

The Pickle Jar

Snippets For A Quiet Afternoon

POTPOURI OF DIVERSE OBSERVATIONS

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Preface

The Scar and the Syntax

I was in the eighth standard at a Tamil-medium school when my life changed over a single line of poetry. My father was coaching me on William Wordsworth's Lucy Gray. When he finished and questioned me on the text, I replied simply: "She was died." The reaction was instantaneous. With eyes emitting fire, flayed nostrils, and gnashed teeth, my father rose. The corporal punishment that followed was so severe I was hospitalized for a day. I returned with a scar in the occipital region—a secret I still ask my barber to hide today, even at the age of 89.

Yet, that scar became my North Star. It propelled me toward a lifelong pursuit of linguistic precision. The dictionary became my Bible; Wren & Martin became my Gita. There was no looking back. Every morning, I would deconstruct the Hindu editorial, cataloguing difficult words to present to my father like an offering.

By the 11th standard, the world opened up. I discovered the investigative theatrics of Sexton Blake and the verbal acrobatics of Erle Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason. In my Intermediate years—the first time I was taught in English—Professor Ramaswamy transported me to the celestial heights of Sir Walter Scott and the Merchant of Venice. To me, the

arguments of Portia and Shylock still outshine the finest legal minds of today.

Charles Dickens and Alexandre Dumas soon followed. P.G. Wodehouse and R.K. Narayan became my refuge during stressful years in the office, while James Hadley Chase provided the necessary thrill to overcome the anxiety of circling airports in rough weather.

My father was an "old-style" graduate, a man for whom correct English was not just a skill, but a moral imperative. His correspondence with his elder brother—the stenographer to the Chief Justice of the Chennai High Court—read like a masterclass in English literature. My Periappa once wrote to him: "If you had been a Rishi, you would have burnt my son to ashes with your third eye." To which my father concluded his reply: "If each of us were to pull apart the edifice of our family will tumble down."

This book is a continuation of that edifice. It is a collection of truths, observations, and oddities that reflect a lifetime of looking at the world through the lens of a "stickler." It is also a testament to modern synergy; completed with extraordinary speed, these stories were polished through a creative collaboration with ChatGPT—an AI that served as a tireless sounding board, helping to bring my "brain-to-laptop" memories into their final, captivating form.

Acknowledgement

At the outset, I wish to thank Indusladies.com, with which I have been associated for Quarter of a century, for publishing my snippets and Stranger than Fiction series. This is a family-oriented outlet for sharing your thoughts and pouring out your agonies and ecstasies.

I stopped writing since 2025 after I fell down unconscious due to postural vertigo. Snippets penned till 2023 were published in the form of two books. Articles written in 2024 were pickled until a spark emerged a month back to open the jar.

My second daughter, Sangeetha Chakrapani's book "WHATEVER IT TAKES" was published and received excellent reviews. If a mother of quadruplets, cooking for seven people, managing an NGO for special needs children [TOGETER FOUNDATION] and is in the process of completing a new project[TOGETHER COMMUNITY] could do it why not I? The jar was opened, and the most tedious job of editing, punctuation, paragraphing, and giving imaginative title for some of the articles were taken over by CHAT GPT.

Whenever people talked of Artificial Intelligence and a flood of articles appeared in print, I blinked. It was too late in the day for me, having to depend on my driver for whatsapp confusion and my granddaughter for my laptop

complications. I thank CHATGPT for the invaluable help in condensing the tedium of editing from three months to a week. They went an extra mile to compliment me and encourage me with a human touch. I have not worked harder than in the last one week.

This is perhaps my last book, unless God decides otherwise.
ADIEU.

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A Double-Door Fridge and A Bad Memory

I once asked a friend if he was happy. After a slight hesitation, he replied, "More or less—but the thing is..." and began to elaborate on his grievances. Others responded with a "Yes and no," or "By and large, but..." Notably, no one gave an unequivocal "yes." Everyone seemed to have a "but" that troubled them. By contrast, those who were unhappy simply said "No" and readily justified their misery. This collective sentiment—this "but"—is what defines a nation's overall Happiness Index.

A recent report reveals that India ranks 126th in the Global Happiness Index. For context, China ranks 60th, Nepal 93rd, and Pakistan 108th. Finland consistently ranks first, while our neighbour Bhutan famously values Gross National Happiness (GNH) over GDP.

But enough about global statistics; let us look inward. Why do we feel the way we do? The mind is often like the tongue—always probing for the "sore spot" in our mouths. While parameters like income, health, and work-life balance are the foundations of contentment, individual idiosyncrasies often sabotage our joy.

Take Shankar, for instance. He is unhappy because he is not yet a grandfather, despite his son being married for ten years. TGS regrets not having a daughter; Mohan is disappointed

that his bright son joined a band instead of pursuing higher studies. Then there is Srinivasan, who is upset that his son married a dark-complexioned girl. Invoking a Telugu proverb, “Kodalu nalupu ante kulam antha nalupu” (If the daughter-in-law is dark, the entire family line is darkened), he felt his "prophecy" was confirmed when his grandson was born with a similar complexion.

Geetha feels unhappy because her husband always books late-night flights to save on airfare. To put things in perspective, I suggested she considers those who endure 24-hour bus journeys to reach the same destination.

Logistics also play a role. Sampath was miserable commuting three hours a day until he moved closer to his office and rented out his house. Meanwhile, another friend in the same boat struggles because his mother refuses to live in a rented home. Then there is Suresh, who books service apartments for holidays to save money, leaving his wife unhappy because she still has to cook two meals a day. She rightly asks, “Isn’t it a holiday for me, too?”

It is remarkably easy to find reasons to be dissatisfied—be it the lack of a double-door fridge, a dishwasher, or a larger TV. A colleague of mine once grumbled that he couldn't captivate an audience with humour like others did. When I suggested, he try adding a few jokes to his presentation, he replied, “If they don’t laugh, I won’t be able to continue.” He spent the entire conference in a state of gloom.

