A talk session at Punarjani, Thrissur

To hell & back

His experience is first-hand and his therapy unique. This is a story of an alcoholic who was able to free himself from the scourge and give new life not just to himself but tens of hundred others like him. VR JAYARAJ charts the journey of Johns K Mangalam

Many years later, as he faced the alcoholics' squads, Johns K Mangalam would remember those distant afternoons when his father would send him to purchase booze (apologies to Gabriel Garcia Marquez).

The remotest memories of Johns, 49, are soaked in alcohol. It is those memories that force him to agree with the psychoanalysts in the theory that the experiences registered in a child's sub-conscious determine his character in the later years.

Johns' father had inherited the die-hard trust in the power of man's arm, the ultimate asset of any settler farmer anywhere in the world, and had viewed drinking as the sublime projection of masculinity. That is how it all began for Johns, presently head of the Department of Philosophy at Thrissur's Sree Kerala Varma College, one of the most reputed academies of Kerala.

ALCOHOLIC'S PATH

Those memories made his life something like a race between suicide and self-destruction. Those memories, how they had made him a victim of alcoholism, a disease that has claimed lakhs of victims all over Kerala, and how he managed to get out of that vicious world of wine with no weapon other than the capacity to reassert own personality will all find mention in the book he is currently writing, *"Autobiography of an Alcoholic"* which he says will also be his experiment with truth. Johns is a Doctor of Philosophy in Gandhian Thought. "My memory fails to remember how old I was then. Four, five or six?"

Sitting at his home at Poomala, a scenic hilltop habitat in Thrissur district that settler farmers from the South carved out for themselves, Johns reminisces. "There used to be guests at home everyday. At the very first sight of the guest emerging from the farthest corner of the mud-road, he (father) would call out to my mother. The message of that was simple and clear: Organise *Chaarayam* (country liquor). On the first notes of it, I would have crossed the fence in the backyard with a cloth-bag with a bottle in it. At the bushy, remote drinker's joint in the valley, the ruthless boozers who understood nothing but the power of man's arm and masculinity of alcohol would tease me."

"However hard I tried I failed to hold my tears back. Back at home, the guests and the host would immerse themselves in the hallucinatory world of alcoholic ecstasy. An ecstasy whose cooing notes would continue to tear into the essence of my life, my pride, my happiness, my personality and my life forever. To put it simply and bluntly, I hated him," Johns says.

Own experiences and those of other alcoholics recounted to him at *Punarjani* (Rebirth), the de-addiction and rehabilitation centre he is now running near his home, have helped Johns to unravel the mysteries of alcoholism for himself.

"Alcoholism doesn't spring from nowhere. The problem is that the alcoholic normally doesn't find out the reasons. We at Punarjani are helping them find those reasons and bring them back into life, not through medication but through meditation, self and collective," says Johns.

Johns K Mangalam

ALCOHOLIC'S PROGRESS

Johns' entire life, perhaps, was a struggle with that hatred and the irony was that he would saturate himself with alcohol to defeat those memories. That marked the stinky beginning of adolescence, but then there was not even the slightest indication that one was slipping into that pathetic world of the universal alcoholic. The colleges he studied gave him the freedom to evolve himself into what he later became. The University of Calicut, where he did his MA in Philosophy and later took his PhD, nurtured that urge.

Those were the days of penury — which would stay on in his life for long years together — but penury of the "intellectual" had the strange ability to ensure that one never had any dearth of booze.

Life itself was turning into a lie for Johns. "After the university, I got a job at Sree Kerala Varma College as a philosophy lecturer, which qualified me to marry a teacher, who brought with her a lot of money to my home as dowry, which was one of the reasons for entering into that relationship. But soon I lost the job because it was only a leave vacancy. I am not sure whether she had thought I had betrayed her but that was how I saw it. That was reason enough to drink more. I drank recklessly. Still, somewhere in the inner corridors of my mind, someone kept telling me that I was not born to be this," Johns says. Having no job and with no hope of finding one, Johns studied law at Kochi and later practiced as a lawyer in Thrissur. It was the period when he gave himself totally into alcohol. All the friends were gone, there was no money, there was no reputable address, and all these negative factors added to the urge to drink more.

