy who sold eggs."¹³ Further, as we will

see in more detail in the next chapter, native *scholarly* expertise, necessary to advance scientific anthropology, had to be constructed on this foundation of self-denial. Thus disaggregated, dissected, disembodied, and disenchanted, “culture” in scientific anthropology could not have been more removed from those who lived and breathed it.

The “writing culture” turn of the 1980s began to systematically spell out the racist logic of scientific premises in early anthropology.¹⁴ The logic applies equally to the politics of temporality in the discipline of history. Dipesh Chakrabarty sums up the central contradiction of the so-called scientific (“reason-based”) method:

If historical or anthropological consciousness is seen as the work of a rational outlook, it can only “objectify”—and thus deny—the *lived* relations the observing subject already has with that which he or she identifies as belonging to a historical or ethnographic time and space separate from the ones he or she occupies as the analyst. In other words, the method does not allow the investigating subject to recognize himself or herself as also the figure he or she is investigating.¹⁵

On the surface, Venkataswami observed many of the norms of scientific anthropology. He was a member of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland and also the Folk-Lore Society of London,¹⁶ and like the colonial collectors, he too invoked the discourse of typology, indices, the image of the hardworking social scientist, and so on. Consider this passage from his preface to *Folk-Stories of the Land of Ind* (1927):

For the use of the student a classification to the best of my ability has been drawn up on the lines followed for his Indian Nights Entertainments by the Rev. Charles Swynnerton; a glossary of Indian terms and copious notes to elucidate the text are also given, and to enhance the utility of the work I have given an Index on broad lines as recommended by the eminent Indian folklorist, Sir Richard Carnac Temple, [this is] a study of the Indian folklore . . . in a scientific spirit. . . . [T]he author will consider himself amply compensated for the labour bestowed on the work for a year and a half, while performing his duties of an uncongenial nature and at high pressure.¹⁷

But what I find interesting is the way in which he deploys the scientific. For instance, he dispassionately presents the British under a *new* tale type called “Foreign Character Series.” Here we find the story about bird droppings on a statue of the well-known British official Thomas Munro.¹⁸ In the notes he places supposedly exotic Indian practices side by side with European customs.

Thus, he blandly describes “washed his hands” as “a habit which is essential to those who eat with the fingers, not with knife and fork.”¹⁹ English, the language of scientific discourse, itself must stretch to include Indian scripts and transliterated, untranslated colloquialisms and breathe through the onomatopoeia of Indian languages. *Gulloo gulloo*, he explains factually, is the “noise caused by anklets worn by ladies,” and as for *kich kich*, “rats make such noise.”²⁰

Through a set of writing practices and viewing techniques that can be described collectively as a “subjective lens,” Venkataswami performs the scientific but obstinately refuses its racist premises. Such a lens inverts the object in a way that our gaze is directed to a human subject who is not an insulated biometric object but a living, reflecting person connected to places and things and people and phenomena. This subjective lens reveals a world of vernacular abundance, a world that overflows with acknowledgments of his parents, sisters, aunts, uncles, nephews, and cousins. It is a world energized by descriptions of everyday life with its micro-politics, local landscapes, and caste-specific practices. Kinship and affective ties connect stories to particular life moments in narrators’ lives, and oral stories demand an equal hearing with the written record of things. The subjective lens also describes Venkataswami’s unexpected use of the photograph. In contrast to the gospel belief of nineteenth-century anthropology that the photograph could objectively illustrate “primitive culture” beyond expository assertions from the field or the armchair, for Venkataswami, photography became a technology that gave stories form and life, their *élan vital* (vital impetus).²¹

Finally, the subjective lens also reveals Venkataswami’s relationship to the English language. “I am not responsible for the language in which [the stories] are couched or clothed by reason of my being a foreigner,” he clarifies in *Folk-Stories of the Land of Ind*, and elsewhere he offers variants of that sentiment: “The writer is writing in English, a tongue foreign to him,” and “Absolute perfection [in English] only comes to him who stays in England be it for a season and I have never been [to England], much less stayed [there] for the sheer fact of my being one of nature’s unwealthy sons.”²²

Why did Venkataswami write only in English?

I have been asked this important question many times when I have presented Venkataswami’s work. I have not been satisfied to say that English was simply the language of power and he therefore aspired to write in it. To assert this would be to go against a view he held passionately: “The regeneration of my country (or any country) lies in the cultivation of the vernaculars to the highest pitch, and not in writing English although Lord Macaulay’s Educational Despatch of 1833 was instrumental in giving

such a liberal education or education in such a finished and fine form to some of India's sons."²³ I imagine, therefore, that as colonial anthropology began to annex a deeply familiar terrain by wrenching stories from their lived moorings, Venkataswami felt that it violated his cultural experiences. Notwithstanding that he lacked privileges of class and caste, he reclaimed that terrain, and reclaimed it in the languages of science and English—the languages of nineteenth-century Europe that depleted, if it did not destroy, the sap of everyday Indian life. These were also the very languages that sought to fashion brown sahibs whose re-formed cultural inheritance would include a hand-me-down Anglo-Saxon past and English ways. The Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes the parallel predicament in Africa: "The ambitious colonial scheme of reconstructing an African whose historical, physical, and metaphysical geography begins with European memory was almost realized with the production of such a native class dismembered from its social memory."²⁴ But only *almost*. Because raconteurs like Venkataswami, far from letting the English language sever them from their societies, expanded the language and made it recognize and overcome its forgetfulness of human person and memory. To write in English, therefore, was an ethical choice, a political choice, as much as it was an aesthetic choice.

In the rest of the chapter I consider how Venkataswami re-narrates the present and the past on his own terms, intertwining two dominant genres in which India was being inscribed: history and folklore.

The Subject of Biography

Life of M. Nagloo, Venkataswami's biography of his father, Nagaya, was begun during Nagaya's lifetime and published in 1908, fifteen years after Nagaya's death.²⁵ It was written over twelve months. Venkataswami's financial circumstances allowed him to print only a hundred copies of this edition, which he privately published after much delay. Unfortunately, the 1908 Hyderabad floods immediately swallowed up all copies of this inaugural edition. Twenty-one years later, Venkataswami published, again privately, a second edition, with significant additions and substantial copyediting. (This is the edition I had stumbled on in the used book store in London.)

In a remarkably dialogic process that is prescient about life story research today, Venkataswami interviewed scores of his relatives in Ongole, Vijayawada (Bezawada then), Nagpur, and Hyderabad. The family had migrated from the Madras Presidency to the Central Provinces and then to the territory known as the Nizam's Dominions. The narrative is shaped by his many

conversations with his father and his correspondence with people who had known his father. Reflecting on how practices of history produce variant truths, the biography is decades ahead of contemporary historiography and anthropology. For example, Venkataswami regrets that he had neglected to get some details from his father, and that he had lost a precious book of Nagaya's testimonials. A set of notes made by a colonel through direct conversations with Nagaya was stolen. Hence, Venkataswami says, "we must fall back upon our memory" and trust sensory recall. He remembers Nagaya recalling that while returning home from his work as an errand boy in Kamp-tee (a cantonment station in the Central Provinces), he saw a large number of scorpions on a rock during a drizzle. This earthy, vivid memory "confirms" for Venkataswami that Nagaya had been an errand boy in a British officer's house. The earthy memory becomes, he says, a "way of filling up the gap" in the biography.²⁶

The second edition of the biography is an extraordinary collation of voices. It includes a variety of responses to Venkataswami's solicitation for reminiscences. Some letter writers are indifferent toward the "Subject" (as Venkataswami refers to his father in the book), a few are condescending, and some others express admiration. Venkataswami also included two published reviews of the first edition, one by the historian Jadunath Sarkar, and the other by S. Zahur Ali, an educator and social reformer in the Nizam's Dominions. Fourteen appendices add to the vivacity of the biography: there is a poem by Venkataswami's brother to a deceased sister; an anonymous account of the "treacherous" ousting of the raja of Nagpur by the British political resident; a letter appointing Nagaya as the head *gumastha* (adjudicator of caste disputes); a petition from the Nayudu and Mudaliyar communities of Kampti and Nagpur to the British commissioner to strip Nagaya of his position as *gumastha*; a notification from the commissioner dismissing that petition; and a panegyric in Telugu on Nagaya by a schoolmaster. Flattering and unflattering anecdotes provide snappy views of British officials. The edition also contains photographs of key places and individuals. Between his footnotes and endnotes that continuously widen the scope of the narration of the "main text," I believe that Venkataswami tries to make a larger point—that life history can never be represented or contained by one telling, and that to understand that life through its various vicinities, one needs many perspectives. Fairly or unfairly, I had read Venkataswami's folktale collections through the lens of the biography and had allowed its colors to vivify his folktale collections. I retrace this journey of interpretation beginning with a detailed summary of the biography.²⁷

FIGURE 8. Nagaya and Tulsemmah. Reproduced from M. N. Venkataswami, *Tulsemmah and Nagaya, or, Folk-Stories from India* (Madras: Methodist Publishing House, 1918).

Nagaya's Life Story

The family's history told in *M. Nagloo* begins three generations before Nagaya in the town of Kadapa (colonial name Cuddapah) in south-central Andhra Pradesh, the same Kadapa of the story in which Munro sighted the mysterious hilltop garland. Nagaya's great-grandfather Goona Nayudu belonged to the high-ranking landowning Kamma caste; the family used to be the silver mace bearers and wrestlers in the service of the local kings. During the terrible famine of 1783, as he lay starving, his wife and children already dead, some compassionate Malas (deemed to be lower in a caste hierarchy) fed him beef. Hearing this, the local king punished Goona Nayudu by banishing him to the "Untouchable" caste of Medaras, basket weavers. Medara Goona Nayudu moved to Ongole, where the local Malas accepted him. He married a Mala woman, and they had a son named Govindoo. Although orphaned at a young age, Govindoo prospered. He became a government contractor supplying bullocks to the British infantry during the last battle of Srirangapatnam (1799) and the campaign against the Maratha Holkars in 1804. When Wellesley asked Govindoo if "he wanted anything" in reward for his services, family lore records that he said: "I have all, Sir. I do not want anything."²⁸ Govindoo made enough to eventually build a tile-roofed house and purchase a few acres of land outside Ongole. His end was sudden: he was savagely attacked in a lane on his way home after defeating higher-caste competitors

in a village competition—and died, ironically, on Vijaya Dashami, the festival of the goddess Durga that celebrates the victory of good over evil. The family all across Ongole, Bezawada, Nagpur, and Hyderabad stopped celebrating the festival.

After Govindoo's sudden death, his wife and young son Polaya were cheated by many people and lost most of the family's fortune. Polaya did not enter his father's business. Instead, he learned sorcery from a sorcerer from the coast of Malabar, farther south, and also cultivated his interest in Telugu literature. Polaya became famous for his skill in healing and his public discourses. But famines stalked the family once again. The 1823 famine depleted his wealth, and the 1833 famine ruined the family. Venkataswami remarks, "Ongole, indeed the whole southern country, has not witnessed such a dire calamity before or since."²⁹ Desperate, Polaya participated in a raid on a government granary, was caught, and was sent to prison to serve a three-month sentence. He continued to heal fellow prisoners. But half-way through his sentence, he died. Venkataswami reports two versions in family memory about the cause of this death. The first version blames the deplorable state of British prisons, where prisoners were starved, tortured, and kept in extremely unsanitary conditions. The second version attributes Polaya's death to sorcery gone wrong. Polaya was buried on the banks of the Pennar River. It is said that on the night he died, all the "devils, ghosts, and disembodied spirits" to whom Polaya, being jailed, had not been able to keep his promises gathered at his house and created a pandemonium.³⁰ His mother and his wife, scared out of their wits, gathered all his sorcery books and burned them in a big fire.