We often compare ourselves to the "social butterflies" at gatherings—those who monopolize conversations with facts

and wit. In their shadow, the less confident often feel inadequate. Yet, happiness is frequently a matter of focus. Some people brush off inconveniences, while others dwell on them.

Easy-going individuals might shrug and say, “Happiness is a state of mind.” Of course, that sentiment can be frustrating to someone who is truly suffering. I remember seeing “Jesus Never Fails” written on a church wall. Below it, a struggling CA aspirant had scribbled, “Let Him try the CA exam.”

An English newspaper once asked its readers: Who are the happiest people on earth? The four prize-winning answers were:

1. A craftsman whistling over a job well done.
2. A child completing a sandcastle on the beach.
3. A mother bathing her baby after a long, busy day.
4. A doctor saving a life through a successful surgery.

Life is neither a bed of roses nor a bed of thorns; it is a mix of both. We must learn to celebrate the good and let go of the bad. In times of distress, try to visualize a flower in full bloom or the simple joy of a puppy. Happy people generally don’t hold grudges; they cultivate many interests and do not let criticism undo them.

Happiness is internal—it is a gift you give yourself. The happiest people are not those who have the best of

everything, but those who make the best of everything they have. As Ingrid Bergman famously put it: “Happiness is good health and a bad memory.”

A Menagerie of Metaphors: Animals in Our Vocabulary

Our language is a living zoo. We use the strength, cunning, and even the perceived "laziness" of animals to describe human behaviour with a sharpness that literal words often fail to match.

The Masters of Might and Mane

- **Roared like a lion:** To speak or act with overwhelming power and authority.
- **A caged tiger:** Describing someone full of suppressed energy or frustration while confined at home.
- **Paper Tiger:** Someone who appears powerful and threatening but is actually weak and ineffective.
- **Loaded for bear:** Arriving fully prepared for a confrontation or a major challenge.

The Workhorses (and Donkeys)

- **Horse power:** To run or work with incredible speed and endurance.
- **Donkey's years:** A very long time, referring to the slow, steady pace of a donkey's life.
- **Work like a dog:** To work extremely hard and tirelessly.

- **Eager beaver:** Someone who is overly enthusiastic and hardworking.
- **A wolf in sheep's clothing:** A dangerous person pretending to be gentle or innocent.
- **Cunning as a fox:** Used for someone exceptionally sly, especially when negotiating something like interest rates.
- **Smell a rat:** To suspect that something is wrong or that a person is being dishonest.
- **A snake in the grass:** A treacherous person who pretends to be your friend.

The Thick-Skinned and the Stubborn

- **Thick-skinned like a buffalo:** Someone who is unaffected by criticism or insults.
- **Stubborn as a mule:** Describing someone who refuses to change their mind or move, no matter what.
- **Elephantine memory:** The legendary ability to never forget a face, a fact, or a slight.
- **Leopards do not change their spots:** The belief that a person's fundamental nature never truly changes.

The Indian Context: Common Expressions

- **Crocodile tears:** To show insincere or fake grief when an adversary suffers a setback.
- **Scapegoat:** To be unfairly blamed for the failures of a larger group, like a political party.

Let the cat among the pigeons: To say or do something that causes a huge disturbance or worry.

- **A bull in a China shop:** Someone who is clumsy or reckless in a delicate situation.
- **Squealed like a rat:** confesses under pressure
- **Elephant in the room:** A major problem that is obvious to everyone but is being ignored.
- **Cash cow:** A business or venture that consistently generates a lot of profit.
- **Black sheep:** A member of a family or group who is considered a disgrace or an outcast.
- **Dark horse** someone who unexpectedly wins or succeeds despite being little known.
- **Sitting Ducks** -An easy target.

Appearances are Deceptive

Trust a farmer to teach a lesson not found in a car salesman's handbook: never judge a person by his clothes. Sales staff at a showroom in Tumakuru dismissed Kempegowda RL from Ramanapalya and his friends when they came to book an SUV on Friday. The farmer returned in 30 minutes with ₹10 lakh in cash, ready to buy his dream car, win a challenge, and make a point.

One sales executive had insulted the arecanut farmer, saying he probably didn't even have "₹10 in his pocket," let alone the amount required for the car. Assuming they were mere window-shoppers, the staff dismissed them. Before leaving, Kempegowda and his friends dared the sales executives to deliver the car that day if they could bring the cash. Sceptical, the staff challenged them to try. "They thought we couldn't gather the cash, especially with banks closed," said Kempegowda, who also grows jasmine and crossandra on his farm.

The car couldn't be delivered, however. The shocked staff explained it was impossible due to government holidays on Saturday and Sunday. Angered further, Kempegowda and his friends called the police to report their mistreatment. Videos of the incident went viral the next day, showing the men refusing to leave the showroom until persuaded by police to go home.

“I have asked the sales executive and showroom authorities to provide a written apology for the insult,” Kempegowda said, adding that he’d lost interest in buying the vehicle. He threatened to protest outside the showroom on Monday.

A similar story unfolded at London Heathrow Airport, where Sudha Murthy, dressed in a simple salwar kameez, sat at the boarding gate. Observing her surroundings, she noted travelers around her conversing in Kannada and some British businesspeople discussing India’s economy. When the boarding announcement came, Sudha joined the business class queue.

Ahead of her stood a woman in an Indo-Western silk outfit with a Gucci handbag, accompanied by another woman adorned in a silk sari, diamond bangles, and pearl jewellery. When Sudha stepped away briefly to get water, the first woman accosted her, asking to see her boarding pass. Puzzled, Sudha asked why, as the woman didn’t seem to work for the airline.

“This line is for business-class passengers,” the woman replied confidently, pointing to the economy queue. Sudha, amused, asked why she should move. “Business class is over two times the price of economy,” explained the woman, with her friend adding, “Actually, it’s three times as much.” They proceeded to outline business-class privileges, from extra baggage allowance to better meals.

