Kundalakesi

THIRUKKADAIYUR KASINATHAN SUBRAMANIAM IYER – Mani Mama to those of us with things to do – was a remorselessly typical seventy-year old retired postmaster who, according to most respondents, had reason enough to be satisfied with life. He had postmastered with an iron fist at the Arundale Colony post office for twenty-five years and had, with his retirement money, built a single-storey house on two grounds of land in the outskirts of the city. He had three temples he could walk to on Fridays, two supposedly dutiful and god-fearing daughters-in-law from respectable families, four lovable grandchildren who went to various homework-giving state-board schools, thick bifocal glasses on a heavy-set nose, thin silver hair that had lost all memories of blackness, a burgeoning belly, a stormy gait, a few cotton shirts in various shades of blue, several identical brown pants and white veshtis, all the traditional leanings towards pragmatism, propriety and frugality, and the occasional complaint of reasonably benign arthiritis.

On the morning of the second of February 2015, Mani Mama woke up at four, roused his wife by tripping over her on his way to the bathroom, brushed his teeth for fifteen minutes, picked up his battered pail, and headed at a brisk pace towards the milk store three streets away. He returned fuming half an hour later, accusing the milkman of lowly adulteration and questioning the circumstances of his birth. He stormed past the coconut trees and the purple bougainvilleas in his front garden, past the broad swing suspended from the ceiling of the anteroom by wrought iron chains, through the sparse living room with its black-and-white portraits
of past generations, through the sunlit dining room with its six-chaired table covered in sunmica and turmeric stains, all the way down to the kitchen at the back where his wife and daughter-in-law were beginning to busy themselves with preparing the meals for the day, and deposited his pail heavily on the counter. After a hot-water bath and his religious obligations as a devout brahmin, he went out to the veranda, settled down in his wicker chair with the day’s copy of The Hindu and, for the next two-and-a-half hours, proceeded to read about every misdeed that had been sprung on the unsuspecting public the previous day, from corruption scandals to questionable leg-before-wicket decisions.

The Hindu was the most (if some are to be believed, the only) respectable newspaper in the country, and Mani Mama had been a sworn loyalist since before he had started as a novice stenographer in the postal department fifty years earlier. With perverse pride, he told anyone who would listen that it had always maintained its high journalistic standards, all through the wars and the riots of the sixties, the political upheavals of the seventies, whatever happened in the eighties, the economic reforms of the nineties, the pestilence of the computers and the internet of the twenty-first century, right up to today, where it remained a stalwart herald of the significant goings-on in the country and elsewhere.

“Why don’t you read The Hindu?”, he looked up from the City section to ask his son as he descended upon on an identical wicker chair across from him, clutching The Times of India. “Times of India is only good for page three news. They don’t care at all about real news.”

There were at least a dozen uncomfortable truths whose potencies Mama regularly attempted to blunt with unprovoked dismissals and casual insults, and prominent among these was the fact that ever since The Times of India had launched its Chennai edition a few years ago, The Hindu’s fortunes had seemed to be under question. Sales had declined as the Times, with its incendiary headlines and supplements filled with glamour models, quickly garnered sheaves of subscribers, all delighted at an alternative to the straightforward and unembellished reportage that they had been subjected to for decades. The Hindu still managed to remain the
most respectable newspaper in the country by the standards most appropriate for newspapers, but it was on a tighter budget each quarter as the younger generations – in all their shallowness of sensibilities, as Mama often disgustedly remarked (though in less parliamentary words) – continued to seemingly prefer celebrity divorces to the central budget.

“You and your Hindu. It is an old-fashioned leftist rag.”, his son responded, issuing the one attack on the paper’s objectivity that possibly had ground. “I don’t have time to get bored by it. It may have been a great paper in the past, but look at it now! Just yesterday I found two spelling mistakes in the front page itself.”

Mama went back to his reading, grumbling ungracious metaphors for the futility of giving sons good advice. Sure, there had been a small number of typographical errors – he had just come across ‘rancour’ spelt ‘rancor’, for instance – and the occasional issue with declension in the recent past, but Mama was sure this was an ephemeral kink that would soon be smoothed out. After all, he felt, it was the quality of the news that mattered and this, at least as of the second of February 2015, remained as good as ever.