It was under these circumstances of poverty and sorrow that Nagaya, Polaya's son (Venkataswami's father), was raised. Nagaya—who was born in 1828 and was barely six when his father died—was one of three to survive among the ten children born to Polaya and his two wives. The family lost everything it ever possessed in repaying the loans it owed to a Christian mission in Ongole. Nagaya's two sisters were married into native families of Ongole. The younger sister moved to Madras and the older to Jalna in the northwestern part of what was then the Nizam's Dominions. Polaya's two wives took the young Nagaya to Hyderabad in the mid-1830s, where they both soon died of cholera. Nagaya's older sister and her husband brought the orphaned Nagaya to Jalna, where they took up domestic service in the household of a British officer. Venkataswami's account pauses at Nagaya's transition from Hyderabad to Jalna. He writes, "We have seen [Nagaya], in later life of an evening and in the exhilarating moments, when he had had his usual peg of brandy and soda water, bursting out into a doggerel song,

filling his fingers before his infant offspring and recalling sad glimpses of Hyderabad.” The song went, “*Sankalo pilla/Nethi meedha golla/Chadarghatoo bhata/Palmeru Saboo kittutunnadu/Kooliki potunnano.*” Venkataswami translates: “Child on hip/Basket on head/Way to Chudderghat/Palmer Sab is building a mansion.”³¹ Indeed through its everyday dialect of Telugu, the song carries the poignant image of a young mother, with her baby in a sling on her hip, setting out to work as a day laborer at a construction site. I had visited the Chadarghat area in Hyderabad many times as a college student and crossed the old bridge over the Musi to meet my mother at the school where she taught, and the song struck a chord.

The move to Jalna marks the beginning of Nagaya’s self-making. After a failed marriage (and a divorce), he left on a cart for the new military cantonment of Kamptee near Nagpur in the Central Provinces. Beginning as an errand boy, he held menial jobs with various British military officers. When he was about twenty, he followed an officer to Saugor, over two hundred miles farther north of Jalna. Although in Saugor Nagaya became the *kulampedda* (head of the community), he returned to Kamptee just at the time when the Nagpur Chattisgarh railway began to run between Nagpur and Calcutta, the old seat of the British Indian government. Like his forefather Govindoo, Nagaya was diligent and thrifty: “He built a tiled-roof house and two grass thatched houses in the Bandarbasti, then flourishing with Bandarawandlu [people from Bandar] or Masulipatnam men. . . [and] purchased 6 country carts that plied between the Military Station and Hyderabad in one direction and Jubbulpore on the other, on a hire of Rs. 80 to the former and 90 to 100 to the latter place.”³² In 1855 Nagaya married Tulsemmah—who came from a modest Telugu family in Nagpur—and over the years they had ten children, many of whom died young. In one especially appalling instance, the child died because of an overdose of medicine given by a negligent doctor. When confronted by Tulsemmah, the doctor laid the blame on Nagaya for having charged him for a previous carriage ride to Kamptee. (He had expected a free ride.) Venkataswami records the losses of each of his siblings poignantly.

Nagaya’s Nagpur years marked a transformative period of his life. He acquired property and ran his own transportation and hotel businesses, and his life with his wife, Tulsemmah, was “singularly happy.”³³ He worked for some time for a Captain Clifton of the Twelfth Lancers during the 1857–58 Uprising against British rule, during which he witnessed the ruthless practices of the British as they put down the Indians. After this tumultuous period, Nagaya worked for a judge, a forest officer, and a railways officer. The last of these jobs brought him a steady commission from the sale of timber for railway compartments and gave him a financial boost to open a small hotel on

MAP 3. Nagaya's migrations

Source: Map by Bill Nelson. Based on information from J. G. Bartholomew, ed., *Constable's Hand Atlas of India: A New Series of Sixty Maps and Plans* (Westminster: Archibald Constable & Company, 1893), plate 17.

March 20, 1864. The Gondwana country of Nagpur was a prime location for a hotel and catering business. Immensely rich in cotton and forest produce, and abounding with Bengal tigers, leopards, panthers, and bison, it attracted traders and hunters. And it was well connected to the British world by Howards Brothers' "Dawk Gharry," a horse-drawn mail carriage. Nagaya's reputation as hospitality provider soared when Richard Temple II, the commissioner of Nagpur, held the Nagpur Industrial Exhibition in 1865, bringing in hundreds of prospectors. (This was the same Richard Temple who became governor of the Bombay Presidency in 1877, and in whose house we would have our last sighting, as reported by naturalist-adventurer Marianne North, of Anna Liberata de Souza in 1878.)³⁴ Local folklore about the hotel grew. For instance, Venkataswami reports that one guest, a "Nayudu of Lascarline," would get drunk and boast about his strength. *This hand has been fed at Nagloo's hotel; don't mess with me*, he would shout: "*Edi Nagloo Votailoo Chhaiyyee. Yamanukuntavoora.*"³⁵

The railway came to Nagpur in 1867. In 1869 Nagaya bought several acres near the railway station. This was to be his grandest entrepreneurial dream. He built a classy two-story hotel on this plot, paying almost forty thousand rupees, and called it the Railway and Residency Hotel. Venkataswami proudly recounts:

Its façade was the same as the Government House at Parell Bombay. The idea no doubt was borrowed by my Father on a visit to Bombay, most probably the first one with his Madras bullock gharries . . . The whole building with its innumerable outhouses and cookrooms and stables as also a billiard room together with a suite of apartments at some distance to the left of the building were all constructed from plans and designs furnished, would you believe, by my Father himself.³⁶

Nagaya put his heart and soul into his hotel. He bordered the land with neem and henna trees. A fountain adorned the triangular garden in front of the hotel. He planted fruit trees—orange, guava, sweet lime, fig, apple, pomegranate and papaya—and flowering plants like lily, jasmine, rose, and sunflower. In the vegetable garden he grew cabbages, cauliflower, and other produce for the hotel's kitchen. The plot was irrigated with water from a well, which also fed a water tank through an underground pipe. Beside the well was a temple to Nagaya's favorite deity, Muniswaran (a form of Shiva). The hotel's lodgers were mostly Europeans who stopped at Nagpur on their way to Bombay. In fact, the railhead ensured steady Bombay-bound passenger traffic from Jabalpur, Mirzapur, and Allahabad.

FIGURE 9. The Railway and Residency Hotel. Reproduced from M. N. Venkataswami, *Life of M. Nagloo (Maidara Nagaya)* (Madras: Solden & Co., 1929).

Nagaya made a fortune. His generosity was also most visible at this time. “Without putting it in footnotes and lessening the force of the narrative,” Venkataswami describes his father’s philanthropy. He paid for marriages and funerals in poor families, spent many hours on Sunday distributing “a good palmful of rice” or “a quarter anna copper” to alms-seekers,³⁷ poured sugar into ant holes, and handed out *lotas* (cups) with drinking water to thirsty travelers. He gave presents on the Muslim festival of Mohurram to the *majeens*, *bhonds*, and fakirs, on Sankranti, the Hindu harvest festival, to troupes of women from Kamptee, and on Holi, the spring festival, to Somasi dancing girls. During the Pola festival, he gave his bullock drivers an extra day off. During the nine nights of Dassera, Nagaya rewarded his coachmen and horse keepers.³⁸

Nagaya did not foresee that the fate of the Railway and Residency Hotel was tied to the capricious development of the railroad. The same trains that had brought him business took it away. In 1868 the railhead was extended to Jabalpur, and then even farther to Calcutta, establishing a direct Calcutta-Bombay line. Passengers no longer needed to come to Nagpur to transit. Nagaya’s hotel suffered greatly. He became dependent on the occasional passenger and the steady income from his catering contract with the Great Indian Peninsula Railway. He opened a branch hotel in Jabalpur in 1870, and

it did well until 1873. Venkataswami does not know why his father abruptly closed the branch hotel only to reopen it in 1876, when the Railway and Residency Hotel was in dire straits. Nagaya's son-in-law, who was put in charge of the reopened Jabalpur hotel, cheated him, and to complicate matters, the hotel lost its liquor license. The tottering branch hotel had to be shut down in 1878. Another hotel Nagaya opened in the nearby hill station of Panchmarhi also failed. Around this time, in 1876, the tycoon Jamshedji Tata made an offer of seventy thousand rupees to buy the Railway and Residency Hotel and its lands as a site to establish his textile factory, which later became famous as Empress Mills. But Nagaya would not sell. Then followed a ten-year cascade of lenders filing lawsuits against Nagaya to recover their debts. Ultimately, in 1879 the Railway and Residency Hotel, its contents, and its grounds were attached and auctioned. The auction fetched twelve thousand rupees. Venkataswami writes:

This was the fall, and my father in those days lost his appetite, his gaiety had also gone, and he used to retire early to bed, touching a little food after taking little of a stimulant. There is no doubt that he brooded over the loss of the building whose construction he had watched with the glee of a child. The loss of many of his most valued articles such as the very large chandelier, the fine big billiard table, the double-horse carriages that used to run between Nagpur and Kamptee, the horses, the "sage gharries" or coaches drawn by bullock, etc., etc, might not have put him in melancholia as did the loss of his idol, the Hotel building magnificent with a fine style of architecture and commanding a partial view of the neighbouring Sookrawar Tank of old.³⁹

In a final attempt to provide for himself and his family, in 1879 Nagaya established a small hotel, called the Central Provinces Empress Hotel, beside the defunct palatial Railway and Residency Hotel, which had been turned over to the railways. Venkataswami recalls that his mother's *strīdānam* (marriage jewelry) was pawned to fund his father's last venture. And he also remembers the people who came to his father's aid in these diminished circumstances: Gopal Pant Gatate, who provided the loan, and Nagaya's old friend Shaik Ismail—"one of his few true friends with a stout heart"—who was the guarantor. In 1880 Nagaya petitioned the government for a pension on the grounds that he had provided services to the state through his hotel and catering services for twenty years, at a time when the "Central Provinces [were] just arousing to commercial activity. The Hotel established was a point of civilisation as the other few points, [just as] the Telegraph Post Office, etc. are [points of civilization]." The chief commissioner of the

Central Provinces, John Morris, was a supporter of “Old Nagloo,” but the proposition to provide him a life-saving pension failed because it was “bitterly attacked or opposed by Dr. Brake, the Civil Surgeon, and Colonel H. A. Hammond, the Inspector General of Police.” As an “alternative measure,” Morris commissioned the building of a new structure that combined the idea of a hotel and a *dak* bungalow, out of which Nagaya could run his hotel business. Nagaya relocated the Empress Hotel “on 10th August 1881.”⁴⁰ In 1884, Nagaya’s wife of thirty years, Tulsemmah, died, leaving him bereft of the steadiest companionship he had been gifted in his life, despite his own affairs with other women and his harsh treatment of her in his later years (about which Venkataswami is cutting).

The chronological account ends with the events of 1893. The new commissioner, Anthony MacDonnell, abruptly terminated Nagaya’s lease on the hotel and *dak* building, which housed his Empress Hotel, giving Nagaya six months to leave. Venkataswami bitterly notes that the contract was issued to a German firm, Messrs. Kellner & Co., which had been operating the East Indian Railways Refreshment Rooms, an operation that displayed none of Nagaya’s intimate knowledge of, and care for, clients. The notice of termination could not have come at a worse time. Nagaya had been paralyzed by a stroke. In Venkataswami’s sad words, “Sir Antony MacDonnell showed himself the reverse of a man of feeling.”⁴¹ Nagaya sold his house at the same time that he was evicted from the hotel, and was moved in a *tonga* to a small rented house near the Khandoba temple, not far from his old Railway and Residency Hotel. Venkataswami—married in 1886, when he was eighteen years old—and his wife, Heeramma, cared for Nagaya during the last weeks of his life. Nagaya died on May 26, 1893—six days after young Heeramma herself had died. Venkataswami migrated to Hyderabad, and nothing in his writings indicates that he ever went back to Nagpur. And thus, through the lens of one family’s experiences—its economic ups and downs, its displacements, dreams, and innovations—Venkataswami brings us face-to-face with colonial India’s human paradoxes and costs, and its quotidian encounters, rarely available in imperial annals.