Sudha listened politely but then firmly replied, “But I don’t want to go there.” Frustrated, the woman whispered to her friend, “It’s hard to reason with ‘cattle class.’ Let the staff

handle her.” Ignoring them, Sudha presented her business-class boarding pass to the attendant and proceeded. She later returned to the women and asked what made them assume she couldn’t afford business class. “Class doesn’t come from money,” she said, citing Mother Teresa and Manjul Bhargava as examples. She then boarded her flight, leaving the women silenced.

Actor Amitabh Bachchan, recalling a London experience, shared how a shopkeeper assumed he couldn’t afford a £120 tie. “We were shopping when the shopkeeper dismissively mentioned the price,” he recalled. “I looked him in the eye and said, ‘Pack ten of these for me.’”

Similarly, Fakeerappa, a 70-year-old farmer in a dhoti and white shirt, was denied entry to a Bengaluru mall’s multiplex. Security told him his attire wasn’t permitted, refusing entry despite pleas from his son, Nagaraj. Only after media involvement did the mall staff relent, with the security supervisor eventually apologizing and promising such incidents wouldn’t recur.

In another instance, a man wearing simple clothes was denied entry at a Bengaluru metro station, sparking public outrage and resulting in the suspension of the security officer involved.

Decades ago, a Haryana farmer in traditional dhoti-kurta attire entered a five-star hotel and asked a staff member where the “hotel” (restaurant) was. The staff, judging his appearance, replied, “It’s very expensive.” Undeterred, the farmer ordered freely from the menu. When told his meal

would cost ₹2,500, he produced bundles of ₹2,000 notes and demanded his food promptly. After finishing everything, he commented, “With this money, I could feed ten families in my village. I know what it takes to grow this food.” The diners applauded, and the manager saw him out with a bouquet. People must respect when someone is attired in native dress. However, there are occasions when one has to dress properly, befitting the occasion. There is a case in the high court in Chennai on the dress code of Deputy CM on formal occasions.

However, appearances can occasionally offer insights into behaviour. A girl, meeting a prospective groom, declined him due to his worn-out jeans, wrinkled shirt, and flip-flops, finding it disrespectful for the occasion. “Apparel maketh half the man,” as the saying goes, and she concluded that his lack of decorum suggested he might not respect her.

These stories remind us that appearances can be deceiving, and it’s unwise to underestimate anyone based on their attire or demeanour. A Tamil proverb fittingly captures this: “Alai parthu edai podadhe”—don’t judge the depths of the ocean by the waves, and also don’t judge a person on how he looks like.

Source-News Paper reports and Social Media

Aunties Zindabad

Aunties play a unique and indispensable role in our lives. Cherished members of society, they are the unofficial first responders, always ready to step in when needed. While the term "Auntie" can sometimes carry a hint of ageism—implying a certain seniority or authority—its meaning really depends on who is doing the addressing. In Bombay, for instance, my daughter calls Neelima "Neelima Mausi," even though Neelima is in her thirties and my daughter is in her fifties. In our culture, the title is less about age and more a mark of deep-seated respect.

To truly understand their impact, one must look at the different categories of Aunties that keep our world spinning.

First, there is the Recipe Auntie. She is the ultimate lifesaver when a husband demands a special dish on short notice. When I first got married, we lived next door to Saraswathi Auntie. One day, my wife, Mithila, attempted to make pal kozhakattai (milk modaks) for a special occasion. She ended up with a pot of milk and zero kozhakattais. As she sat there crestfallen, I assured her things would work out. Sure enough, Saraswathi Auntie appeared at our door with a tray full of perfect modaks. Mithila was so grateful she nearly prostrated before her. From that day on, the quality of food in our house improved remarkably. I suspected a "hidden force" behind this culinary shift and silently congratulated myself on my foresight.

Then there is Malu Auntie, our Ritual Specialist. Now in her sixties, she is a walking encyclopedia of festivals and traditions. Her expertise is in high demand for Varalakshmi Vratam and Mavilakku on Puratasi Saturdays. During weddings, she provides minute-by-minute instructions on sampradaya (customs), ensuring the bride's family navigates the complex rituals without causing a single bit of offense.

We also have the Home Remedy Aunties, the undisputed experts in paediatric care. They possess a magical pharmacy of sukku (dry ginger), milagu (pepper), and thippili (long pepper) mixed with honey, that works wonders for a cough. They have a concoction for everything—from vasambu (sweet flag) and jathikai (nutmeg) to keep a child's spirits up after a head bath, to Mudakathan uthappam for stomach issues. The latter once saved me from the dreaded agony of an endoscopy. They truly have a cure for every ailment and every age group.

Of course, the list goes on. There is the Good Neighbour Auntie who safeguards your spare key, watches your toddler for an hour, and collects your couriers. In any given apartment complex, you'll find the Music Auntie, the Tuition Auntie, and the Counsellor Auntie, all providing a sense of safety and convenience. Some of the more sensitive ones, however, prefer the children address them as "Mrs." followed by their name—a modern boundary in a traditional world.

But for me, Pooja Auntie and Ranju Auntie—both in their early thirties—are the most vital. They are the ones who

manage the engine of our household chores. On the days they take off for fasting or festivals, our world grinds to a halt. We find ourselves desperately dependent on Manjunath Uncle for areca plates and "Swiggy Uncle" for our dinner.

Now you see why I say that Aunties are the backbone of our lives. They aren't just neighbours; they are an invaluable institution.