Totally free of the octopus grip of alcohol now, Johns can afford to crack a joke about that. "I myself was a famous drunkard in the entire district," he says.

> I HAVE LEARNT THAT SOCIETY IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FALL OF INDIVIDUALS INTO ALCOHOLISM. INSTEAD OF LOOKING UPON THE ALCOHOLIC AS A FELLOW-BEING, IT VIEWS HIM AS A DESPICABLE SINNER BEYOND SALVAGE. IT IS TRUE THAT THE ADDICT'S BEHAVIOUR MAY NOT BE SOMETHING THAT EVERYBODY CAN PUT UP WITH. THOSE WHO NEED HIM ALIVE SHOULD BE TAUGHT TO LOOK AT THE PROBLEM IN THE RIGHT PERSPECTIVE

Wisdom dawned later and then he searched for help. The de-addiction centres he stayed at were not like hell but hell itself. "They were prisons where the guards, the nurses and the doctors looked upon the "patients" like despicable animals or sinners condemned to hell. After several 'jailer-inmate' interactions, which they called counseling sessions, I understood that my alcoholism would only worsen once I got out of the camps. I had to find the way out myself."

REBIRTH

It was during that time that Johns came across the theory that alcoholism is a disease, which called for treatment. But there was no cure available for that as in the case of a number of illnesses starting from simple cold to psoriasis or dengue. But it can be treated, though not with drugs. Then it was the period of auto-suggestions, self-admonishments, penance, etc and all that helped him get out of the serpentine grip of the addicting liquid. But by then his liver had begun to show symptoms of irreparable damage (and the treatment for that continues even now).

"I have learnt that society itself is responsible for the fall of individuals into alcoholism. Instead of looking upon the alcoholic as a fellow-being, the society views him as a despicable sinner beyond salvage. It is true that the addict's behaviour may not be something that everybody can put up with but those who need him alive and well should be taught to look at the problem in the right perspective," Johns says. That is why he stipulates that the closest relatives should be with the 'patients' during their stay at Punarjani, his de-addiction centre at Poomala.

At Punarjani, "patients" are not given drugs, not even the repelling agents that make intake of alcohol physically impossible. There are no short-cuts in this, says Johns. Alcoholism cannot be treated with force and insistence, but the addict himself has to understand his problem and know for himself that the choice is his. Also, Johns would term all the claims about systematic counseling as nonsense. Alcoholism for anybody does not have any set standards. Unrestricted communication is the key to deliverance, as far as Johns is concerned. What the counseling person can do is to help the alcoholic understand his problem. "Regimands, restrictions, insistencies and prison-like controls will produce only negative results," says Johns. The patient may adjust to such practices as part of a psychological strategy but they will worsen his situation, he points out.

Punarjani Charitable Trust for De-Addiction and Rehabilitation at Poomala, 15 km north of Thrissur, has been successfully practicing the auto-help way of deliverance from alcoholism since its establishment on March 16, 2004. In the past six years, the centre, with Johns as its president, has enabled more than 1,000 chronically addicted alcoholics back into normal social life. "Punarjani doesn't have gates," says Johns, but it is not a statement of pride or admission of poverty. It is just an expression of the fact that essence of de-addiction practices is freedom and not restriction of it as traditional counselors seem to believe.

FREE THYSELF

Punarjani normally has around 20 'in-patients' at one time and they are all put up together. They walk freely, go to the market, have evening strolls, go angling in the vast pond in front of the centre, smoke cigarettes and crack jokes. Johns has set the patient free so that he doesn't have the feeling that someone — the society, wife, doctor, or God himself — is watching him. The practice is based on the simple theory that it is up to the alcoholic to decide whether he should go back to the booze or stay away from it. The patients sit in groups, share experiences, crack jokes about what they did at the height of hallucination. Counsessication within the community frees their souls and through that training in self-recognition, the patient comes to the understanding that he does not need an external agent to keep him alive.