“Greatness” and the Biographical Subject

The oral-historical approach helped Venkataswami tell the story of the making of a self-made man, but it also helped him evince what he believed was the “greatness” of his biographical subject. In the second edition, Venkataswami published the comments of A. B. Napier, an officer in the Indian civil

service to whom Venkataswami had sent a copy of the first edition. Napier wrote, "I admire your dutifulness as a son in recording the details of your father's life and from a cursory examination of the book, it would appear to contain some interesting records of persons and events connected with Nagpur, but at the same time, when I knew your father he was hardly a public character of great importance."⁴² Musing on Napier's remarks, Venkataswami wonders if perhaps "he ought not to" have written his father's biography. Then he quickly asserts: "Now with reference to the estimation amongst his caste people it may be stated, that he ranked high. The qualities of the heart, which were ever predominant won them over and threw a veil over the moral breaches which at one time raised a storm of indignation of the entire community." He reminds us that from *til sankrant* to *til sankrant* (harvest festival), Nagaya's community brought him gifts of sheep and sugarcane. Somasi girls who danced each year at Holi mentioned him in their songs, which went:

Bungari Kolattamo	We sway over golden Kolattam rods.
Na Lachimi Kodaka	My Lakshmi's son [i.e., Nagaya, son of the goddess of prosperity]
Bungari Kolattamo	We sway over golden Kolattam rods.
Poowooloo boosay	The trees have blossomed
Poowooloo gawsay	The trees have flowered ⁴³

Napier's remarks about Nagaya's unimportance had clearly not discouraged Venkataswami. On the contrary, he called his revised second edition of the biography a "second birth" (a rite of passage generally reserved for upper-caste Hindus). That was not all. Along with photographs of the raja of Nagpur (Raghoji Rao III), the commissioner (Sir Richard Temple), and the tomb of the well-known historian of Nagpur (George Forster), he placed a photograph of the tomb of Nagaya, the pioneering hotelier. These were the makers of Nagpur. This audacious visual rejoinder to Napier does not just refuse the humiliation of erasure. It demands radical parity in the ascription of greatness.

Greatness was acknowledged by two Indian reviewers, rather backhandedly. Jadunath Sarkar and Zahur Ali, in separate reviews, admired the first edition of book for the graphic candor of its narration and its breathtaking detail. Sarkar called it a "truthful narrative," high praise in light of Sarkar's well-known commitment to "truth" in historical method.⁴⁴ Yet what arrests both Sarkar and Zahur Ali is that the biography is the story of a "pariah" by a "pariah": both reviews flash "Great Pariah" in their titles.⁴⁵ The editor of

the *Modern Review*, where Sarkar's critique appeared, gratuitously comments in a headnote that Venkataswami for his "truthfulness deserves to be made Brahmin like Satyakama Javala of the days of the Upanishads."⁴⁶ Sarkar himself appreciates the complex characterization of Nagaya that balances his excesses against his generousities and concludes that despite "wealth and official favour," Nagaya remained "humble and respectful as before." But, Sarkar goes on, "This [humility] is a most admirable characteristic often noticed in low-caste Hindus who make their own fortunes." This sentiment is made more explicit when he calls on "high caste Hindus" to express "greater charity and sociality" toward "these educated Pariahs."⁴⁷ To be fair, Sarkar was reflecting a view held by one segment of the Indian elites toward what came to be called the "Pariah Problem" from the 1890s in south India. The solution to historical caste discrimination in their view lay in *social* reform, not in legislative empowerment.⁴⁸ The other reviewer, Zahur Ali, appreciates the portrait of Nagaya for different reasons: "Nagloo is indeed a very interesting personality and the interest is heightened by the fact that he appears in his 'original' Dravidian colours unsullied by *padre* purification. The ordinary fate of the *malas* [Venkataswami's ancestral community], unless they come within the missionary fold is to live and die, unseen, unknown and unlamented with not a stone to tell where they lie."⁴⁹

Venkataswami, however, has little use for either the condescension or the patronization. Bristling at a Scottish missionary who had publicly announced that "Pariah girls" were not beautiful and so "if the caste system were to be abolished today, all the low caste Pariahs will flock in numbers to marry high caste girls," Venkataswami denounces these attitudes. He writes: "The Reader might think that we brood over our lot of being of low status, but he is mistaken. We are not brooding over our lot. We are satisfied with it, as that Being . . . has distributed equally on mankind, beauty, wealth, education, etc., without distinction of caste or creed."⁵⁰ In the teeming index of the book, Venkataswami lists the word "pariahs" with a telling cross-reference: "See Malas." And under the term "Malas" is indexed a world of anecdotes, practices, and histories.⁵¹

Venkataswami's observations about caste had reminded me of the famous interlocations between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on "untouchability."⁵² I wondered if Venkataswami, who had never hesitated to write to public figures, had ever corresponded with Gandhi or Ambedkar. Ambedkar's papers in the National Archives of India did not provide any leads. To my excitement, however, Sabarmati Ashram's library held letters from a single exchange between Gandhi and Venkataswami. The exchange was not about caste. What it revealed was nevertheless instructive to me and

shaped my understanding of how Venkataswami viewed the biography he had written. His letter to Gandhi is dated January 1929, a few months before the new edition would have been out. Gandhi was in Ahmedabad at that time. “I beg of you to write a foreword thereto,” Venkataswami requested, “after going through it from page to page—unless you have good reasons for not complying with my request [which is] not far fetched in any way.” After listing names of people who had declined to write a foreword for various reasons, Venkataswami tells Gandhi:

My book deals with many things and it is outspoken on many points, as I have to speak the truth, and people are afraid to write a foreword as by doing so they think they would be committing themselves. So I have approached you and if you are also afraid as the others [were] I would permit the book to go without a Foreword as was the case in the first edition. Lastly, I have another request to make and the request is, that you will not disclose the matter of the book much less permit it to be printed in your paper or make a reference about me in your paper or [any] other paper for reasons of my own. I hope you will comply with this request of mine unfailingly and of course with your usual kindness to all.

Unsurprisingly, Gandhi responded promptly. He congratulated Venkataswami but regretted he could not write the foreword because he was preoccupied with “matters of national importance.”⁵³ (He was preparing for the Salt March.) Venkataswami had written to Gandhi *not* because Gandhi was, for some publics at least, a champion of less privileged castes but because his name had become associated with truth telling and the courage to commit to it.

It is clear that Venkataswami’s dispute is not just with the British but also with “upper-caste” Hindus. A footnote in the biography tells us that Jadunath Sarkar had made the “minor error” of stating that Nagaya had the habit of spitting on the walls of his furnished drawing room. Venkataswami corrects this view. He writes, “It is too true that [Nagaya] retained the habit but he never spat *on the walls of his drawing room* but on the wall or a small portion of the wall to his right in the pillared verandah at the rear of the Bungalow.” Equally important, however, is for him to point out that this is not a pariah peculiarity imagined by an affluent upper-caste Hindu. He writes, “It may be stated here that in these days of reason and right understanding it is a wonder to me that this very habit should be formed by an intelligent Brahmin from the Rai Bareilly district, who is an assistant of mine in a Government institution (since deceased).”⁵⁴ Venkataswami’s closing words passionately state the

core point of the biography: acknowledgment on the basis of greatness and not on the basis of caste.

The work is concluded, and we do not know whether the Subject of this Life by a consensus of opinion was really great enough to have a biography of his own. Opinions in the first place differ, as to what constitutes real greatness, and yet there is no doubt that the Subject of this Life had a number of qualities which were really the marks of greatness which brought him to the front rank of men. . . . When the Rev. W. E. Winks has already recorded the lives of illustrious shoemakers of his country, we thought fit to record, to the best of our ability, the Life of a Representative Mala or Pariah of our country who lived in the past century and whom we have the honour to own as our father, and if the Government of India has not thought fit to confer a title, that of a Rao Bahadur on the Subject of this Life as it did on the Stevedore Mr. P. M. Maduray Pillai, an Honorary Magistrate and Municipal Commissioner and on Mr. Aiyaswamy Pillay, D.M. & S.O., the first Indian Officer of the Madras Corporation, both being Pariahs of the Tamil country, that is no reason why we should swerve from the duty of writing the biography of our Father, the untitled Nagaya, or "Nagloo" the favourite of the Central Provinces Officers. . . . Despite the liberal dissemination of knowledge in the mother country and in the colonies and dependencies which is one of the characteristics of the Victorian age, if a Hinduised aristocratic European or a caste-ridden Hindu were to sneeringly remark, "After all it is a biography of a Mala or Pariah written by a Mala or Pariah, who is no more than one degree higher than a Madhiga or shoemaker," so what should our argument be to rebut the sneer or charge. Our argument, without offending the Reader of broad sympathies, would be an interrogation or question put in the words. "Whether a Pariah is not a man brought into existence by the Author of the Universe just as he called into being the other human creatures that go by different castes?" And if so "why talk disparagingly of the humble man and exclude him from the social organization from time immemorial?" If on the ground of uncleanness, or rather because of being the eaters of forbidden flesh, the Burmans, the Malagasees, or the inhabitants of the Island of Madagascar, the African races, the Mohammedans (whether continental, Asiatic, or otherwise) the European nations, nay two-thirds of the human race are offenders in this respect. Yet these have their organization—call it caste organization if you please—whereby the deserving have the liberty to rise above the ranks.⁵⁵

In choosing to tell his story as *he* chose to tell it in the light of justice, unafraid of naming people and reinterpreting events, Venkataswami takes us to David Scott's observation about George Lamming:

For Lamming . . . the sovereignty of the imagination has neither to do with the sequestering of creativity from, nor its absorption by, the world of affairs—this would be merely bad faith. Rather an authentic sovereignty of the imagination has to do with the active will to refuse submission to the shibboleths that seek at every turn to inspire our self-contempt and our unthinking docility, and to command our understandings of, and our hopes for, what it might mean to live as a free community of valid persons.

Scott could well have been speaking about Venkataswami, who would have been an active builder of a "free community of valid persons." Such a global community (and the phrase) was the vision of the Guyanese poet Martin Carter, which Lamming explains is born out of the shared commitment to "the proximity that we have to each other, and the communality of [the] historical cargo of burden, and survival from burden, that we carry."⁵⁶

Truth and Biographical Representation

Life of M. Nagloo takes on the central problem of "truth in history." Historians do not ordinarily turn to Venkataswami to find an answer to the question "What is history?" or "What was history?"⁵⁷ Yet Venkataswami's writings articulate what is at stake in that question and then make a choice in answering it, choosing integrity to "the subject." This integrity does not inevitably mean *bias*. Rather, in the end, integrity is the evocation of many possible truths, and not the representation of a single truth. After reading the first edition, a native of Nagpur, M. Hosanna, provided what Venkataswami calls "destructive criticisms." He advised Venkataswami to tone down details about Nagaya's love for brandy and about his affair with the "servant girl" Sayulu, to replace "Maratha Mahar women" with "Maratha women," to delete a Tamil song that has the phrase "call of nature" in it, and in general to stick to "extolling" his father, not "exposing" him. Venkataswami reproduces the feedback and challenges each of the suggestions with "why?" or "how so?" He does not modify the biography to accommodate Hosanna's suggestions. In the same way, footnotes frequently contain anecdotes with deliberate disregard for political correctness. Here is a classic example:

My father used to tell me that Sir Bepin Bose when [he] was a young man came to Nagpur to practise in the Courts he was not rich enough and as such paid reduced charges with the consent of the Hotel proprietor [Nagaya] during his stay in the Hotel for what period I do not know. But the Knight does not admit of having stayed in the Hotel for reasons he knows best and we would have struck off his name from the biography as I have done in the case of Mr. S. Ismay who said he never stayed in the Hotel, but we have no reason to disbelieve my father in the present case. So the name must stand though it does not add to the value of the biography in any way.

Venkataswami explains such choices: "In writing this biography I walked in the footsteps of Plutarch, the Prince of Truthful Biographers, giving the bright side as well as the dark side of my father's life in all candour and truth."⁵⁸

How is this truth expressible for Venkataswami?