The house soon came alive with the sound of bursting mustard seeds and the scent of frying onions, and midway through Business his wife brought Mama his dabara and tumbler of coffee. By the beginning of International, his son and daughter-in-law had departed for their respective offices in private-sector companies, having ushered his grandson and granddaughter into their respective school buses. He spent part of the afternoon napping and the rest calling out the short-sightedness and strategic ineptitude of characters on the mega-serials his wife liked to watch intently. In the evening, he took a brief walk among swarms of school-weary adolescents in the neighbourhood’s excuse for a park, commiserating with retired bank managers and chartered accountants about the shortcomings of the day’s youth and the bleak future this foreboded for the country. The rest of the day was teaching his grandchildren how to add numbers, helping them stick things onto chart paper, dinner and sleep.

The second of February 2015 was not any particular day in Mani
Mama’s life as a seventy-year old retired postmaster; it was more or less every day, and that was really what the problem was. In the course of his reign at the Arundale Colony post office – twenty-five years of a characteristic and distinguished career – he had commanded the fear and obedience of every government servant in his oversight from peon to desk clerk; truant postmen and careless accountants used to tremble in their slippers when they heard the crisp tread of Subramaniam Iyer’s polished leather shoes rounding the corner. Over this golden age of his long tenure, his tireless vigil had ensured that no more than thirty-four pieces of correspondence were delayed in reaching their addressees among the oblivious inhabitants of his jurisdiction, and it was said sometimes among those in the know in the Postmaster General’s offices that the most effective means of receiving weekly magazines in Velachery was to subscribe to them in the name of your brother-in-law who lived in Arundale Colony and take the bus there every Monday. All that and now here he was, relegated to wicker chairs and evening walks, his most invigorating undertaking a monthly hour-long wait at the ration shop for five kilos of rice, one of unpolished sugar, and a packet of gingelly oil. One can only take so many months of doomed mega-serial reunions and the pasting of small pictures of national leaders onto chart paper before one finds oneself sorely drained of temper and tolerance on a regular basis, and Mama had run out of these months years ago.

It did not help either that there had not really been much temper and tolerance to drain; for Mani Mama had always taken life, with all of its variegated incongruities, rather seriously. His disposition towards the affairs of the populace, as his son had found occasions to point out to him for years now, strayed well past cynical. He ceaselessly pointed out all that was wrong with the world – the lack of water in his borewell, the excess of salt in his sambar, the poor quality of furniture purveyed by the local carpenter – and seemed to not appreciate anything that wasn’t. He regarded the government and all its decisions with disdain irrespective of the party in power, and routinely blamed politicians for having taken away all his money as income tax and then spent it on their daughters’
weddings.

Mama was also oblivious to cheer, refusing to be moved by the direst attempts at making him laugh, and easily stood mirthless in the face of the best mimcry artists in the industry. He was not even amused by banana-based comedy and had sat unimpressed through half-a-dozen Crazy Mohan movies, scoffing at each joke and muttering something about puns being the lowest form of humour.

Such an outlook on life naturally led to a well-supplied stockpile of complaints against the state of society at large, not to mention those against the actions of his immediate acquaintances. But, to his great frustration, he found that he had no one to complain to. His son’s patience, of which there had not been much to begin with, had been used up years ago; besides, his job as a salesman of household appliances provided him with his own collection of complaints against the state of society that he bored the daughter-in-law with. The same was the case with Mama’s wife though at least she pretended, however ineffectually, to listen to him while actually worrying about the fate of the woman in that matinee serial who had unwittingly gotten back together with her estranged husband. And the assortment in the park only waited for him to finish his tirades so that they could start with their own.

So when, one serendipitous Tuesday morning about ten years into his retirement, after having learnt about the causes and effects of the latest lorry drivers’ strike from his trusted newspaper, Mama reached the centre pages with the editorial and the obituaries and inadvertently started reading the columns where the letters to the editor were published, it was love at first sight. An engineer from Hyderabad had written in complaining about the poor quality of bridges being constructed in his city, and a school teacher accused local members of the legislative assembly of blocking crucial traffic on a daily basis just to ease the passage of their narcissistic cavalcades. Mama read letters about the falling standards in the quality of silk sarees in the south, the rising rates of value-added tax, the frequency of blockages in the sewer systems of various second-tier cities, and even about some issues that had somehow eluded even his
honored critical faculties thus far.