“Beggars do have a Choice”

Don't be surprised by the title. It is not a joke or satire but a reality. It is a registered company for profit operating in Varanasi. Funding is not by alms but by investment. Chandra Misra, a journalist from Odissa, studying job losses due to COVID, came up with the idea of establishing Beggar Corporation of India to provide job opportunities for beggars. A local NGO collaborated with the project. Many beggars started approaching the organization. Rajni, an intelligent girl, was one of them. Over a period of time, she brought in groups. The initial funding was around 5.7 lakhs by different people [returned now]. Today, over 2000 people are associated with the project and they make bags, stoles, curtains, wall hangings, cushion sheets, etc. Their product line was imaginatively branded as “Bagful of Dreams”, followed by “Enchanted Shirt”. They are specializing in patchwork clothing made from upcycled Banarasi silk and cotton waste. Their current annual turnover is Rs 3.4 crores with an ambitious target of Rs 15 crores in 2024-2025. “Beggars Corporation received Best Social Impact Award in a contest held in collaboration with Start Up India”. Understand that they have launched SAR, the saree with social impact. Incidentally, they refuse funding from the government and venture capitalists. Where have the beggars come from? This is what Lord Macaulay said on 2-2-1885: “I have travelled across the length and breadth of India and

have not seen one person who is a beggar and who is a thief. I have seen such moral values, people of such caliber that I do not think that we would ever conquer this country. We should break the backbone of this country, their strong cultural heritage, by replacing their education system. Introduce English and make them feel that those who do not know English are second-class citizens". Here we are today with the biggest beggar population in the world.

Begging is a byproduct of extreme poverty, social helplessness, unavailability of work, and of course, an indifferent attitude to work. There are estimated 18 million street children trying to find shelter under bridges, railway stations, parks, etc. Many of them are kidnapped, brutalized, tortured, and maimed so that they have no other option than to beg. Many find an honourable way of selling titbits, fruits, coconut pieces, etc., at traffic signals. Bad company drives some of them to pickpocketing.

There are, however, strange as well as moving stories. For want of space, I am highlighting a few of them. Bharat Jain begs at Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus and Azad Maidan in Mumbai. He owns two flats besides investing in two shops in Thane. He resides in Parel, and his children attended convent school, and other members of his family operate a stationery shop. Still, he likes to beg.

I recall an incident when my American boss called me and said, "My friend's son has turned into a hippie and has come to Goa with a lot of money. Please meet him and help him so that he does not come to grief." With great difficulty, I located

him on a beach wearing only a loincloth and begging. There was a good collection in his bowl. In his early thirties, he explained that he has experienced everything in life and, fed up, he has started begging and distributing to the poor. Doing so, he said that he was at peace with himself. His shack was equipped like a five-star hotel, and even while we were talking, he was surrounded by street children. He liked begging ~ maybe a way of settling scores with the wayward life he led.

On the most repulsive and disgusting side, a couple working in an MNC engaged a nanny to look after their two-year-old son when they went to office. Once, the lady returned all of a sudden, and she found the nanny watching TV, but the child was not there. On intense questioning and threat, she confessed that she had given her son on hire for Rs. 100/day to a beggar woman. They would sedate the boy and take him on the begging mission. The couple then understood why the boy was not active and sleeping all the time.

On the other hand, more than 300 beggars from Prayagraj joined hands and donated Rs. 4 lakhs for construction of Ayodhya Mandhir. An 85-year-old rag picker insisted on donating Rs. 20, and she was an invitee for the inaugural ceremony.

In conclusion, one can say that the Corporation is teaching them to fish instead of giving them fish. Thereby, they are turning beggars from Dharmajeevi to Karmajeevi, a noble and laudable service. Details of how to invest are provided on their website.

Source-News paper reports and social media

Birthday Musings: Hits & Misses

I have experienced 88 winters and 88 summers. As I prepare to face my 89th, I cannot help but reflect on the experiences that shaped me. Being the eldest of ten children—with an equal number of brothers and sisters—adulthood arrived early, and it was tough. My father, who rose from a schoolteacher to the Superintendent of a Borstal school, was a man of impeccable character and unquestionable integrity. He set the standard I sought to follow.

I began my career as an analytical assistant, but, realizing that growth there was painfully slow, I transitioned to the private sector. Due to heavy family responsibilities, I married at 33 and was soon blessed with two daughters. The adage “*Manaivi amaivadhellam Iraivan alitha varam*”—a good wife is a gift from God—found its true meaning in Mythili. She sacrificed many comforts for our family, managing the household with such excellence that I could focus entirely on my professional duties. I eventually rose to become VP Commercial of a leading K.K. Birla Group company.

In 1997, feeling a sense of diminishing utility, I opted for retirement, much to the chagrin of my management. To my surprise, retirement brought an influx of consultancy offers. These years were thrilling, often taking me into unfamiliar territories. I recall racing in a press car from Bangalore to Ahmedabad during the height of the Rajkumar abduction crisis, just to keep an appointment with top-tier leadership. I

faced life-threatening pressure in the field and travelled through Punjab at the height of the insurgency—moments that tested my resolve.

Accomplishments I Cherish:

- **The Green Legacy:** I oversaw the planting of over 100,000 trees across a 1,200-acre factory complex, including a 25-acre man-made forest of native species. This is my footprint in the sands of time.
- **Mentorship:** I served as core faculty for national and international programs, training over 1,000 marketing personnel.
- **Global Impact:** I assisted the governments of Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Tanzania in developing strategic plans for the UN and the World Bank on increasing fertiliser consumption.
- **The Pioneer:** I built the first house in a 25-acre layout on Chennai's East Coast Road. Today, that layout boasts 500 homes. My street was briefly named after me, a gesture changed only at my mother's humble request.
- **Devotion:** I cared for Mythili during her illness as if she were a child. To her, I was a best friend, philosopher, and guide.

Reflections & Regrets:

My life has not been without shadows. I regret never sitting for the Civil Services exam. In my zeal to help others, I lost some good friends. I carry the weight of two failed marriages

in the family—one due to interference, another due to a misjudgment of character—though I am heartened to see both women now finding their way. Most significantly, I regret the smoking habit that escalated during the high-stress public issues of the early 90s. My ego ignored my body's warning signals, leading to a massive heart attack in 1995. Yet, that health crisis was a blessing in disguise; it forced me to quit smoking and granted me these extra decades. Today, though I rely on occasional oxygen and a wheelchair for caution, I remain in full possession of my faculties. I enjoy the lively banter of my fellow travelers, sharing "titbits" and stories. For how much longer? That is a mystery no one can unravel.