Johns' autobiography will be out in some months. But the philosophy teacher knows that all those 1,000-odd addicts who had stayed at his Punarjani, and the lakhs of alcoholics in Kerala, are people who could write such autobiographies. Brief talks with the patients at Punarjani would convince one about this. Mahesh, the autorickshaw driver, is yet to find out *why* he was drinking. Rich man Thankachan knows that it was his father's lust for money that had driven him into alcohol. Dinesan, the weaver, was a victim of his house's proximity with the liquor shops. But all of them would in due course understand the truth that it all started with themselves. That understanding is the path for the walk back from hell.

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BORN AGAIN

Semkiw's family is Catholic, and his reincarnation research has been difficult for them to relate to. "Nonetheless, both my brothers and my ex-wife agreed to be featured in my book. As my work has grown, they have become more accepting, but they still maintain their Christian beliefs. When I asked my brother Leo, the orthopedic surgeon, why he wasn't more interested in my work, he responded, 'We are comfortable with our belief system.' But then all religions work that way," Semkiw adds.

The task that Semkiw and others like him have chosen is not an easy one. Ahtun Re, the spirit guide that Semkiw and Kevin Ryerson use to go about their task, also withholds information if the soul in question does not want the information to be revealed. "Ahtun Re shares past life information with me most of the time. I have often wondered if this violates some type of spiritual confidentiality and I have asked Ahtun Re about it. He has related that Kevin, I and he agreed to work together on reincarnation research even before Kevin or I were born. I think Ahtun Re chose to work with Kevin and me as we are both ethical and have pure motives," Semkiw says.

There are also a few other hitches that don't make the task easy. "The spirit guide can make past life identifications for people if given just the basic biographical information. If you give me permission, he would be able to give me information about your past lives. However, even after information is given, one may still not be able to locate a past lifetime historically. Many times, Ahtun Re gives me past life information but historical information is not available to validate the case. The past lifetime is just too obscure," Semkiw says.

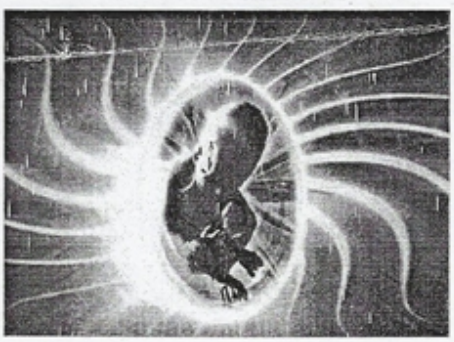
"That is why it is easier to find past lives involving people who were well known in a past incarnation as they have left a record," he explains.

Asked how Semkiw conducted his research and who are the people he chose to do the same, he says, "Cases are developed from people who write to me regarding past lives that they have remembered. In other cases, I ask Ahtun Re about people I am curious about."

Semkiw is quite confident that his research will be able to solve a few questions related to humanity. While suicide is considered a crime in legal terms, and religious preachers say that it leads to eternal damnation, that is not the case.

"Ahtun Re told me that when a person commits suicide, he will simply reincarnate and have to face the same set of circumstances that led to the suicide. The person will then need to find a different solution to their problems other than suicide," Semkiw says.

Currently, Semkiw is focused entirely on developing his ISIS website, which will focus on making compelling, independently researched cases available to people around the world



demonstrate objective evidence of reincarnation. He believes that his efforts and this knowledge will bridge the gap caused between people by religion, nationality and ethnic affiliation, which will create a more peaceful and evolved world.

Currently, religion is the main USP or medium of knowledge about reincarnation. However, Semkiw believes that science will increasingly get involved in reincarnation in the future. He states that in the future, facial recognition software, psychological testing, linguistic analysis, voice analysis, DNA sequencing and other instruments will be used to assess reincarnation cases.

"Just as the nature of the solar system was once the domain of religion, reincarnation and spirituality will shift from a religious concern to a scientific concern. The Roman Catholic Church had placed Galileo under arrest when he proposed that the Earth revolved around the Sun, rather than the other way around. Just as science displaced the church in understanding astronomy, science will displace religion in understanding reincarnation and the nature of the human soul," concludes Semkiw.