Here, it seemed to him, were the sensible and the level-headed of the world. Here were those that saw injustice and iniquity about them and took their pens up in protest. Here were his people, bringing much-needed attention to matters of national importance, taking on undesirable elements in existing power structures, calling upon the slumbering public to stand up and take notice, with their voices being heard by thousands of rapt readers, all before breakfast. He decided then that it was time for the harangued to become the haranguer, and resolved to bring to the wide readership of this hallowed newspaper a stark awareness of the failings of the system and the inconveniences of his everyday life.

“This buttermilk is getting worse every week. Look at all these clumps! It is supposed to be smooth and uniform.”, the son complained later that same Tuesday at dinner as the daughter-in-law was ladling it out, more out of a lack of anything else to say than as a genuine observation regarding any decrease in the quality of the buttermilk.

“It is because of the milk and that wretched milkman.”, Mani mama burst out, almost choking on a mouthful of rice. “He is adding more and more water to it each day, and it doesn’t even form good curd any more.” Interestingly, this was exactly what the milkman was doing.

“It isn’t the milkman, the poor man, you keep blaming him.”, said his wife, willing as ever to accord benefits of doubt, and sceptical as ever of Mama’s outbursts. “And besides, if you dislike him so much, we could just switch to packaged milk. It is because of you that we don’t.”

“Ey, what do you know? Packaged milk is full of chemicals.”, Mani mama said, echoing the articles he read in weekly magazines. “You know what I am going to do? I am going to write a letter to the editor of The Hindu about him. When the public learns of his underhanded practices, then he will know.”

“Appa, why do you want to do such things?”, the son frowned at Mama, still upset at the loss of a washing-machine franchise deal from earlier that day. “Don’t we have other things to do?”, which he actually knew his father actually did not.
“If Mama wants to write, let him write, no?”, the daughter-in-law responded. She had always been a little sympathetic towards Mani Mama as he reminded her of her own father. She was even mildly amused by his apparent annoyance at apparently everything, and later wrote a story about him and his letters. Also, she was rather intelligent and had an endearing sense of humour.

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The next morning, after his daily perusal of The Hindu, which today lasted three hours because he read each of the twelve letters to the editor with ardour, Mani mama started preparations for his endeavour. He dug out from the loft his old typewriter that he had bought in a government auction a few years before his retirement, during an equipment overhaul at his post office. He dusted it off superficially, but found that it did not work; I wish I could give you more details, but I know nothing about typewriters. And neither did Mama.

That Saturday, he got his son to drive him to the one shop he knew on Ritchie Street that repaired typewriters. To his own surprise, the shop still existed, and still repaired typewriters. After almost getting kicked out for demanding prices that had been offered twenty years earlier, they worked out a deal, and a week later Mama was in his living room facing his familiar fully functional workhorse loaded to the stops with A4 sheets and all set to proselytise.

Dear Sir,

Adultery is a huge problem in today’s society. The milkman next to my house adulterates our milk regularly with water and he is a scoundrel of the first order. I am sure they are doing this everywhere, and the government is not cracking down on them. Stern measures have to be taken against such illegal activities that harm the common man. The only alternative is packaged milk,
which is full of chemicals and in particular gives me indigestion all the time. The quality standards on this should also be more strict. Only then will India have any chance at becoming a developed nation.

Thanking You,
Yours Sincerely,
Thirukkadaiyur Kasinathan Subramaniam Iyer
Chennai

Mama held this up to light and beamed down at it with pride through the reading half of his thick bifocals. Short and to the point, like the best of the letters he had read over the past week; none of those winding introductions that took half-an-hour to wade through and said nothing that the reader did not already know. And scathing too – he hoped that the indolent arm of justice would be roused into action by his words and come down heavily upon these peddlers of sub-standard goods. He had wondered whether he should keep the “Thanking You” and “Yours Sincerely”, as they did not appear in the paper, but decided that the editor may be offended if they were not there and let them be. On his table lay a dozen rejects that he dumped into the dustbin on his way to the park that evening. He took his final draft to show his co-walkers, ostensibly to ask them for advice, but only really wanting to exhibit his fine composition.