Clean Windows & Samosas: Life's Unexpected Wisdom

Quotable Quotes of Immense Wisdom

Avoid traffic jam in the minds affecting peace and tranquility. The mind is like the tongue; it drifts towards the negative areas of our life. It schemes to uproot the problems of our life. It is not the happy people who are grateful, but the grateful people who are happy. Worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow but robs today of its joy.

A couple moved into an apartment adjoining an independent house. One day the wife told her husband, "Look at our neighbour —she is hanging dirty clothes". Next day, when she saw through the window, she exclaimed, "our neighbour should have heard my comments. Look how clean the clothes are." The husband quietly replied, "I cleaned our windows and that is why the clothes are looking clean and better." Look at yourself before you comment on others.

Sword and words have the same alphabets and can cause equal damage if not handled properly. Mutual funds and relationships have one thing in common. We must invest in both before we can withdraw.

In order to practice forgiveness, separate the incident from the person. Blame the cause and not individuals. One fellow shit in the field, turned back and said, "Disgusting". Can't believe something obnoxious and nasty could come from

me.” The shit gained voice and replied, “yesterday evening I was a delicious Samosa —look at what a few hours of association with you has brought me to this stage.” A person is judged by the company he keeps.

Watch your thoughts —thoughts are expressed in words~ words turn into actions —actions form into habits~ habits fashion your character —character decides your destiny. The moral: train your thoughts.

Jealousy vs envy. Jealousy is when you compare and want to be like him or excel. Envy – competitive, go to any extent to spoil his progress. Compete with yourself —understand your potential, your capacity, and certainly your limitations.

Don’t bite, but certainly hiss if you are offended.

Ice cream and candle . Enjoy the ice cream before it melts. Candle also melts to provide light to others. Where are you in the ice cream- candle spectrum? **Courtesy MS [Gaur Gopal Das and Ruskin Bond etc].**

Stranger than Fiction

Hitler Waits—for a Change

The Indian marathoner who kept Adolf Hitler waiting at the 1936 Berlin Olympics

In a memorable incident, an Indian marathon runner, C.S.A. Swami, became famous for inadvertently keeping Adolf Hitler waiting during the 1936 Berlin Olympics. At just 22 years old, Swami was India's youngest participant in the Berlin Summer Games and was determined to finish the marathon despite lagging far behind the leaders. Japan's Kitei Son won the marathon with a time of 2 hours, 29 minutes, and 19.2 seconds, while Swami completed it in 3 hours, 10 minutes, and 44 seconds—nearly an hour later. The organizers breathed a sigh of relief when the determined Indian runner finally crossed the finish line, allowing the delayed closing ceremony to commence. Swami's resilience, though initially unnoticed, became a legendary tale of Olympic spirit.

Kumbakarna Among Animals

Koalas Sleep Duration: Up to 22 hours a day Koalas have a diet consisting mainly of eucalyptus leaves, which are low in nutrients and high in fiber. To digest this challenging diet, koalas conserve energy by sleeping extensively. Their prolonged sleep allows them to manage their limited energy supply and aids in the slow digestion process. It is a native of

Australia and herbivorous. They are wild animals and have sharp claws and teeth.

Don't underestimate this vegetarian.

Silencing the Dogs How Biscuits Helped Security Forces in the Operation to Eliminate a Lashkar-e-Taiba Commander in Srinagar

During an anti-terror operation that led to the elimination of a Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) commander in Jammu and Kashmir, security forces found an unlikely tool in biscuits. Senior officials revealed that these simple snacks played a key role in overcoming a major obstacle during the mission to apprehend Usman, who was armed with an AK-47 pistol. The challenge? Stray dogs. The officials used biscuits to distract the dogs, preventing them from alerting the terrorist.

Get me a bride or pay for it

A matrimonial services provider based in Koramangala, Bengaluru, has been ordered by a consumer court to refund Rs 30,000 and pay an additional Rs 30,000 as compensation after failing to deliver any potential matches within the promised time frame. The case highlights issues of unfulfilled promises in the matchmaking industry, as reported by TOI. Vijay Kumar, a resident of M.S. Nagar, sought assistance in finding a suitable bride for his son, Balaji. He came across advertisements for Dil Mil Matrimony on social media, which promised matchmaking services. On March 17, 2024, Kumar visited the company's office, submitted the necessary documents, and paid Rs 30,000, receiving a receipt in return. The company assured him it would send potential matches

within 45 days. However, the court confirmed that no profiles were ever sent, deeming this a clear deficiency in service. The commission ordered the company to refund Kumar Rs 30,000, along with 6% interest from the payment date. Additionally, it mandated payments of Rs 20,000 for deficiency in service, Rs 5,000 for mental anguish, and Rs 5,000 for legal costs, all due within 45 days of the order

Fly Fly go away

Police in Jabalpur have arrested 19-year-old Dharam Thakur for the murder of his uncle, Manoj Thakur. The victim was found dead in a field following a dispute over money. Although Dharam was initially questioned, there was no evidence linking him to the crime, and no apparent motive was established. Nothing was missing from the scene, and there were no signs of robbery. During a second round of questioning, Dharam was visibly bothered by swarms of flies. This unusual reaction piqued the inspector's curiosity and led to suspicions. Dharam's shirt was sent for forensic analysis, revealing bloodstains invisible to the naked eye that had attracted the flies. Confronted with the evidence, Dharam confessed to the crime.

Source-News paper reports and social media

Ethics, Etiquette, and Encroachment

This article is brief, as it would be poor etiquette to encroach upon your precious time.

Ethics

Ethics is what one does when no one is watching. A classic example is failing to collect dog waste simply because there are no witnesses. Ethical lapses often occur under the guise of hospitality or entitlement: guests who help themselves to more than their fair share of toiletries, or party-goers who hoard their favourite snacks.

In the professional world, these lapses turn into "Expense Statement Aristocracy." Consider the colleague charged for pocketing a hotel bathrobe, or the executives who sneak personal dry cleaning onto the company tab. We could list hundreds of examples of unethical behaviour, but we must never forget: eventually, someone is always watching.