Sites of History

First, land and places are vulnerable to accruing inscriptions and overlapping remembrances. "Truth" in narration shows how sites are transformed by political action or social practice. For instance, Banda and Chitrakot figure in the epic Ramayana as the forest in which Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana passed their years of exile, and are sites of elaborately sculpted temples worshipped by "the pious rajas of Tiruha."⁵⁹ But they become transformed into bloodied landscapes during the 1857–58 uprising. Among the many illustrations of the layering of cultural memory is Venkataswami's description of the grand Railway and Residency Hotel building. A footnote tells us that near the site of the hotel were former gallows where prominent local criminals were hanged. He then reproduces a song in Hindustani, "sung in the bazaars," about "the Sitabaldi goldsmith Kashi's son, probably the eldest," who was evidently a criminal:

Kashi Sonar	Goldsmith Kashi
Taria baita haram	your lawless son
Kasbin ka janliya	took away the life of a prostitute ⁶⁰

In this way, Venkataswami's songs, anecdotes, images, and histories of monuments illustrate the phenomenon of change that underlies all accounts of history.

Ample History

Second, digressions in the narrative and the construction of coincidence enliven the surroundings of the biography's subject and help make an account of the past, or history, "ample." An ample history evokes a wide range of experiences, and in so doing, it allows us to perceive multiple truths that are intertwined but could remain invisible.⁶¹ For instance, while recounting Nagaya's catering services for Sulaiman Shah (a descendant of the former Gond kings of Nagpur) and British commissioners, Venkataswami strategically digresses to describe the relationships between the Gond kings and the Marathas and then, with the Gonds fading, between the Marathas and the English. The digression enables us to visualize Nagpur as a place of rising and receding powers and Nagaya's own story as part of this ebb and flow. Venkataswami's use of coincidence juxtaposes historically disparate events, provoking new interpretations of history. For example, after describing the arrival in Ongole of the American Baptist missionary Reverend J. E. Clough, who intensified the evangelical work started by his predecessor Reverend Lyman Jewett, Venkataswami draws an unusual parallel that he himself recognizes is unrelated in geography and time. "Strange is the coincidence," he says, between the "doings here [in Ongole deep in south India] of the missionaries" and Nagaya's establishing of a hotel enterprise many years later in the Central Provinces. If Christian missionaries chose Ongole for their evangelical project because they believed that Ongole's Malas and Madigas were in darkness,⁶² eight hundred kilometers away, Richard Temple, the commissioner of the Central Provinces, selected Nagpur to be developed for trade and business. (Temple, we may recall, had hosted the Industrial Exhibition in 1851 in Nagpur.) Venkataswami leaves the connection between missionary activity and business enterprise implicit. Yet this juxtaposition underlies Nagaya's argument in the twilight of his life as he sought a pension from the government: his hotel enterprise, he reasoned, should be treated as an equal participant in "civilizing" the Central Provinces, thus equating the professed civilizational goals of church and commerce. "Coincidence" is not an ahistorical construction. Instead, it helps the historian build conceptual analogies between unrelated phenomena or events and provides the irony necessary for the interpretation of history.

Narrative Justice

Third, truth in history is tied to narrative justice, a form of equity that is possible only through a many-sided narration, a narration that is prompted

by the fundamental question of whose reporting yields what account of the past, and why any one account becomes the dominant version of "history." (Venkataswami, we might say, was walking several steps ahead of the "narrative turn" in history.)⁶³ One illustration takes for its setting the events of the Indian Uprising of 1857–58 as they unfolded in the Central Provinces. From the sidelines of this transformative event, we get Nagaya's account of the fast-paced action of the Indian summer that provoked the British chain of command into suppressing rebel soldiers in Kamptee and Nagpur. Nagaya remembers standing at night in the verandah of the brigadier general's bungalow, chatting with other servants, when the British resident, George Plowden, rushed in from Nagpur. And "getting down in great haste from his horse in the middle of the night, [he] entered the Brigadier General's room and had a close and short, evidently important talk; and [soon afterwards] all the forces were marshalled ready in an incredibly short time and marched on to Nagpore."⁶⁴ Some months later, Nagaya sees the uprising from the battlefield itself as personal servant to Captain Clifton of the Twelfth Lancers (a subdivision of the "Movable Column" led by George Whitlock). Venkataswami at first summarizes the well-known historian George Malleeson's account of the events, which lauds the bravery of British generals and captains and decries the treachery of "uprising" Indians:

We have followed Malleeson with incidents, details and dates of the battle of Banda and of the taking of Kirwi, and we have almost borrowed his graphic language, though this, properly speaking, was not our set duty, writing as we do a biography of a humble man, yet it is excusable, for, General Whitlock's Satellite, Captain Clifton, in no disparaging or mean sense of the word, shone resplendently taking part in all the operations undertaken in Bundelkhand country . . . and within . . . the compass of the gallantry of the Captain existed the Subject of this Life serving his master with faithfulness and loyalty, with honesty and singleness of purpose combined with alacrity in moments of peril and safety. . . . We are not writing, and this is not possible for us, a history of the Indian Mutiny to replace those splendid authoritative volumes of Kaye and Malleeson.⁶⁵

This modest disclaimer performed, Venkataswami goes on, "Yet we would, embolden, to speak of General Whitlock, Banda and Toruha in as few words as possible, as we have heard it personally from our Father." The focus is now restored to the "Subject" (Nagaya), who reports gut-wrenching "harrowing scenes" of the battlefield. Through Nagaya's eyes we see the "large mound of parched Bengal gram and jaggery heaped up with potfuls

of water” by desperate Indian soldiers who do not want to break for food while fighting the British. We witness Whitlock’s “immediate and constant hanging on trees” of captured men, and his handling of men of importance such as an old raja and his son by tying them to the mouths of cannons and firing them. And we are moved with Nagaya as he recounts how women all over the country threw themselves into wells, preferring to die rather than be captured and raped by British soldiers. But it is the “Loot of Banda,” the small kingdom in the Central Provinces, that Nagaya remembers “at length and with special stress.” The nawab who had supported the rebels was overthrown and banished to Indore, his palace looted by the British, who took his rare and old books valued at “at 12 lakhs of rupees” and all the family’s gold and silver and jewelry. The quantities were so large that it took the British “60 carts daily for three months for the removal to Bombay” to ship to England.⁶⁶ Thus, as events of fifty years earlier become experience-near for Venkataswami through his father’s memories of witnessing them, John Kaye and George Malleeson’s one-sided account is thoroughly unsettled. Similarly, Venkataswami cites James Rennell’s 1785 cartographic reconnaissance of Nagpur but shifts it out of focus through Nagaya’s reminiscences about Nagpur’s hills and streams and communities. Minutiae from the biography provide the texture that is absent in dominant narrations. Narrative justice is accomplished when the historical record is thus formed through many and textured tellings that complicate the moral resonance of places and events.

The Subject of Small Kingdoms: Venkataswami’s *STORY OF BOBBILI*

Before Venkataswami produced the second edition of *Life of M. Nagloo*, he compiled an extraordinary account of the tragic battle in 1757 between the kings of Bobbili and Vijayanagaram (Vizianagaram) in the Andhra region of southern India. The story, with its dramatic episodes of war, mass suicide, political machinations, cockfights, wagers, and heroism, is popular in the imaginary of the Telugu-speaking world.⁶⁷ The story is likely to have gone into the oral tradition soon after the events of 1757 in the Andhra country, and there are several versions that vary significantly, although they share a common core.⁶⁸

Venkataswami’s version is the only version of the story in English, recorded and translated from the oral tradition. It is also probably unique in that it was narrated by itinerant Telugu singers who went from the nizām’s state of Hyderabad to the Central Provinces in the late nineteenth century.⁶⁹ The version is extraordinary also for its explicit framing by Venkataswami and for its implicit dialogue between Venkataswami and Jadunath Sarkar—

MAP 4. Bobbili and Vizianagaram

Source: Map by Bill Nelson. Based on information from J. G. Bartholomew, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India: Bombay Presidency*, Volume 18. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909).

who wrote the foreword to the book—on the subject of history. We have here a different texturing of the question of truth in history, which, we have seen, was an intellectual and ethical question for both Sarkar and Venkataswami. Since Venkataswami's *Bobbili Story* is a rare book, perhaps available only in the library of the University of Cambridge, I provide a summary in the text that follows.

Bobbili is a small town in northern Andhra Pradesh, just south of the state's border with Odisha. The story recounted by Venkataswami's "minstrel" about the battle of 1757 begins in the early 1740s in Rajahmundry, about two hundred miles to the south. Two local chieftain brothers from Rajahmundry, Ranga Rao and Vengala Rao, on a rather unsuccessful hunting expedition with their two young nephews Papa Rao and Dharma Rao, come to a wild unpopulated land, where their hunting hounds at last spot a hare and give chase. To

their surprise, the hare turns around and attacks the dogs, which run back whimpering to the hunting party. The chiefs learn of a local legend that says whoever lives here is unconquerable. They decide to build a fort here and establish a small kingdom. They thus become vassals of Vijayarama Raju, the ruler of Vijayanagaram, a kingdom forty miles to the south, under whose jurisdiction the land falls. Vijayarama Raju himself is a feudal king under the nizam of Hyderabad, whose capital is in Golconda, about three hundred miles southeast.

Soon the brothers build an impressive kingdom of twelve villages called Bobbili. Ranga Rao becomes king and lives in a colorful gem-studded palace. Bobbili is surrounded by an impregnable fort, and the deity Gopalaswami, whose temple already exists, now becomes Bobbili's protective god. The Bobbili people, agricultural Velama by caste, become renowned for their courage, and especially for the prowess of their thousand warriors. All is well for four years until Ranga Rao abdicates the throne to his nephew Papa Rao, who has now become a strapping young man and a strong, bold, and skilled warrior. Papa Rao turns out to be headstrong. He stops paying taxes to Vijayanagaram, and when after nine years the king, Vijayarama Raju, approaches Bobbili for the payment that has been delayed for so long, Papa Rao roughly rebuffs him. Ranga Rao, now reduced to a powerless elder statesman, remonstrates against his nephew's dangerous impetuosity, calling the nonpayment of taxes unethical. But Papa Rao remains defiant, and in an act of insult to Vijayarama Raju, he goes to Golconda and pays the taxes directly to the nizam. To heap on further insult, he gratuitously deposits the gifts he receives from the nizam in Vijayarama Raju's palace and goes back to Bobbili. Vijayarama Raju, a hotheaded man himself, is infuriated and sends three hundred troops, who cut off the water supply to Bobbili. Two Bobbili warriors discover the troops and, in a demonstration of Bobbili valor, they vanquish the troops and open up the water supply. These incidents set up the drama of lasting enmity between Bobbili and Vijayanagaram.

Vijayarama Raju hates Bobbili deeply but realizes that he does not have the strength to overcome Bobbili. His advisers come up with a plan to invite Papa Rao to a cockfight, in which he can get Papa Rao to wager and lose Bobbili. Cockfighting is Papa Rao's weakness. The wise Ranga Rao warns him that the cockfight is a trap, but he accepts the challenge on the condition that the event should take place in neutral territory. Vijayarama Raju agrees but, at the beginning of the cockfight, imposes another condition: that the winner not laugh at the loser. The Bobbili cock, after an initial setback, dramatically wins against many others and is ultimately declared the winner, but excited by the fighting, it flies at Vijayarama Raju himself, who runs away to avoid it. Papa Rao breaks into laughter. Immediately, Vijayarama Raju claims victory, holding Papa Rao in violation of the agreement. A fight ensues between the two parties, and they retreat to their own kingdoms, nursing wounds and grievances.

With his hatred fueled by humiliation after this defeat, Vijayarama Raju is now bent on destroying Bobbili. He bribes the nizam's officer Hyder Jung, who arrives with thousands of troops. Together they recruit Dubash ("accountant") Lakshmiah, a cunning multilingual feudal lord, who also demands a large bribe. He suggests that they recruit the powerful French general Bussy, who is in the French colony of Pondicherry, and demands a hefty fee to serve as translator between Vijayarama Raju and Bussy. The greedy Bussy agrees after a massive payment on the condition that he receive a separate huge amount for every stage of the journey. Making frequent stops in order to get more money, Bussy comes with the three warlords to Bobbili. They now have 100,000 troops together, and they lay siege to Bobbili.

Papa Rao meanwhile is away from Bobbili at the Durgammah fort, where his sister lives; he is attending the marriage of her son, having gone there against the strong warnings of Ranga Rao. He takes with him only one trusted friend. While at Durgammah, he is enticed by a cockfight challenge and forgets his promise to return to Bobbili within a day.