“This is very good, sir.”, said the bank manager, having read the short letter through. “It is high time these scoundrels were punished. Just the other day, I found a worm this long in the rice I had bought at the store on First Cross Street. And not just that, the shopkeeper, I don’t know what problem he has, he is always rude to me when I go there.”

Mani Mama beamed again – the bank manager had said his letter was good. He had always known the manager to be a reliable person.

“Yes yes, he is rude to me as well.”, the chartered accountant agreed, “If only there was another grocery store nearby, I would never go to his store. His prices are twice that of what they are near my daughter’s house in Saidapet. Mani sir, why have you said ‘Dear Sir’ here? You should say
‘Dear Editor’. This is more appropriate.”

Mama had not anticipated criticism, though he should have, given that he had known the chartered accountant for fifteen years or so, and had always believed him to be an atheist. Did he think that just because he had handled the accounts of two or three famous actors, he could criticise with abandon? Well, he was about to be shown otherwise.

“In my twenty-five years of service as postmaster of Arundale Colony post office”, Mani mama started, waggling his finger at the chartered accountant. This was his favourite phrase to start retaliations with. He firmly believed that establishing himself as a retired postmaster granted him authority and respect in popular society, and often despaired in private that life offered him precious few chances to do so. He liked to stop here and start over, this time emphasising the ‘twenty-five’ so that there was no doubt as to how long he had served as postmaster of the Arundale Colony post office.

“In my twenty-five years of service as postmaster of Arundale Colony post office, no one has ever written me a letter starting with ‘Dear Postmaster’. Did you know this? It sounds ridiculous! Letters always start with ‘Dear Sir’ or you put the name in if you know them personally.”

“No, Mani sir, I have received several letters that said ‘Dear Manager’. I think it is normal.”, the bank manager took the chartered accountant’s side. “Also, if you put ‘Dear Sir’, what if the editor is a woman? You should at least put ‘Dear Sir or Madam’.”

Mani Mama had had it. Who were these two to know better than him about letters? He was a postmaster! He pulled his draft out of the hands of the chartered accountant.

“OK, it is getting late. I will see you tomorrow.”, and he left without waiting for their response and stormed home, scowling at the trees and lamp posts along the way.

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The next day he sent his letter off and started waiting for the results. Where earlier he would work his way to it through National and State,
the next couple of weeks he went straight to Opinions and started with the names of the letter writers. But alas, his name never appeared. There were still the Mala Murthys from Thirunelveli alarmed at the perils of deforestation and the Vinayak Hegdes from Bangalore tired of delays in the construction of the metro rail system, but no Subramaniam Iyers from Chennai with concerns regarding the quality of commercial dairy products.

To the surprise of everyone in the family, however, Mama’s disappointment did not turn into resentment towards the paper or the section. Though he did bemoan his letter not being published with a low comment to himself each day he found his name missing, he still read avidly each morning, and continued to write to the editor about the numerous shortcomings of the world as he saw it.

Dear Sir,

I am afraid I have to say that the state of so-called comedy in Tamil motion pictures has deteriorated drastically in the past few decades. In the days of the late great NSK, comedy used to be funny and meaningful at the same time. Today it is all one ruffian hitting another and calling him names in a weird accent. And the worst of all are puns. If one word sounds like another, why is it funny? The youth of today are getting poisoned by these so-called comedians and imitating them in their free time. These youth are the future of India. How are we going to develop and prosper if they are exposed to such nonsense?

Thanking You,

Yours Sincerely,

Thirukkadaiyur Kasinathan Subramaniam Iyer
Chennai

Such letters he typed out as often as he could find material and energy,
eventually settling down to a steady rate of about one a month. He wrote about, among others, the abundance of potholes in suburban localities, the prevalence of corruption among lower rung officials of the Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation, the poor form of the Indian test team, the poor form of the Indian one-day international team, and the incessant greed of auto drivers who wanted seventy rupees to take him from Mambalam to Ashok Nagar. And none of these were published.