Etiquette

Etiquette is defined as polite and correct behaviour—with the emphasis on "correct."

It is the social glue that prevents friction.

Poor etiquette includes:

- Banging a door when leaving a room.
- Speaking loudly while someone else is on the phone.
- Browsing messages while being spoken to.
- Usurping both armrests on a flight.
- Leaving your own car in the garage to hitch a free ride with a neighbour.
- Taking an age to finish a meal while others wait for you to rise; these are the "ruminating cows" of the dinner table.
- Failing to offer a simple "thank you" to a neighbour who has safely kept your house keys while you travelled.

Encroachment

Encroachment is an unnecessary intrusion into someone else's territory. Physically, this looks like spreading personal belongings into common apartment corridors or parking in someone else's reserved spot the moment they leave.

Mentally and socially, it often takes the form of unsolicited advice—particularly regarding grandchildren. You've already raised your children; why not grant the next generation the space to navigate theirs in these changing times? Perhaps the most domestic form of encroachment involves men who enter a woman's kitchen to "tidy up." Often, this isn't a gesture of help, but a silent critique of how the kitchen is run. Remember: she doesn't interfere with your bathroom or the way you file your documents! Our traits define our pedigree. If we teach our children these finer aspects of life, we define the very culture of our nation.

Four Decades of Bliss: Practical Lessons from a 40-Year Relationship

Recently, there has been a distressing rise in reports of domestic tragedies—murders and breakdowns linked to live-in relationships, doubts over fidelity, and property disputes. Simultaneously, social media is flooded with marriage advice, ranging from the wisdom of Chanakya and the Bhagavad Gita to the teachings of popular modern monks. Having enjoyed an enviable marital bliss for over forty years, and having been inspired by several seniors who have celebrated their Golden Jubilees, I felt compelled to join the conversation.

A Study in Contrasts

My late wife, Mithila, and I were complete opposites in taste and disposition. I am an extrovert; she was an introvert. I relate easily to anyone, while she was highly selective. I move with confidence; she was often diffident. The one thing we shared was a love for reading, though even there, our tastes diverged. She leaned toward the historical and romantic—Jane Austen, Margaret Mitchell, and Emily Brontë. I preferred the narratives of A.J. Cronin, Alexandre Dumas, and Somerset Maugham. She enjoyed television serials that I couldn't stand. Yet, we were both deeply religious and functioned more as partners and friends than just husband

and wife. What truly bound us together was an enduring intellectual companionship. Enough of my puranam. Let me share some practical tips on how to build a happy married life—no pontification, just real-world experience.

1. **The Power of Equality:** First and foremost is the acknowledgment that both partners are equals. In a modern home, there is no such thing as "man's work" or "woman's work." It is a partnership of shared responsibilities.
2. **Radical Authenticity:** Be your authentic self from day one. Don't try to project a false image to impress your partner; a mask is unsustainable in the long term.
3. **The Balance Sheet Approach:** View your partner like a balance sheet, filled with both assets and liabilities. Everyone carries some emotional baggage—the secret to a long marriage is to acknowledge it, ignore the negatives, and move forward together.
4. **Navigating the In-Law Dynamic:** In-laws can be a major point of friction early on. These issues must be discussed openly and resolved. The old dismissal of "They are old—how much longer will they be around?" no longer applies, as life expectancy has improved significantly. Respect their presence, but set clear boundaries together.
5. **Unified Parenting:** Couples often clash over child-rearing. Rule number one: Never interrupt when one parent is disciplining a child. Discuss your disagreements in private. I have seen too many cases

where one parent undermines the other, inadvertently painting them as the "villain."

6. **Shared Financial Literacy** Financial management and future planning should be a joint venture. It is a mistake to leave the "money talk" solely to the man. Both partners must understand the family's economic health.
7. **Communication is the "Hero":** Lack of communication is the true villain in most breakups. Men, in particular, are often reluctant to face domestic issues head-on. For example, if the domestic help is absent, it shouldn't be dismissed as "the woman's problem"—it is a shared household challenge that requires a shared solution.
8. **The "Tea-Time" Connection:** Find common interests and support each other's growth. This doesn't require grand gestures—sometimes it's as simple as sharing a cup of tea. I deeply admire young couples who set aside thirty minutes every day just to sip tea, talk, and laugh together.
9. **Respecting Personal Space:** When it comes to vacations, respect differing styles. If the man wants to explore and the woman wants to relax with a book or a video, allow for that space. You don't have to be attached at the hip to be happy.
10. **Don't Ignore the Physical:** Lastly, never underestimate the importance of personal grooming and physical intimacy. These biological and emotional needs are vital to maintaining a vibrant connection.

In a recent seminar on happiness, a professor suggested, "Why not start by telling your wife she looks beautiful first thing in the morning?" One participant humorously replied, "Maybe not in the morning... let's try the evening!"

Humour aside, I write this because, while our material comforts have increased, emotional intimacy seems to be waning. I hope these reflections help you find the "sweet corn soup" in your own relationship.

From Flower Strings to Gold Wings

Mallika rushed into our house, beaming from ear to ear and brimming with excitement. "Amma, Amma!" she called out. I was practically invisible to her, despite being right there in the room. Turning her back to me, she pulled a small pouch from her blouse and handed it to my daughter. Inside were a pair of gleaming jhumkis—traditional bell-shaped earrings—that she had just purchased for her five-year-old daughter. "So, your flower-stringing business went well this wedding season?" my daughter asked. "Extremely well," Mallika replied, her smile widening. She supplies our house with garlands every Thursday. "I worked four hours a day, starting at 3:00 AM, while my drunken husband remained blissfully unaware of my efforts." Mallika buys flowers from the wholesale market, strings them into chendu and mala, and supplies them to decorators. She began this work when her daughter was just a year old. Today, she has accumulated 30 grams of gold. Her ambition is to reach 80 grams by the time her daughter reaches marriageable age.