Ranga Rao sends a message to Papa Rao informing him of the siege and asking him to return immediately. The messenger, dressed as a *bairagi* (a wandering Hindu holy man), is trapped by Bussy's men. Bussy, ignorant of the culture, thinks the messenger is a Muslim fakir and asks him to read the Qur'an as a test. The messenger prays to Gopalaswami, the Bobbili kingdom's protective deity. Miraculously, he finds he is able to read the passages. Just as he is about to leave the camp area, he is discovered. Without the arms to fight, rather than surrender, in Bobbili warrior-style, he kills himself with a small knife. Vijayarama Raju and his men discover the message intended for Papa Rao and are thrilled to learn that the redoubtable Papa Rao is not in Bobbili.

Ranga Rao sends Papa Rao's brother, the more levelheaded Dharma Rao, to negotiate with Hyder Jung, the representative of the nizam. But the attempt fails and Dharma Rao returns after a fight. Ravanammah, Papa Rao's wife, sends a letter to Vijayarama Raju with an old maidservant requesting as his symbolic sister that he stay out of the war against Bobbili. But Vijayarama Raju laughs off the request, and the old maid and the soldiers accompanying her have to fight their way out of Vijayarama Raju's camp. When she returns and tells the story, Ranga Rao expresses sorrow and loudly wishes that the taxes had been paid and that Bobbili had not been in breach of ethics. At this, Ravanammah, who is Ranga Rao's daughter, chastises her father for not being a strong Velama. But there is not much time to quarrel, because Vijayarama Raju and his partners attack the Bobbili fort that very night, a moonless night.

The people of Bobbili put up a brave fight; even the women throw the French soldiers off the fort walls, arming themselves with mortars and pestles and paring knives and chili powder. But the enemy's numbers are too large for the people of Bobbili. Ranga Rao decides to leave the fort and fight the enemy. With him are his brother Vengala Rao, his nephew Dharma Rao, and a

thousand Bobbili troops. He stops to pray at the Gopalaswami temple, where the signs are all inauspicious: the golden spires of the temple look worn and bent to one side, and all the lamps inside the temple have gone out. The Bobbili lords relight the lamps then beg Gopalaswami's permission to go to war and ask for his protection. The god, instead of giving permission or protection, tries to run here and there, and is in fact about to bolt altogether when Dharma Rao forcefully brings him back. Gopalaswami tells the lords that they have had enough time in Bobbili and should move on, and that he does not want to stay here either, especially now that foreigners have touched the fort walls. He reluctantly agrees to protect them for "seven *gadiyas*" (a *gadiya* is twenty-four minutes) in the battle.

Ranga Rao and the Bobbili army march out, and though outnumbered, they fight the enemy with astonishing valor. There is tremendous loss of life on both sides in the fierce fighting, and the remaining Bobbili men turn back to the fort to recoup. Just outside the fort walls, however, they are caught in a trap of gunpowder and mines laid by one of the nizam's commanders. Most of the remaining Bobbili warriors are killed. Ranga Rao and a few others manage to return to Bobbili. Ranga Rao decides that with defeat on their doorstep, all the women in the royal household have to be killed to avoid abduction and rape. He blindfolds his wife, Malammah, and kills her with his sword. He similarly kills his daughter Ravanammah (Papa Rao's wife) and all the other royal women. He also intends to kill his son, an infant, but an old maidservant escapes with the child in a basket. Most of the common women hang themselves from lime trees, and the remainder lock themselves in huts that they set ablaze. Ranga Rao, Vengala Rao, and Dharma Rao go to the Gopalaswami temple, where they pray to the god and then kill themselves with their own swords. Everybody in Bobbili is dead.

The servant who has tried to escape with the sole Bobbili royal child is captured by the enemy and brought to Bussy's tent. Bussy, however, melts and, telling the others that a child should not be killed, he lets her go with the infant. She rushes to the Durgammah fort, where Papa Rao is still engrossed in the cockfight, and tells him about Bobbili's destruction. Papa Rao comes out of his stupor and rushes to Bobbili. He is overcome upon seeing the destruction. In a furious rage, he charges into the enemy camp and kills Bussy, Dubash Lakshmiah, Vijayarama Raju, and Hyder Jung, one after another. Blaming himself for being so headstrong, and holding himself responsible for the destruction of Bobbili and all its families, he kills himself with his sword.

The story ends in the court of Golconda many years later, where the gracious nizam reunites the children of the Bobbili and the Vijayanagaram kings and gets the current Vijayanagaram king to pay for the rebuilding of Bobbili for the young Bobbili prince, who has survived the decimation.

How did Venkataswami encounter the story to begin with? Nagaya's house in Nagpur in his better days was a cultural center for the caste community. The Telugu-speaking diasporic community of Nagpur welcomed *dandadāsaris* (traveling traditional storytellers) from the old Telugu lands of the Vanaparathi region who made the three-hundred-mile long journey from Golconda in the Deccan to Nagpur, crossing bandit-ridden ravines. But once they reached Nagpur, these *dandadāsaris* were rewarded well by their nostalgic audiences. Venkataswami had heard the story of Bobbili many times in his youth in these contexts. The story itself, the performance, which took place typically after the midday meal, and the flows of sociality that marked these occasions—some people staying on and others leaving to attend to other work—made a formative and lasting impression on him. Perhaps the best way to understand Venkataswami's re-telling of this remembered story as a composite of many performances is to see him too as belonging to the tradition of storytellers who relate the Bobbili story. Forty years after he had heard the story, with its echoes still reverberating in his mind, he revisited it by writing it down into English. He does not tell us whether he wrote it down first in Telugu (or even in Marathi, given that he was raised in Nagpur). He then conducted research for "two years and a half," reading everything he could find on Bobbili history in "encyclopedias, manuals and magazines as also going through a Telugu History of Bobbili written by the present enlightened and cultured Ruler of the State himself."⁷⁰ He read the account of the Bobbili battle by the colonial historian Robert Orme.⁷¹ He was familiar with the *Pedda Bobbili Raju Katha*, which was available in printed form,⁷² and came to hold the view that it "seems to be an inferior production; a second-rate book, interspersed with Brahminical legends."⁷³

With these experiences, Venkataswami has some insights into the role of the itinerant storyteller (*dandadāsari*) as a narrator of the past, and consequently into the immense role of art and experience in the transmission of "history." The *dandadāsari*, he says,

is a powerful narrator with a large fund of unflinching humour, telling the stories in a sing-song tone and explaining, his wife or an elderly female relative or his younger brother playing on a harp-like instrument, and holding the men sitting before him spell-bound. At one time, in the course of his story, he would rise high describing a scene of exceptional grandeur, at another time his voice falls to describe a sorrowful scene; once he becomes spirited to describe a war scene, at another time he breaks into a rapture to describe a laughable incident.

He is as ready to create laughter, as he is to create sorrow. . . . It is a rare pleasure to listen to him for 5 or 6 hours sitting on a comfortable chair after midday meals.⁷⁴

The dramatic vigor of the telling enchants in another crucial way: it makes “history” relatable, opening possibilities for grounded aesthetic relationships with the past.

The creation of such relationships happens in a number of ways. First, the alliterative sounds and the regional multilingualism of everyday language appear throughout *The Story of Bobbili*. Take this example: When Dharma Rao goes to Hyder Jung’s camp to negotiate, he is accosted by the Muslim guards, who challenge him, in spoken Urdu, “Kon janai walai? kon gaon walai? kidar janai walai?” (Who goes there? From which village? Where are you going?). Dharma Rao snaps back in a typical mix of Telugu and Urdu words in a nonsensical rhyme, “Kon ledu, meinu laidu” (There is no *kon*, there is no *mein*). Second, cultural metaphors that audiences know intimately are frequently employed by the *dandādāsari*. To illustrate, Ravanammah’s letter to Vijayarama Raju in her effort to preempt war calls up a resonant surrogate natal connection: “Consider me as your younger sister . . . and consider that Bobbili has been given to me in dowry or as a marriage-gift.”⁷⁵ Third, descriptions are located in a materiality that directly connects to the everyday lives of listeners. When the mercenary armies of Bussy and Vijayanagaram attack the Bobbili fort, the Komati (merchant-caste) women spring into action. They quickly feed their infants and young children, tuck in their saris, and climb to the fort’s ramparts. As cries of “deko, deko, banchote, aurath ko deko, acche hai, pukdo usko” (in Hindustani: look, look, sister-fucker, look at that woman, she’s good, grab her) rend the air, they gather the measuring weights kept in their homes—“4 lbs, 2 lbs, 1lb and ½ lb”—tie them in cloth to make slings, and hit the clambering enemy soldiers with them.⁷⁶ Finally, an expansive religious imaginary connects the performed story to lived religion. We can imagine the audience in Nagaya’s courtyard emoting along with the scene in which the Bobbili messenger, on his way to alert Papa Rao disguised as a Hindu mendicant, is trapped by Bussy, who puts him to the Qur’an test. The audience can sense his fear, they can understand the fervor of his prayer, and they can exult with him when the god helps him out:

The Rajah’s courier was a Vellama [agriculturist] by caste and cowherd from early life, and as such was quite innocent of education, as well of arts as of sciences. Seeing the Koran, three-yards in length, put before him to read, his courage sank within him, and he meditated within himself, “O Rangesa, Ranganatha, life is departing, it is unquestion-

ably departing; be kindly disposed towards me. O Knower of the four Vedas, Sri Ranganathaswami, Protector Lord Ranga O ye possessor of the bird (as a vehicle), do help me to tide over this difficulty.” Soon after he contemplated on Gopalaswami who was existing before the fortress and earnestly entreated of Him not to fail in kindness. . . . [H]e contemplated on golden Mysammah and Hanumantharayudu . . . and the deities treating him indulgently, he read out the Koran faultlessly for 3 *gadiyas* [seventy-two minutes].⁷⁷

The same audiences probably also would have known, either through other stories or through life experiences, that divine protection is fragile. As the narration proceeds, they see that Bobbili’s tutelary deity Gopalaswami protects, but himself flees when cosmic signs portend the fall of Bobbili. In this manner, the *danḍadāsari*’s narration of the past provides what factual history cannot: evocations that generate relatability.

Interestingly, the structure of *The Story of Bobbili* adheres to the conception of a work of history as an objective enterprise. It has a preface, a summary of the story, an elaborate section called “Comments,” and a glossary (and errata, thanks to the printing follies that dogged Venkataswami’s publications). Venkataswami describes the comments as his “dissection” of the Bobbili narrative. With the dissection, he hopes, first, to set right “inaccuracies of statements” that are in “glaring contradiction of facts.” (Bussy, for instance, was not killed by Papa Rao but died in Pondicherry.) It would prevent, he explains, “later generations” from accepting the entire story as “true” or prevent skepticism that would altogether dismiss the story as invalid. Second, the dissection seeks to provide portraits of the main characters in the Bobbili drama, through “analyses of [the] working of their minds, grouping around them their objects and aims.”⁷⁸ Venkataswami’s from-the-inside analysis of characters—for example, what in Vijayarama Raju’s nature does not let him forget his defeat at the cockfight, or why Ravanammah loses her temper at her father—anticipates the historian R. G. Collingwood’s idea of historical study as “re-enactment.” Collingwood, whose advocacy for anthropology is little known, said in an unpublished lecture in April 1928: “To write the history of a battle, we must re-think the thoughts which determined its various tactical phases: we must see the ground of the battlefield as the opposing commanders saw it, and draw from the topography the conclusions that they drew, and so forth. The past event, ideal though it is, must be actual in the historian’s re-enactment of it.”⁷⁹

Yet this structure and rationale are less about asserting the infallibility of objective history than they are about taking seriously the knowledge contributions of itinerant, orally literate raconteurs. In Venkataswami’s words:

The narrations are not histories, pure and simple, but are stories combined with truths and untruths, and devoid of dates to boot, yet they may go a long way to piece together the history of India—the blank portions of course—aided on by the rock edicts of the Buddhist Emperors of the Mauryan dynasty, and informations [*sic*] obtained from copper plates and researches of honorary archaeologists. . . . [All these] give [India's] history in a connected form.⁸⁰

Sarkar's praise for the book needs to be appreciated in the light of his own "methodological obsessions" with fact = truth, consistent with the intellectual horizons of his time.⁸¹ The comments and the glossary have brought "authentic history and modern topography" to the narration such that even the "critical historian will have no occasion to cavil at the *Story* as a mere story," Sarkar writes in the foreword.⁸² And thus, Sarkar and Venkataswami agree on the necessity of "facts." But there is a revealing divergence between them. For Sarkar, the value is that the Bobbili story provides an *original* narrative that shows the true uncorrupted "heart" of the people, who have not been civilized, colonized, or converted. This heart has a specific geography: "For the purposes of such a study, the most favorable fields are the debatable land between the Aryan and Mongolian in the extreme north-eastern corner of Bengal, the arid jungly core of the Indian continent (viz., Telingana [*sic*] and Gondwana), and the last asylum of the Dravidians in the less advanced districts of Madras." Therefore, Sarkar concludes, *The Story of Bobbili* is a "very interesting 'human document.'"⁸³ For Venkataswami, the value of the Bobbili story and its narrative environment is that it helps construct a "connected form" of Indian history without bypassing a pervasive and vibrant oral record.