The Hindu itself, meanwhile, was beginning to phase out its hallmark of quality a little faster than its readers were willing to recognise. Spelling mistakes were growing in number, and once every few days even the editorial ended sentences with prepositions. The newspaper, much like any other private enterprise that wished to last, needed money; money usually came from advertisements, advertisements from having a sizable readership; and The Hindu’s readership was now falling faster than the price of sugarcane after Pongal. The intrepid men and women behind the operations at Kasturi Buildings were working overtime and consuming nearly twice as much coffee as they used to, but every week or so they still found themselves having to resort to articles on the prospects of the call centre industry and the lamentable disappearance of small but long-beloved used-book stores in Mylapore.

Mama chose to notice none of this, however, not even the onslaught of benign discussion pieces on the growing popularity of worn-out pants and other such imported pretensions among incorrigible teenagers in the more affluent sections of society. In his eyes, The Hindu still bore all the glories of its century of existence. Yes, he was disappointed each morning the week after each unpublished letter, but he never stopped writing them. The letters, unread as they were by anyone else, still seemed to grant him an inexplicable sense of calm, much like tossing pebbles into a desolate pond does to a lovelorn spinster. His general mood improved around the time he wrote one of his letters, and sometimes he even watched afternoon mega-serials with his wife without cursing any of the characters.

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Another thing his earnestness with the letters granted Mani Mama was a veritable nemesis. Across the street from him lived a retired civil lawyer, and he learnt that four letters of hers had been published in newspapers over the previous year, though one of them was in The Times of India and so did not count. She would come over once a week to learn cross stitching techniques from his wife, and he tried his best to be asleep on these occasions. Mama detested her because he thought she patronised him because of his lack of success with the letters, though in reality she only patronised him because she thought he was a misogynist. She actually thought everyone was a misogynist, and this had nothing to do with him in particular. Don’t blame her, though – if you had spent thirty-seven years of your life representing two divorce cases a week at the Madras high court, you would think everyone was a misogynist as well.

“Mama, the problem you have is that your English is too simple.”, she said to him one day, peering over his shoulder as he was typing his sixth letter or so. “You need to use more sophisticated words and sentence structure to more effectively drive in your point. The papers have editorial standards they need to meet, you know, so they won’t publish anything subpar.”

If there was one thing Mani Mama disapproved of more than adulterating milkmen, it was unsolicited advice from nemeses who he believed were patronising him. He turned around in his chair to face her with his best reproachful gaze.

“Why, Mami, why? Why is it necessary to use fancy English? This is the land of Kattabomman and Bharathiyar. We did not drive the British out of the country so that we could spend our days trying to learn their language.”, he exploded, mindlessly loading in oft-used arguments that had little to do with the discussion at hand. “Besides, I was not born rich, and I did not attend one of your convents. I worked hard to get to this point in life. Why should I spend my time learning someone else’s language when I have my own?”

“But you are dealing with an English newspaper.”, the lawyer responded, confused and offended, as she had indeed been schooled at one of these
convents. “You could always write to a Tamil newspaper instead if you want to write in Tamil.”

“Those Tamil dailies cannot compare to the standards set by The Hindu.” What does she know, he thought to himself, she reads The Times of India.

“One more thing – you write ‘Dear Sir’, but what if the editor is a woman? I always write ‘Dear Editor’. At least write ‘Dear Sir or Madam’.” Just as expected, she thought to herself, misogynist.

“Mami, in my twenty five years, my twenty-five years of service as postmaster of Arundale Colony post office, no one has ever written me a letter starting with ‘Dear Sir or Madam’, or ‘Dear Postmaster’. Did you know this?”, and he got up and stormed into the bathroom.

The next day he went to the local book store and bought a thesaurus, making sure the shopkeeper knew it was for his grandson.

Dear Sir,

The obsession with the English language is a severe pestilence on our society. Yes, it is very paramount as a means of communication, but does it merit the esteem that we accord it? Is someone superior because she knows better English? This problem is more conspicuous in the case of lawyers and judges of the judicial system. For example, last week a judge from the Madras high court wrote in a verdict, “The attendant aspects of this momentous and monumental pronouncement pertain to pertinacious tendencies of the proletariat”. What this means I have no idea. Why this obsession with someone else’s language? Why are convents better than government schools? If we want to move forward as a nation, we need to be proud of our own heritage.