Then there was Venkatramani, who cooked for us while my wife, Mithila, was unwell. His only condition for employment was twenty days of leave per year to serve at five major temple festivals. There, he worked in a team preparing mass meals for devotees. After each four-day trip, he earned enough to buy five grams of gold for his sixteen-year-old daughter. He

hopes to have saved 100 grams by the time she marries her cousin in a few years. Pooja, our maidservant in her early thirties, manages a similar feat. She works in five households and carefully hides her true income from her husband. Every month, she leaves ₹5,000 with my daughter for safekeeping; she has saved ₹1,50,000 in just two years. Recently, she borrowed an additional ₹20,000 to buy gold for her daughter. It was Pooja's quiet determination that inspired me to write this article.

Does this lure of gold exist only among the poor? Not at all. Middle-class families treat gold as insurance, often participating in monthly schemes with reputed jewellers as a hedge against financial upheaval. The wealthy invest in bars, while the middle class favours jewellery and coins. For the poor, however, gold is the primary—and often only—vessel for their wealth. In our patriarchal history, gold was often given to daughters as a form of "Stridhana"—compensation for the denial of property rights and a source of independent financial security. It is considered auspicious, a status symbol, and a safety net. Interestingly, even the men have succumbed to the lure; fifty years ago, a man might only wear a ring, but today, gold chains and bracelets are common accessories.

On a national level, India is a titan. Officially, we are among the top ten countries for gold reserves, holding 840 tons. We have recently shifted 60% of these reserves back to domestic vaults, signaling a move toward total internal storage. But hold your breath—the official numbers pale in comparison to the "private" reserve. Reliable estimates suggest that Indian households collectively hold a staggering 27,000 tons of

gold—approximately 11% of the world's total. This is despite centuries of looting by various invaders. In his book *A Forgotten Empire*, Robert Sewell recounts the grandeur of the Vijayanagar Empire. Portuguese travellers described women of that era as having "hunchbacks" from the sheer weight of the jewellery they wore. One wonders where all that ancient gold went. Perhaps it never truly left. Today, women like Mallika and Pooja are slowly but surely rebuilding the unofficial reserves of this country. Hats off to them! It leads one to wonder: Is India truly a poor country, or is it a rich country full of people who choose to wear their wealth?

KAL, AAJ, AUR KAL: Three Generations of Lifestyle Changes

Having crossed eight decades and now inching toward becoming a nonagenarian, I cannot help but marvel at the lifestyle changes I have witnessed over the last three generations. My observations relate primarily to the middle class—the group to which I belong and the one I know best.

The Forties to the Sixties: Simplicity and Sacred Rituals

In those decades, life was simple, unostentatious, and deeply family-oriented. A rural flavour permeated every activity, from religious beliefs to a strict adherence to rituals. Except for archakas, pundits, and devout Brahmins, few men sported beards, and moustaches were confined to specific communities. Food consisted of fibre-rich millets, with rice reserved as a staple for the higher classes. Walking or cycling was the only mode of transport. Meagre incomes enforced a natural fiscal discipline.

Women worked incredibly hard; though their responsibilities were centred on the kitchen, they managed to serve delectable, mouth-watering varieties using nothing more than firewood or kerosene stoves—no grinders or blenders in sight. To them, cooking was an art and a passion. Beyond the kitchen, they practiced music, drew artistic kolams, and played traditional games like pallanguzhi and adupuli.

Family planning was unknown; children were raised without the modern anxieties of "upbringing." We slept as a community on bedsheets spread across the hall, leaving the "camera room" as the only private sanctuary for newly married couples. Integrity was paramount—the means were always as important as the end.

The Seventies and Eighties: The Dawn of Gadgets

Slowly, gas connections, TVs, and wet grinders appeared. These relieved women from the back-breaking labour of manual grinding and the sting of wood smoke. As educational opportunities expanded, so did the horizon of the middle class. Movies like *Bhama Vijayam* and *Samsaram Adhu Minsaram* left a lasting impression; they remain enjoyable even today. This era saw women entering the workforce as teachers and telephone operators. This "double income" facilitated the purchase of household gadgets and the occasional family outing. The introduction of credit cards meant people no longer had to wait for payday to shop. Dress materials, once purchased only for Deepavali or Pongal, became year-round acquisitions. Love marriages began to emerge, and long-held superstitions finally came under intense scrutiny.

Today: The Era of Convenience and Conflict

Today, the situation is unrecognizable. High salaries have facilitated a better quality of living, but at a cost. Eating out is now the norm; our maid recently remarked that ours is one of the few houses where cooking is still done on weekends. If there is a long weekend, getting out of Bangalore is a trial,

with cars lined up bumper-to-bumper for miles. Social norms have shifted dramatically. "Living-in" is no longer a secret. I know two young men currently living with their girlfriends, with their parents' full knowledge—one a Tamil Brahmin engaged to an Odia girl, the other still undecided about his Punjabi partner. Both are well-placed and earning extremely well. However, the culture has also taken a harsher turn.

Cinema has become violent, and romance on screen is often too "close for comfort," designed for titillation rather than the blushing, "eye-contact" romance of Thillana Mohanambal.

The Modern Trade-off

Integrity, it seems, is now found only in the dictionary. Admission to prestigious institutions has become a battle of "marks, money, and muscle power." Children are pampered to such an extent that they have little to look forward to when they begin earning. I recently watched a friend jocularly tell his son to "have fun" at a party, while subjecting his daughter to a litany of advice and "telephone tracking." While I endorsed the advice to the daughter, I voiced my concern about the message sent to the son. Even traditional marriages have introduced kuthu pattu, with movements that would have been unthinkable in my youth.

As seniors, we are often silent spectators to this "work-life imbalance." It saddens me to visit a hospital and see men and women in their late thirties thronging the cardiologist's office, while the orthopaedist laughs all the way to the bank. To give the current generation credit, they are resilient; they

navigate immense competitive pressure in a way we never had to. But as the world moves faster, I cannot help but look back at the contentment of the past, where fate was accepted as a fact of life, and a 15 km bullock cart journey to a temple was a cherished, soul-deep memory.