The Subject of Indian Folktales

"I have named it after my parents," says Venkataswami, referring to the title of his first collection, *Tulsemmah and Nagaya, or, Folk-Stories from India*,

the late Maidara Tulsemmah, that chaste and superstitious soul who had been reposing in the Nagpore Cemetery with the meandering Nagnuddi flowing by these seventeen years, and the late Maidara Nagaya, the head of "Sur Punch" [*sarpanch*: village council] and known amongst Europeans as "Nagloo," the hotel-proprietor of Nagpore and Central Provinces hotels' fame who had followed her in 1893 and reposing there. Parents' debts are very heavy and I see no other way of

liquidating their [debt] partly except by naming the little book as I have audaciously done. . . . [T]erm it audacity if you please.⁸⁴

The audacity is of course broader. One of the promised deliverables of scientific anthropology was the display of natives. It was epitomized in the eight-volume government-sponsored photo-ethnology *The People of India* (1868–1875), in which objectified “natives” could be classified and, more important, subjected to surveillance and regulation—and thus also contained.⁸⁵ It was the highlight of the India section of the “Great Exhibition of 1851” in London, in which handpicked natives were curated to depict “traditional” occupations (though some natives, we should however note, resisted).⁸⁶ Venkataswami’s folktale collections, ethnographic and ethnological in every way, audaciously had no natives to display.

Instead, people are abundantly present. Venkataswami names and acknowledges members of his family, recounts his own experiences, modifies and uses family photographs to illustrate fairy stories, and openly pays homage to the family’s dead. His collections emphatically make the point that Anna de Souza had made to Mary Frere fifty years earlier: stories circulate within communities and families, and are connected to particular moments and particular relationships. “Folk-stories of India” are ultimately about embodied tellers and listeners and their inventive narrations about places and other possibilities. India was indeed *peopled*. The French historian Pierre Nora may be right to disparage what he calls the “era of commemoration,” by which he means the parades of display or “places of memory” (*les lieux de mémoire*) maintained by histories that triumph in the narration of the nation-state. What can we say, however, about commemoration that isn’t merely in the service of nationalist history but that permeates a human subject’s sense of personhood amidst a confluence of pasts? The philosopher Edward Casey’s more expansive understanding of commemoration works better in Venkataswami’s context. Drawing on the original meanings of commemoration as “intensified remembering” and participation in a formal eulogy, Casey writes: “In acts of commemoration remembering is intensified by taking place *through* the interposed agency of a text . . . and *in* the setting of a social ritual. The remembering is intensified still further by the fact that both ritual and text become efficacious only in the presence of others *with* whom we commemorate together in a public ceremony.”⁸⁷ And as Ngũgĩ notes, “Names have everything to do with how we identify objects, classify them, and remember them.”⁸⁸ As we will see, for Venkataswami, the recording of narratives is a commemorative effort that seeks to recognize

a particular kind of peopling. In the sections that follow, I consider how he uses two modes of commemoration: inscription and photographs.

Inscriptions

The forty stories in *Tulsemmah and Nagaya* were collected, Venkataswami tells us, at Nagpur and at Hyderabad, beginning in 1899. The dedication of this book reads:

To the Memory
of
Those Chaste Souls
(the Author's Sisters)
The Kind-hearted Puttem Huthoolummah
The Gentle Kaki Chinammah
The Upright Collum Polummah and
The Loving Maidara Venkammah:

Residents of the Upper World.
THIS BOOK OF FOLK-STORIES, NAMED AFTER
THEIR PARENTS,
IS
LOVINGLY INSCRIBED

By the time the book was published in 1918, Venkataswami's sisters had all died. The zeitgeist of the dedication comes from the biography, where the birth and death of each sister is recorded. Nagaya and Tulsemmah had celebrated the arrival of each baby girl, seeing each birth as mitigating their misfortunes. And each death left them in great sorrow. The year 1876 in particular was a year of loss, when smallpox took two sons and the daughter who appears in the dedication as Maidara Venkammah. Venkataswami, who witnessed these deaths from age nine, seems to have had a special relationship with his sisters, just as Nagaya had had with his sisters, who had rushed to rescue him when he was orphaned in Hyderabad. He remembers vividly how Pollummah, the oldest and Nagaya's "darling eldest daughter," named after the ancestor's tutelary deity, had once wrapped some chilies and salt in a small piece of fabric and waved it around her father, who was ailing with a fever. She lit it, and "when it was all ablaze and making a crackling noise, as the Chinese crackers do on a Diwali night," she made him step across it three times, believing it would cure him of the evil eye that had caused the ill-

ness. When Polummah's infant child died years later, Nagaya himself buried the baby in the hotel's compound, not sending it to the cemetery. Nagaya's second daughter, Huthoolummah, had assured her father that he would not lose his hotel even when the town crier had announced its auction, a reassurance that had kept Nagaya sane. (Huthoolummah and Polummah died within two months of each other in 1887.)⁸⁹ The youngest sister, Chinnammah, who died in 1912 in childbirth, is eulogized in the biography through a poem composed by Venkataswami's brother.

The titling of Venkataswami's folktale collections also breathes this aesthetic of evocation. With *Tulsemah and Nagaya*, Venkataswami commemorates his parents' relationship. It was a companionship of thirty years, but it had not been easy on Tulsemah in the later years. Married at twelve, Tulsemah found life with Nagaya at first full of mutual affection. Then her life became full of cares as Nagaya took up with other women, incurred debts to attend to them, and lost his reputation and his business. Her censures and entreaties were ignored—and he began to beat her. From his narration of his mother's life in the biography, it is clear that Venkataswami felt immense empathy and admiration for her. "Her tone was [as] perfect as her features were comely, the limbs symmetrical and the figure tall and grand," writes Venkataswami. She came from a close-knit family in Nagpur, where she had been especially adored by her only brother. On Sundays, she took the children on outings in bullock carts to the Vaishnava temple of Lakshmi Narayana in Sakkardara in Nagpur.⁹⁰ She also loved visiting Ramtek, a Vaishnava pilgrimage town fifty miles from Nagpur, and its ancient temple of Rama, whose towers could be seen gleaming in the sunset from four miles away. I wondered whether the fact that Tulsemah had been raised in a Vaishnava family was why she preferred these temples rather than praying like Nagaya at the shaiva temple of the village deity, Munaispurudu. Venkataswami reproduces three of the many Telugu songs she used to sing, for example, "*Vandanam ayya vasudeva hare, sundara murti sompu nika sare, balulam ayya, Balakrishna hare*" (which I translate as Respects to you, O Vasudeva, image of beauty, grace looks best on you, we are but children, little Krishna). The commemoration of the relationship between his parents in the title of the book, as I understand it, is not a refusal to acknowledge Tulsemah's suffering as a result of Nagaya's excesses; it is rather the acknowledgment of their relationship, which, with its ups and downs, had provided Venkataswami and his siblings a home.

The case is similar with *Heeramma and Venkataswami; or, Folktales from India*, which Venkataswami self-published in 1923. He dedicates the book to his nephew, calling him "the only surviving son of a favourite sister of mine

[Huthoolumma].”⁹¹ The nephew—also named Venkataswami—who was deputy auditor in the Posts and Telegraph Department in Nagpur, had followed Nagaya’s footsteps, and had in addition become acting head of the *sarpanch*, the village council. The narrators of the 101 stories are mostly women from Venkataswami’s family: his wife, Heeramma; sister Huthoolumma; and mother-in-law, Narayanamma, who he says had a “retentive memory and graphic powers of narration.” Venkataswami had overheard some of the stories when they were being narrated in his childhood to his sisters by a paternal aunt, who he recalls was “a much-traveled woman.”⁹² We do not always know which of these women narrated which story (or when). Some stories were told in Nagpur and others in Secunderabad, in a variety of languages—Telugu, Hindustani, Marathi, and, to a lesser degree, Tamil.

The narrator that Venkataswami singles out is Heeramma. He explains:

I have named [the book] after my deceased wife, the late M. Heeramma, that lodestar of my life for seven years, that thoughtful girl, that chaste soul, that close, almost Lubbock-like observer of ant’s habits and ways, lying with her sweet first-born these five years in the Hindu necropolis at Nagpore, the Naganuddi flowing by. Without dissociating myself from one whose love was like that of a mother I have linked my name with that of my wife and this explanation will, I hope, absolve me from a charge of presumption in naming the book as I have done.⁹³

Explaining why he dedicates his book to his nephew, Venkataswami writes, “As they [the folktales] are named, as elsewhere explained, after my departed consort and myself, I do not see the propriety of dedicating them [folktales] in this collective form to anyone outside of the family circle.”⁹⁴ Again, from the biography we know that Heeramma was the oldest daughter of Majaity Surwiah, a Telugu scholar and calligrapher who was employed in the stores of the Great Indian Peninsula Railway at Jabalpur. Venkataswami married Heeramma in 1886, and, as we saw earlier, she died in 1893, six days before Nagaya, who had been in her care.

There is an extraordinary translation of Heeramma’s presence into some stories in this collection. For instance, take the story “The Prince, His Wife, and the Fairies.”⁹⁵ A prince is in despair because his young wife leaves him every day from six in the evening to six the next morning. He jumps into a well to end his life, but is rescued by an old man who endows him with the magical capability of turning into a fly so that he can follow his wife. The fly-prince finds her, dressed beautifully in a sari and a blouse of lilies, playing in a lake in the company of fairies (*kanyakulu*). He makes off with a pearl necklace belonging to the lead fairy, and in his palace, within earshot of

the princess, narrates this adventure to his attendant as if it were a dream he had had the previous night. The princess pleads with him to return the pearl necklace to the fairies. He does. The fairies, understanding his plight and his desire for his wife, help him go through a transformation and test in the god Indra's court. It all ends with the prince happily regaining his wife for all time.

One of Venkataswami's notes to this story pushes the tale into another register. He writes: "There is a superstition that kannaikulu [fairies] select from human beings beautiful virgins or newly-married women of great personal attraction to keep company with them. I remember my wife, who is now no more, telling me of her having seen five water nymphs of unheard-of beauty in a konairoo [lake], where she went to bathe sometime after her marriage and that they had attracted her, one exhibiting her beautiful hands."⁹⁶ This note shifts the focus of the story to Heeramma and her untimely death. It displaces the fairy-tale ending with a suggestive "explanation" for a real loss in Venkataswami's life, turning the "happily ever after" mood of the story to a mood of pathos. We will see in the next section how Venkataswami transforms this particular loss through visual techniques.