Thanking You,

Yours Sincerely,

Thirukkadaiyur Kasinathan Subramaniam Iyer

Chennai
Mama had hardly lived this down when one evening his grandson came up to him with his science textbook.

“Thatha, you keep saying the packaged milk has chemicals, but I asked my class miss and she said no. Even the book says milk is boiled to remove bacteria and make it safer.”

Dear Sir,

The country’s education system is in shambles. Only rote learning is encouraged. The students memorise the whole textbook instead of understanding anything and copying is rampant in the board exams. Even the textbooks are found to be inaccurate in several places with a lot of outdated information. The Education minister needs to do something about this and call for a review of all the textbooks being used. Education is an important cornerstone of civilisation, and is all the more important in our country, as it is our most important asset.

Thanking You,
Yours Sincerely,
Thirukkadaiyur Kasinathan Subramaniam Iyer
Chennai

Such outbursts did grow fewer as the months passed, however. Each complaint Mama put down on paper seemed a small piece of ballast loosed landwards out of his crowded mind as it soared a little higher towards lighter climes. After about a year of letters he was, at times, on the verge of being able to appreciate the irony in a former postmaster’s lack of success with letters, but not quite there yet. After two years he had, to his own surprise, nearly exhausted his complaints and had to actively look for issues to write about.

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“Appa, why do you bother with these letters?”, the son asked him one day, concerned that disappointment at the rejections might eventually get to his father. “You know thousands of people write each day. It is very unlikely they will publish yours even if it is very good.”

Mani Mama had answered this very question several times in the past, though his son never seemed to remember. He had just finished composing a letter earlier that day about local motorcyclists having little regard for public safety, however, and was not as irritable as he might have been otherwise.

“You look around and there are so many bad things happening. Someone has to say something. You have your job, you are comfortable, so you don’t. Someone has to say something. So I say what I can.”

“But why write to The Hindu? They aren’t even printing your letters.”

“Ey, what do you know? The Hindu is the best paper there is. Show me another like it if you can.”

“The best paper? Maybe it used to be in your day, but have you actually been reading it these days? Just yesterday I found three spelling mistakes in the front page.”, and he went back to bothering the grandson about homework.

This conversation irked Mama for the next few days. His son had said similar things several times in the past, and Mama had also noticed the spelling mistakes – in fact, he had just come across ‘grey’ spelt ‘gray’ that morning – but had then dismissed them as the work of inexperienced proof-readers and had not counted them against the quality of his newspaper. Lately, however, he seemed to be finding more errors each day. Even factual errors seemed to be growing in number, though they were all admitted to on the subsequent days. All this he found worrisome. Something would have to be done if this loyal messenger of the Indian people were to uphold its fidelity. Besides, he needed things to write about anyway.

Dear Sir,

Over the past few weeks, I have noticed that the
typographical quality of your publication has been very inconsistent. Yesterday in the second page, for example, ‘public’ was spelt without the ‘l’, rendering the whole sentence unspeakable. This is very regrettable, as The Hindu usually sets a high standard for all news publications. I suspect this is because your proof-readers are rather inexperienced. I hope these issues are corrected soon, as the press is an important component of democracy and The Hindu is an important instrument in India’s consciousness and progress.

Thanking You,
Yours Sincerely,
Thirukkadaiyur Kasinathan Subramaniam Iyer
Chennai

This letter happened to catch the eye of the editor in charge of the letters, as it so happened that she had been fighting the board for a while on the matter of proof-reading; she believed the existing proofers were both incompetent and overworked and wanted to hire more. So she decided to publish the letter, despite its numerous shortcomings, to demonstrate to the other editors that even the readership had recognised her cause. And the letter was indeed published the very next day. Unfortunately, she forgot that it too would have to go through the proof-readers.

Dear Sir,

Over the past few weeks, I have noticed that the typographical quality of your publication has been very incontinent . . .

Mani Mama paused. He kept staring at ‘incontinent’, his blank face and unmoving eyes bearing no indications of the various emotions wrestling for control inside. Finally, after two whole minutes, startling everyone at home, especially the children, who had never witnessed him at it, he burst out laughing.