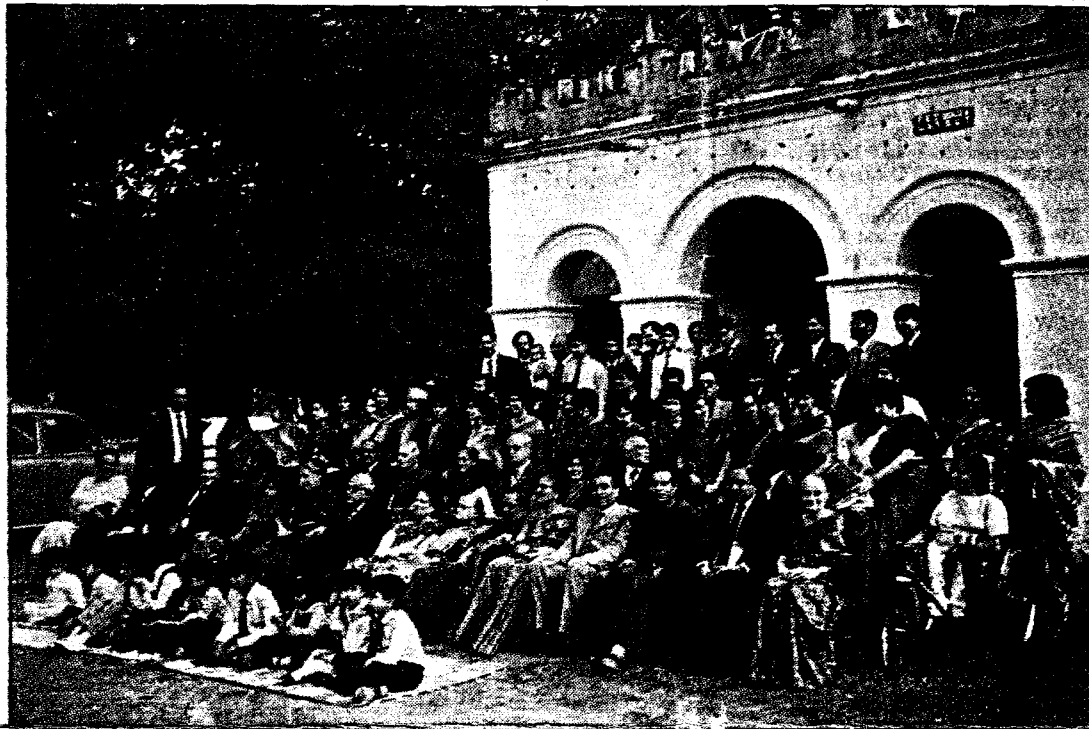


Merry dozen plus five



The clan photographed a few weeks before Oorgaum house was demolished.

PETER COLACO

In my childhood, Father would be transferred every other year — and we would move to a new town, a new school, a new second language.

Two facts gave me a sense of identity. One: my mother was the eldest of a family of seventeen children. The other: we had a 'hometown' called Bangalore. Here

our Grandparents lived in a large, rambling house near Cubbon Park; and here their children and grandchildren would assemble, every year, for a month of joint summer holidays.

There must have been sixty or seventy of us in the ancestral house each summer, and very proud we were to belong to such

an enormous clan.

But, now, I wonder. Should I state it as a boast? Or as a bashful confession? Or should I write at all, about how my grandparent's family won the 'Cheaper by the Dozen' Contest at the Empire Theatre in 1950, or thereabouts. Let me tell the story, you decide.

In later years my Aunt Louise (number 16) was to tell of a coffee party where assorted society ladies were discussing the need for family planning and birth control. Between cheese biscuits and choc-

olate cookies they decried the population explosion. The economic unviability of large families.

They listed the woes of women they knew — constantly carrying or labouring or feeding their numerous offspring. And the brutish, inconsiderate selfishness of men — concerned only with their own masculine pleasure and prowess.

Someone mentioned the case of one Mr P G D'Souza — and his wife Rose — who had 17 children in the space of 25 years; and a happy, healthy family they were.

'Men like that should be shot without question', said a lady. Aunt Louise was getting out the coffee. She was not in the room to say that it was her own father, who had been summarily sentenced to the firing squad. No one else ventured to say a word in his defence. But that was in the 1980s....In the early 1950s, when the movie 'Cheaper By the Dozen' came to town, having such family was till a matter of pride.

Bangalore was a different city — a small town of friendly people and open spaces. Millers Tank (which now accommodates an auditorium, a billiards club, a badminton club, a hospital and assorted offices) was a rainfed lake with an orchestra of frogs. People strolled or wheeled their cycles down South Parade; families went and listened to the band in Cubbon Park. And nobody had ever heard of words like Boom Town, Fast-Lane or Traffic Jam.