Photographs

A photographic imaginary animates the inscriptional in Venkataswami's folktale collections. To contextualize his use of photographs, I begin with a thumbnail account of the early development of photography in India. Photography arrived in the subcontinent the 1840s almost immediately after the invention of the photographic process in Europe.⁹⁷ As anthropology came of age in the 1870s in Europe, photography was ready as an essential tool in the field. The rationale: subjective bias could assail the scientific self and make personal observation unreliable, and native testimony was either not trustworthy or dependent on the European anthropologist's shaky or non-existent linguistic competence.⁹⁸ Trashing the prevalent practice of engravings of racial types, E. B. Tylor asserted, "Little ethnological value is added to any but photographic portraits, and the skill of the collector lies in choosing the right individuals as representative of their nations."⁹⁹ The photograph, it was imagined, could not lie; it assured incontrovertible and unchanging evidence. But as we know, anthropology was also the long arm of the colonial body politic. Photography saw a surge after the 1857–58 Indian Uprising, a surge that coincided with the growing conviction in colonial administration that ethnology was indispensable to colonial governance.¹⁰⁰ The first viceroy, Charles John Canning, urged officers to capture Indians photographically.

Army officer John W. Kaye (author of the three-volume *History of the Sepoy War in India*) systematized Canning's exhortation, and thus the vast *People of India* project was born.¹⁰¹

While photography was making its rounds in the circles of Company, Crown, and census, for members of the Indian aristocracy, photographic portraiture offered another medium to depict their princely identities and regal culture. Indians were noticeably productive in the Photographic Societies of Bombay and Bengal, and instruction in photography became part of the curriculum in technical colleges in Madras.¹⁰² Some Indian photographers became famous. As early as 1855, Ahmed Ali Khan, a photographer from Lucknow, was commissioned by the nawab of Avadh to photograph the royal family and the court. Between 1860 and 1880 another Lucknow-based photographer, the former engineer Darogha Abbas Ali, published three photographic albums of Lucknow architecture and Avadhi culture. The work of both photographers can be seen as efforts to visually narrate Lucknow "before" and "after" the Uprising.¹⁰³ Around the same time, in the 1870s, Lala Deen Dayal, who would become British India's best-known Indian photographer, resigned from government service and set up studios in Bombay, Indore, Secunderabad, and Hyderabad. He also became the court photographer for the nizam of Hyderabad. His thirty thousand photographs of famous Indian and British personalities, durbars, landscapes, game hunts, and large infrastructural state projects mobilized new circuits of a visual India where "colonial administration, princely India, and the emergent cosmopolitan metropolis" intersected.¹⁰⁴ As photographic equipment became less unwieldy, studios in urban centers began to serve the photographic aspirations of upper-class and middle-class Indians. In addition, entrepreneurial Indians set up portable booths in bazaars across India taking photography to the common people.¹⁰⁵

Venkataswami embraced this visual medium. Allusions in his writings to the "picturesque" and "cinematographic film" suggest that he was aware of established pictorial conventions and emerging visual technologies.¹⁰⁶ Although he includes a few line drawings in his folktale collections and an occasional painted plate like that of the Railway and Residency Hotel, his versatile use of the photograph is fascinating. Almost invariably, his dedicatory pages include photographic portraits of members of his family with elaborate captions. He clearly commissioned some of these but also went to some lengths to borrow other photographs from friends and relatives. Recall that for *Life of M. Nagloo*, he got photographs specially taken of his father's tomb, the tomb of George Forster in Nagpur, and that of the raja of Nagpur (the last from a painting hanging in the store of Messrs. Cursetjee & Co,

wine merchants in Jabalpur). Friends supplied photographs of the Jumma tank, the Free Church Institution, and the temple at Sangam. These photographs are vital, not ancillary, in his construction of a visual narrative around the monuments and makers of Nagpur, among whom Nagaya the so-called pariah is prominent for his introduction of the hotel system into Nagpur. Thus, photographs serve to radically adjust the lens on untouchability, shifting “untouchable” from an invisible or gratuitous periphery to the center of transformative nation-making.

It is, however, in his folktale collections that we see Venkataswami’s ingenious use of the photograph. Let us consider two stories, both from *Heeramma and Venkataswami*. The first story, called “The Seven Princes and the Fairies,” recounts the high adventures of a young prince and his six brothers who go out hunting.¹⁰⁷ Unsuspecting, they find themselves beguiled by seven beautiful *kanyakulu* (fairies) and marry them. A life of luxury and merrymaking follows, with the odd exception that the youngest prince is confounded by his wife’s constant weeping. Learning from his brothers that none of his wife’s sisters weep, he gently pursues the matter with his wife. She tells him that the fairies are in truth *rakshasis* (ogresses), and that their father, a giant *rakshasa*, is counting on eating the princes upon his return. She herself is a princess from the land of humans. She advises the prince on an escape plan, and he and his brothers get away—but not without a tragedy. As they are escaping, the six *rakshasis* attack the prince, but his wife shouts and directs him to safety. She, however, is caught and turned to ashes by her “sisters.” Years later, the prince and his brothers wander accidentally into the same area. Again they are rescued by the spirit of the prince’s wife, who whispers, “Go hence or danger will befall.”¹⁰⁸ Back in his kingdom, the prince builds a cenotaph to the memory of his dead wife with a loving inscription on it that reads:

SACRED
TO THE MEMORY OF
MY DEAR WIFE
WHO THOUGH DEAD IS STILL LIVING BY
THE REMEMBRANCE OF HER SIGNAL
KINDNESSES CARVED ON THE
TABLET OF MY HEART.
IN OUR SHORT CONJUGAL LIFE WE SAW
EACH OTHER AND OUR SOULS MET.
I SEE NO PORTRAIT OF HERS
YET THE PORTRAIT* IS EVER AND ANON

BEFORE THE MIND'S EYE
AND IS NOT LIKELY TO FADE OR CORRODE
TO THE END OF MY DAYS HERE
WHETHER THAT BE SHORT OR LONG.¹⁰⁹

FIGURE 10. The cenotaph. Reproduced from M. N. Venkataswami, *Heeramma and Venkataswami; or Folktales from India* (Madras: SPCK, 1923).

The illustration that accompanies the story is startling: it is neither a line drawing nor a painting as in most folktale collections but a photographic image. The photograph is of a cenotaph that bears signs of weathering. Whose cenotaph is it in real life?¹¹⁰

If we look closely, it emerges that the “inscription” on the photographic image of the cenotaph is handwritten. With ink smudges and rough edges, this handwritten note seems to have been superimposed on the photo of the cenotaph—and re-photographed to illustrate the story. The handwritten note is legible enough that, with magnification, one can make out that the text in the photographic image is exactly what the prince in the story inscribes on his wife’s cenotaph. The asterisk in the inscription takes us to a footnote informing us that “she was not painted nor photographed in her lifetime,”¹¹¹ indexing a woman who is clearly *not* the fairy princess of the story but a real-life person.

I surmise that the allusion is to Heeramma and that the cenotaph illustrating the story is her tomb. To begin, Venkataswami had built her tomb next to Nagaya’s in Nagpur,¹¹² and since Venkataswami had moved to Hyderabad, he had to rely on his nephew Ramaswamy, who lived in Nagpur, to provide the photograph.¹¹³ Why was he keen on a picture of *that* tomb? After all, there were many graveyards with tombs in Hyderabad that he could have photographed. It is impossible not to see the autobiographical trace in the superimposed inscription that draws attention to the “short conjugal life” between the prince and the princess; Heeramma and Venkataswami’s marriage, too, had been short-lived.

There are other signs of resemblance. Both Heeramma and the princess have shown themselves to be selfless women. Venkataswami tells us—in *Nagloo*—that despite being frail, Heeramma was “the only being that tended [to Nagaya], washed his face and hands and fed him.”¹¹⁴ Finally, the quality of augury fuses the ethereal and the real and creates hyperreal images in the text. As she was taking care of the dying Nagaya, Heeramma had told Venkataswami that before they tided over the crisis, either she or Venkataswami would die.¹¹⁵ Her premonition resembles the whispering voice of the dead princess who also warns the prince of potential death. The element of augury is also visible in the dangerous presence of *kanyakulu* in the lives of both women. Heeramma had been alarmed to see them in a pond while bathing (recall the folktale I discussed earlier), and the princess in this story meets her end at their hands.

Still, there are some questions that are raised by this remarkably inventive use of the image of the tomb that I do not have answers for. Why was a photograph of a real-life tomb necessary? Did Venkataswami’s inability to

reproduce a photograph of Heeramma in a collection named after her—as he customarily did—prompt him to memorialize her instead through a picture of her tomb? What resemblance, if any, did the actual inscription on the tomb in Nagpur bear to the one in the story? Was it necessary to paper over the “original” inscription because it had Heeramma’s name on it and would by its realism “falsify” the fairy story? (As with Nagaya’s tomb, the inscription on her tomb would have been in English, with her name on it.) Did the princess’s death strike a chord in Venkataswami when he heard the story, or did he invent the story (or part of it) to commemorate Heeramma? As a storyteller himself, he has, he says, “in some cases . . . added a touch to embellish a story or heighten its effect . . . and omitted what was obscure.”¹¹⁶

The second folktale is “The Fakeer’s Daughter and the Wicked Queen.”¹¹⁷ This story is about a girl who is born to a fakir through divine means and becomes the most beautiful woman in the kingdom as she grows up. The queen of the kingdom, on one of her sojourns, sees the girl and becomes afraid that the girl will compete with her for the king’s affections. So before the king can see the girl, the queen steals a necklace of pearls that protects the fakir’s daughter, and the girl dies. The poor fakir, grieving over his dead daughter, has a dream in which he is asked not to bury her body but to take it to the forest and leave it under a sandalwood tree. He does that, and soon the most fragrant flowers grow up around the corpse, which remains pristine. The fragrance of the flowers attracts the king, who is hunting nearby, and he is advised by the fairies guarding the body to fetch the pearl necklace from the queen. He brings the necklace, the girl is revived, and he marries her. The queen is punished for her evil act, and the fakir’s daughter and the king live happily ever after.

Again, Venkataswami jolts us by illustrating the story with a photograph, fusing the otherworldly and fantastical events of the story with the real world. He uses a photograph of a woman who seems to have died young to depict the princess lying under the sandalwood tree among fragrant flowers. The woman in the photograph lies on her back on a raised bed; her arms are folded across her chest, and her eyes are closed. The upright fingers, stiff posture, and foot resting on a brick strongly suggest that her body is in rigor mortis. She is dressed in a brocaded sari, wears bangles and anklets, and has a *bottu* (vermillion dot) on her forehead, traditional markers of auspiciousness for a Hindu woman. The floral-printed sheet on which she lies mirrors the caption’s odd description of the corpse as “fresh and blooming.”¹¹⁸ The image shows some obvious doctoring: the background of the photograph has been brushed over in uneven strokes in a light color, highlighting a still body amidst an absence of people or things.

FIGURE 11. The fakir's daughter. Reproduced from M. N. Venkataswami, *Heeramma and Venkataswami; or Folktales from India* (Madras: SPCK, 1923).

I am struck by Venkataswami's total silence about the details of this photograph. With other photographs, he meticulously credits and thanks his sources—whether they are scholars or shopkeepers or friends—and explains the pictures. He identifies each photograph: Gaja his niece, or Chelli his daughter, or even Forster the historian, and so on. Even with the photograph of the cenotaph that he does not identify, he thanks his nephew for providing it. But this photograph of the young dead woman is the *only* picture in all his writings that remains both unacknowledged and unexplained. Was this unsettling image a photograph of Heeramma? Was he silent about attributing this photograph because it was, after all, *his*, something that perhaps he commissioned just after Heeramma died? While I cannot be certain, the cryptic phrase “she was not photographed in her *lifetime*” that we encountered earlier hovers over this image. As with the grave of Anna de Souza that I could never trace, like the portrait of Ramaswami Raju that I could never find, I have had to reconcile myself to the fact that some trails are impassably overgrown.