Bangalore was a nice place to bring up a large family. And there was no limit on the 'carrying capacity' of the town — except the ability of wives to bear children one after another.

'Cheaper By The Dozen' was a film-comedy about an American couple with 12 children. When it came to Bangalore, a food products company sponsored the movie with a Contest — for The Biggest and The Best Family in the City.

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Merry dozen plus five

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It was open to families of a dozen or more. With their tally of seventeen, Granny Rose and Grandpa P.G. D'Souza were well in the running.

Granny Rose first read about the contest in the 'Daily Post.' Or, as another version has it, the family humourist Uncle Tony (number 11) first told his mother about it, for a laugh.

But granny was entirely serious. She was a believer in the virtues of large families. Uncle Tony wasn't laughing much as he way to the theatre for an entry form, at his mothers made his best

There was only one problem. Both parents — with at least a dozen of their offspring — were expected to appear on stage, be photographed, interviewed, and permit promotional publicity by the sponsors.

Grandpa 'P.G.' (aged 75 going on 76, and a retired member of the Maharajah's council of ministers) was not so keen 'to make a public display of himself and his family.' Nor were any of his elder children. But granny's determination prevailed. 'With all this new talk of birth control... It is our duty to show that it is possible to raise a large family — in dignity and happiness!' she is reported to have argued.

And despite grandpa's mutterings and grumblings, he eventually warmed to the idea.

Many families in Bangalore were eligible for the 'Cheaper By The Dozen Contest' — some with a mere 12 or 13, one with 18 and one with 22 children! But the P.G. D'Souz was the undisputed winners. The only family with an unbroken partnership of 17 — by the same two spouses.

After the speeches and photographs, they were given a cash certificate, plus assorted provi-

sions from the sponsors. What the younger children remember is that — apart from the jellies, squashes and other goodies — each of them was given a gift of twelve rupees! A memorable sum for the non-earning members of a large family in the early 1950s.

Till the ancestral house came down in 1990, the Cheaper By The Dozen photo hung beside the piano in the large hall.

But jams, jellies and publicity apart, the award was truly a recognition of a remarkable couple; and more so of a remarkable wife and mother.

Granny Rose's seventeen were born without ceremony in the large double bed at home, with only Mrs. Briggs the midwife in attendance. Except for Uncle Xavy (number nine). He was born in a bullock cart or cattle shed at Channarayapatna, near Hassan, when granny adventurously accompanied grandpa on an official tour.

In the early 1900s, a pregnancy per year was routine. Many wives just could not withstand the strain and passed away in childbirth — after having borne 4 or 6 or 8 children. It was just 'one of those things that happened'; and no one thought much about it. A younger sister, or worthy spinster of good disposition, was quickly found — so that 'the poor motherless children would have someone to look after them' (not to mention the poor, lonely father). She in turn would be blessed with a few offspring of her own. So families of ten, twelve or fifteen were by no means unusual.

But this was not the case with Mr. & Mrs. P.G. D'Souza and their

brood of seventeen. (he lived to be 85; she to be almost 96).

Perhaps proving the law of averages, there were eight daughters and nine sons. I am tempted to state that they were born alternately, but they were not.

Naturally, legends about the family abound.

In the late 1930s, when the tally had finally reached 17, grandpa was working in the red MGID building next door to the High Court. It was a pleasant five minute walk across Cubbon Park, so Rajakarya Pravina Peter George D'Souza could walk to work — and

back home for lunch. (Those were the days!)

He was always a bit Preoccupied with Affairs of State — but not blind to the world about him. One day he saw a little boy, who could have been one of his own sons, weeping in the park. grandpa 'P.G.' resorted to his solution for most problems. He took the boy to his wife — to be fed, consoled and sent back to his parents, whoever they might be.

'Rose', he said. 'I found this boy... crying in the park. He must be lost. He must be hungry.' And then 'Little Boy?' said grandmother with some asperity. 'Lost in the Park? Don't you know your own son Alphy?!' (Alphonse, num-



Mrs P C D Souza at the age of 92 in 1982.

ber 13.)

I think the story is apocryphal. But, even if it was true, one could not blame grandpa for being a bit confused. The house was always full of children — theirs and other peoples.

At the screening of the movie, a lady said to another 'My God! The

poor woman... I wonder how she survived!!' Actually she survived pretty well and lived to be almost 96.

It is difficult for our age of air-conditioned nursing homes, anaesthesia and 'Caesareans' to appreciate the enormity of this achievement.