I am strongly inclined to believe that the dead woman in the photograph is indeed Heeramma. I am therefore compelled to wonder: By using an image of Heeramma's dead body to signify a dead princess who returns to life, was Venkataswami trying representationally to transform the permanence of his loss? Walter Benjamin has famously reflected on the destiny of the “aura” of the phenomenal world amidst the technology of image production. He writes: “In the cult of remembrance of dead or absent loved ones, the cult value of the image finds its last refuge. In the fleeting expression of a human face, the aura

beckons from early photographs for the last time. This is what gives them their melancholy and incomparable beauty.”¹¹⁹ Here we might also borrow from Ranjana Khanna and adapt her term “critical melancholy,” an affect that “has a critical relation to the lost and to the buried.”¹²⁰ Such a melancholy manifests loss but simultaneously demands that the imagination of a new future be cognizant of specters of the past. While Khanna’s context is the conflicted interiority of the new postcolonial nation-state, which has to contend with both loss and recovery, “critical melancholy” can also help us see how Venkataswami preserves personal loss and intimacy from being anthropologized by colonial science. He remains sovereign over the intimate world between himself and Heeramma, free to represent and transform that world as he chooses.

With Benjamin’s thinking, we can appreciate Venkataswami’s innovations with the “technological reproducibility” of the photograph, which “place[s] the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain. Above all, it enables the original to meet the recipient halfway.”¹²¹ And it is at this halfway point that Venkataswami’s sepulchral fusions occur. Aura is not lost but is mythically transposed onto story texts. Evoking sepulchral fusions, Venkataswami renders the photographic surface as a porous boundary between the imaginary and the real, between the living and the dead. Indeed, his writings, with their visual and other narrations, had pushed me to think about how family memory is not archival but alluvial, and how things we call “texts” are also fusions provoked by the flux of life.

After finding Venkataswami’s autographed copy of *Life of M. Nagloo* in a London used book store, I tried to trace the family. What happened to Venkataswami after Nagaya died? Where were “The Retreat” in Hyderabad and “The Hermitage” in Secunderabad, names he mentions in all his prefaces as those of his residences? Each question seemed more enigmatic than the next. I began to explore both Nagpur and Hyderabad in parallel. Through the Internet I found Harshawardhan Nimkhedkar, a volunteer in Nagpur with the international organization called Random Acts of Genealogical Kindness, which aimed to help people searching for past monuments. I wrote to him—in 2004—listing all the places mentioned in the biography: family names, the hotel site, the tanks, the temples, and the graveyards and cenotaphs. Mr. Nimkhedkar wrote back promptly. He was, he said, a lawyer by profession, a former English lecturer, a P. G. Wodehouse fan, a “confirmed bibliophile,” and an ardent student of British Indian history. Two emails later, we discovered to our astonishment that he was a close friend of a former student of my father’s who also lived in Nagpur. After a couple of weeks and considerable scouting on my behalf—including fol-

lowing my request to check out a masala shop by the name of Kaki Masala (one of Venkataswami's sisters had married into a Kaki family in Nagpur)—Harshawardhan wrote back with disappointing news:

I personally went to the only cemetery that's on the banks of the river Nag—it's old, big, and the only place for those monuments. It's called "Mokshadham" these days (formerly Tikekar ghat). UNFORTUNATELY—nothing of the past is preserved there. The whole big plot of land is now being used to build re-modelled and re-designed crematoria and also, to accommodate new burials. They have simply demolished the entire old structures, razed to ground and bulldozed every structure standing there, including chabutaras, chhataris, samadhis, tombstones, monuments, inscriptions, memorial pillars—and there is nary a thing that can tell you about the past burials.¹²²

The Nagpur trails of the Nagaya family—the tombs, the hotels, and the neighborhoods—had all vanished.

In 2003, trying to follow Venkataswami's Hyderabad connections, I called Mr. Narendra Luther, a retired Indian Administrative Service officer and historian of Hyderabad. He did not know about Venkataswami but agreed to publish my inquiry in the column he wrote for the Hyderabad edition of *The Hindu*. There were exactly two responses. One was from a librarian at the State Central Library, who said that the library was in possession of a book of essays by Venkataswami—a publication I had not known about and which turned out to be crucial later on.¹²³ The second was from an army officer who said that one of the buildings in the Secunderabad cantonment could have been Venkataswami's home "The Retreat." I remember visiting the state library with my leg in a cast, having broken it, to photocopy the book. A few weeks later I met the generous army major in the cantonment area. "Fortunately, you caught me on the day my leave for a week has started," he had written in his email. He took me to the building identified in military records as "The Retreat." Despite its promising colonial allure, there was no likelihood of Venkataswami's ever having lived there; British officers had always occupied it. I found out later that Winston Churchill had stayed here briefly as a subaltern in 1896.¹²⁴ The army officer offered to scout out another building in the city that he knew was called the Hermitage Complex; it, too, did not take us to Venkataswami. So in both Nagpur and Hyderabad, I had failed to locate any trace of the man who had written in such photographic vividness about monuments, places, and people.

In 2010, preparing to teach a course, I wanted to gather stories about Indian-English interactions in everyday spaces in India. I recalled a striking essay in

Venkataswami's book of short essays (the book that the state librarian had drawn to my attention) that made a distinction between relations that the early Englishmen in India had with Indians and the ways in which post-World War I officialdom treated Indians. "Despite the fact that India has been under British rule for well-nigh four centuries," Venkataswami writes, "the Englishman is still a tyro in his manners towards Indians. He does not even try to understand the ways and manners of Indians or even to learn their language. . . . Indians sometimes go to an Englishman's bungalow and after a long wait an audience is granted but they are half-heartedly listened to and sent away not a bit wiser for all the trouble taken."¹²⁵ I continued to leaf through the essays, marveling again at how he acknowledged people without hesitation. An essay titled "Hospitals and Doctors" ends with him thanking "Russool, Jamal, and Babiah, the sweepers" and "telephone callers, Messrs. Barnabas and Joachim," who helped during the hospital stay of his son Abhimanyu.

As had become something of a wistful habit, I started searching for Abhimanyu on the Internet. Playing around with the fact that Venkataswami used the initials M. N., in which N. stood for his father's name, I googled "M. V. Abhimanyu" (that is, Medara Venkataswami Abhimanyu). Suddenly an electoral record from Hyderabad popped up. It gave the name Shravan Kumar as the son of a deceased M. V. Abhimanyu. Shravan Kumar's wife and two sons and a daughter were also listed as registered voters. I located one of the sons, Karan Kumar, on Facebook, which, in addition to displaying a picture of him working on a laptop with a beautiful German shepherd beside him and a Pink Floyd poster behind him, listed his phone number. Encouraged by these "signs" that somehow in my eyes lessened the absurdity of my mission, I waited for the day to break in Hyderabad (it was late evening in North Carolina) to call him. "Sorry to call out of the blue," I said, identifying myself. "Would you happen to be related to M. N. Venkataswami?" I hesitated, embarrassed and hopeful. Karan was indeed a great-grandson of M. N. Venkataswami. An exciting conversation followed. And thus, in early April 2010, after a seven-year search, I had connected to Venkataswami's family. By the time I went to Hyderabad that summer, we had exchanged several emails. Karan took me to meet the only surviving son of Venkataswami, Lakshman Rao, who lived, as grand coincidence would have it, twenty minutes away by car from my parents' house.

Lakshman Rao was in his eighties, retired from the police force. The conversations with him and Padmamma, his wife, during several visits to their home over the next few years, a few of which I audio-recorded, answered some questions that had nagged me for many years. We spoke in Telugu, English, and "Hyderabadi Hindi," a unique variation that seamlessly blends Hindi, Telugu, and Urdu. As I had guessed, after Heeramma's and Nagaya's

deaths, Venkataswami had moved away to Hyderabad. Initially, before he found a job as a librarian, he stayed with a relative in the present-day Osmania University area. Later he built a small house in Bogulkunta, near King Koti—today these areas of Hyderabad would be among its oldest neighborhoods—and called this house “The Hermitage.” Later he renamed it “The Retreat.” Although Venkataswami lists “The Hermitage” as being in Secunderabad and “The Retreat” as being in Hyderabad, Lakshman Rao was quite certain they referred to the same house. I continue to wonder, though, whether he called his first home with relatives in the Secunderabad area “The Hermitage” because it had been a refuge after the tribulations of Nagpur. *Heeramma and Venkataswami*, dated 1898, his only book that bears this address, was written just after his move to Hyderabad. All his other books, written later, mention “The Retreat, Hyderabad” as his home.

In an alcove in the living room, a picture frame that held three photographs intrigued me. I recognized Venkataswami. “Who are the two women?” I asked. There was a picture of an older woman and another of a considerably younger one on either side of Venkataswami’s picture. I learned that after he had moved to Hyderabad, Venkataswami had married twice. The older of the two women was Lakshamma, with whom he had two sons, Nagabhushanam and Govindaraju. The younger wife was Ramanujam, whose children were her sons Abhimanyu and Lakshman Rao and a daughter, Sumitra. “I loved both my *attalu* [mothers-in-law] and all the children loved them both. Twelve of us were very happy in that small house,” Padmamma told me, speaking in Telugu.¹²⁶

A conversation in 2013 turned to Venkataswami’s second son, Govindaraju. “Whatever we are today, we owe it to him. . . . He used to tell us: ‘Work hard. That’s the only way to do it. Even if you earn two *paisa*, get it through hard work.’” Lakshman Rao said then, continuing in the spirit of the living truths that had so engrossed Venkataswami in his writings, “Our grandmother used to visit him.” I asked, “*Yevuru?*” Who? Padmamma answered, “*Ayana anevaru, ‘Avva vachindi, kalalo avva vachindi.’*” (He used to say, “Grandmother came, she came in a dream).” Lakshman Rao elaborated: “She used to come often. We now have a belief about it. The old lady, god knows where she is, but if we had any problem, she used to come. Someone wasn’t well, she’d come to ask, ‘How are you? I’m still there looking after you.’” In the back-and-forth of clarifications, I learned this “old lady” was Tulsemmah, Nagaya’s wife, who had predeceased him. She was known not as Tulsemmah, a name I knew from the biography, but as “*Nagulu-tata bharya*,” or Grandpa Nagulu’s wife. When I said, “So Govindaraju would see her in his dream?” Lakshman Rao corrected me: “*Kanipichedi kaadu. Vachedi.*” (He would not *see* her. She would *be* here.) “It was a trance.”¹²⁷

FIGURE 12. Venkataswami with his two wives, Lakshmamma (far left) and Ramanujam (far right). Photograph by Leela Prasad, May 2010.

Other family stories about Venkataswami recall his obsession with books and writing. His personal collection included gilt-edged copies of *Aesop's Fables* and the *Arabian Nights Entertainments*. Once, I asked Lakshman Rao if there were stories about Venkataswami's routine or his daily life. "I've heard that he used to come home—he had a job as a librarian—and after a while, dust his desk, and his books in that almirah [cabinet], and sitting on the floor he would begin to write," said Lakshman Rao. I saw the small, sturdy, well-used desk and the walnut-colored wooden almirah. Apparently Venkataswami's books had been donated or sold. "People can pay me anything, but I can't part with this. This is our inheritance. It will at least help me tell my children who we are," he added, pointing to the furniture.¹²⁸

It seems perfectly befitting Venkataswami's imaginative fusion of the living and the dead that I close this chapter with Venkataswami's death. "I don't know how he died; I was only eight or nine months old when he died in 1931," Lakshman Rao told me. "But we have a tradition in the family of paying our respects at his grave every year at Diwali."¹²⁹ Lakshman Rao's health did not allow him to take me to Venkataswami's tomb in the Himayatnagar neighborhood, close to where he had once lived. Lakshman Rao died in January 2016. His son Devender invited me to join the family on the traditional visit to the gravesite on Diwali in 2018 (November 8), remembering that his father had been awaiting this book. Continents away, I could not join them.

FIGURE 13A. Venkataswami's desk. Photograph by Leela Prasad, June 2014.

FIGURE 13B. Venkataswami's cupboard. Photograph by Leela Prasad, June 2014.

FIGURE 14. Venkataswami's gravesite, Hyderabad. Photograph by Leela Prasad, May 2016.

I visited Venkataswami's grave on my own. The afternoon sun was so bright that it projected my reflection in the phone's camera viewfinder, and I was unsure if I captured the grave in the blinding light. Yet when I later viewed the picture I had taken, much to my delight, it showed three graves, newly painted in white. Devender, Venkataswami's grandson, identified these for me later: "That is Tata-garu's in the middle, between my two grandmothers."