Granny Rose's seventeen were born without ceremony in the large double bed at home, with only Mrs. Briggs the midwife in attendance. Except for Uncle Xavy (number nine). He was born in a bullock cart or cattle shed at Channarayapatna, near Hassan, when granny adventurously accompanied grandpa on an official tour in her seventh month. It was a narrow escape, but both mother and premature-child survived — the 2 lb infant wrapped for days in cotton, the only incubator available in Hassan. Granny not only survived the many childbirths, but her home was always open to several 'adopted' children.

For half-a-century Granny Rose did not get to see much of the outside world, except for occasional visits to the Legislative Council of which she was a nominated member. When 'Grandpa P.G.' retired from the Mysore Maharaja's Executive Council he wanted his wife within earshot at any hour. To keep him occupied she got him to write his memoirs. He had lived through historic times and people like Sir M. Visvesvaraya and Sir Mirza Ismail came alive through his first-hand descriptions.

When grandpa died at 85, granny was 68. For the first time in her life she had neither a child, nor an ailing husband, to nurse. She adopted a rickshawkara and his cycle riskshaw in which she would leave the house at six in the morning. After Mass in some distant church, she would visit family, friends, convents, hospitals; and return only late in the day or, occasionally, at nightfall.

No one realised till then what it must have meant to be household for five decades in the prime of her life. She had so serenely played role of domesticated mother and wife, that we always took it for granted.

When Rose (nee Noronha) married P G D'Souza she was 20. I'd love to embark on the legend of their courtship, but let me just say it was a great romance — and that he was 37.

Few would have predicted that

they would bear so many children. But another legend has it that Mr Lavelle did. Mr Lavelle was an American mining expert, who discovered the Gorgaum Mine at Kolar Gold Fields. He was rewarded with a grant of land covering much of what is now Vittal Mallya Road (Grant Road) and, of course, Lavelle Road.

With his mining wealth Mr Lavelle built a large mansion on Grant Road. And an equally large Pavilion Annexe, in the spacious grounds, at which he planned to host the wedding reception of his only son Capt Lavelle. He called it 'Gorgaum House'. But the younger Lavelle was lost in action in World War I. Broken hearted, Mr Lavelle decided to return to England leaving his daughter with the entire property.

A less romantic — but very plausible — version is that Mr Lavelle's daughter-in-law was asthmatic and found the house too damp. But, either way, Mr Lavelle's daughter Mrs Akey (and in turn her daughter Mrs Tingey) inherited the house called — (now Garden Apartments). They were keen to sell the Annexe to someone known — as she would be their neighbour in the mainhouse next door.

Mr DeCruze, the well-known architect, who designed the two houses suggested Mr P G D'Souza, a senior civil servant in the Maharajah's government with 5 children. Grandpa P G demurred I don't have the money. And what will I do with such a large house.

Mr Lavelle (or Mr DeCruze) reportedly prophesied I can see that you and Mrs D'Souza are going to have a large family... As to money, we'll settle something. And so, in 1918. Grandpa P G D'Souza bought Oorgaum House — with grounds covering about 2.5 or 3 acres — for Rs 9000!

The big house was rapidly filled and was never again empty. Counting children, grandchildren, spouses and great-grandchildren their descendants numbered well over 200 at last count.

It is hard to describe the

wonders of a life in a large family, in a single column.... The enormous House on Grant Road. The dining-table which could formally seat 24 (but still needed to be used in shifts at holiday time!) The smoky wood-fire kitchens. The store-rooms bursting with plenty.

But to wake up in a house with an acre of trees, hens and turkeys in the backyard, cows grazing near the wall — was worth the terrors of the night.

Living and schooling in Bombay, it was a wonder for us to come to Bangalore. Each year when we came in May, Cubbon Park (and most roads) were ablaze with gulmohur reds and jacaranda purple. Every afternoon there was a short sprinkle of rain which shampooed the trees and settled the dry dust into sweet-smelling, damp earth. That's perhaps, the only thing in the city that hasn't really changed.

P S. It is important to remember that what passes as history is not always undisputed fact! This story is reconstructed from the accounts of uncles and aunts (now in their 70s and 80s) and their recollections what their parents told them. Each one has his/her own set of memories (which sometimes contradict one another!) Scholars may argue as to what events should have been left out (and what other events should have been put in). Little details are open to question... To the best of my ability, it is essentially true. To any who would doubt this entirely, some evidence remains. .

On Grant Road (or Vittal Mallya Road, if you must), just a hundred yards from the Lavelle Road intersection, is a housing complex called P G D'Souza Layout. At the heart of it — the site of the Pavilion Annexe — is a new three storey duplex, built on the site of the original 'Oorgaum House.'

And — if you care to examine, the name boards on the flats and houses — there is still an unusually high proportion of D'Souz. And a few P G D'Souz who now bear other names. The sisters who got married and their children. Including me)