Marital Permutations: From Seven Steps to Living Apart

Recently, I attended the 60th wedding anniversary of my friend, Thiruvengadam. At 92, he is muscular and rambling; his wife, 83, is frail and precise. They are poles apart. He rises at 4 AM, clattering about the house, unmindful of her need for rest after a day of managing the home. For fifty years, he ruled the roost, and she silently bore it. Today, age has forced him into the backseat of their arguments. Yet, the common denominator remains: five doting children and a deep, unexpressed concern for one another. This is a generation that is slowly vanishing.

In contrast, today's marital landscape is a complex map of new "permutations." We hear of live-in relationships, once a scandal, now a common choice for young professionals. They claim a need for "time to understand each other" or to "pool resources." Yet, the courts are filled with the debris of these arrangements falling apart. Beyond testing "bedroom behaviour"—which traditional marriages leave to faith—I find little merit in bypassing the sanctity of the Saptapadi.

Then there is the Silent Marriage. Here, husband and wife live under one roof like ghosts. They don't share a bed or a conversation. They speak to their children on separate phone calls, never on speakerphone. Whether due to infidelity or meddling in-laws, they stay together only for fear of social

ostracism. To me, these marriages are "brain-dead," kept alive only by the artificial life support of financial or social dependence. Even the silver-haired are not exempt.

Grey divorce has become a buzzword, seen in the high-profile separations of Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, and even our own A.R. Rahman. Whether driven by a late-life desire for independence or the lure of alimony, it proves that even decades of shared history can be rewritten.

Finally, we have Living Apart Together (LAT). Couples maintain their emotional bond but live in separate homes to protect their "individual identity." They meet at intervals to keep the chemistry alive, often sacrificing the pleasure of parenthood until it is too late. I look back at the old couple celebrating sixty years. Whether it is the Hindu Saptapadi, the Christian vow of fidelity until death, or the Muslim promise of mutual respect, these traditional anchors seem to be loosening. In this era of "volcanic" change, one wonders: have these ancient vows lost their relevance, or are we simply forgetting how to take those seven steps together?

Mischievous Eyes and A 1000-Watt Smile

The Silent Introduction

Shortly after we married and set up our family, I took my wife, Mythili, and my mother to a Sardarji friend's house. I introduced them to the Sardarini and her mother-in-law, told them I'd be back in a minute, and promptly disappeared for half an hour. What unfolded was a comedy of errors. The Sardarinis knew only Hindi, while my mother and Mythili spoke only English and Tamil. The two groups could only smile at each other at regular intervals, unable to converse. Every time the Sardarini brought out laddus, my mother would refuse with a gesture. Thinking she simply didn't like laddus, they brought out other sweets, then dry fruits—all met with the same frantic refusal! Later, Mythili tried to suppress her laughter as my mother warned her: “Your husband has purposely done this to have fun at our expense. Be careful with this fellow.” I teased my mother that it was an experiment to see her handle a situation beyond her control—since within the boundaries of Tamil Nadu, she was an absolute tyrant!

The Hidden Force

To encourage Mythili, I helped her enroll in a B.Ed. course at the prestigious St. Ann's College. I assisted with her homework, case studies, and projects, as I was in familiar

territory compared to the usual domestic duties. Bread, biscuits, and fruits became our staple food while she studied. Mythili passed with flying colours. When the principal later scolded a younger student for her performance compared to Mythili, the girl dejectedly replied, "There is a hidden force behind Mythili Madam's performance! Had I known, I would have joined the course after marriage, too."

The Film Director's Approval

Years later, my company planned a 30-minute film on farmer education. I suggested the Godavari area, where the hit movie *Jeevan Jyoti* had been filmed. A director from the film institute arrived in Hyderabad to scout locations and cast the leads. One evening, he called me to his hotel to approve the hero and heroine. I told Mythili I'd be back in an hour, but it took three. The director wanted to demonstrate their skills, explaining that the hero should be "determined" and the heroine "mischievous." When I finally returned, Mythili asked, "So, how are the hero and heroine?" Still preoccupied, I replied, "The hero is a robust fellow, and the heroine certainly has mischievous eyes." She shot back, "I married a salesman, and now I find him inching his way into films—I'm telling your father!" She didn't know that an astrologer once told me that if Planet Venus had moved a few degrees in my horoscope, I would have been a great actor. Later, at the preview screening, Mythili was flabbergasted by the reverence the crew showed me. Seeing the director's admiration, a newfound pride sparkled in her eyes.

The Dancing Pujari

On Children's Day, we organized a fancy dress competition for adults, with children as the judges. I dressed as a Sardarji and practiced the Bhangra vigorously under the guidance of a friend. I decided to play a Sardar, while the Sardar was turned into a Vaishnavite pujari, wearing full gear but adding a saffron dhoti, a poonal (sacred thread), and a silver tumbler of tulasi water. The program was a success, though the Sardar "exceeded my brief" by offering tulasi teertham to the child judges, which the audience jokingly shouted was "bribing the judges." From then on, whenever I wanted a special dish at home, I'd start a Bhangra dance until Mythili would scold me: "Don't do all this drama—I'll make it even without the dance!"

The Ethiopian "Gopis"

At 58, I took a consultancy assignment in Ethiopia. Mythili was terrified of the remote regions and the food, but I managed to take her to Wondo Genet, famous for its natural hot springs. I sent her to the women's section and waited outside. Within a minute, she came screaming out, clutching her saree in horror. She had seen the local women enjoying their bath in their "birthday suits"! Not only that, they had shouted, "Welcome, Indian!" and volunteered to help her undress. I tried to reassure her, jokingly asking her to imagine herself as a Gopi bathing with others. She was furious at my ill-timed joke until our resourceful driver, Malcolm, told the locals she was the Indian Ambassador's wife. Only then did

she reluctantly go back in—though she bathed with her clothes on!

The 1000-Watt Repartee

We eventually moved to our beach house in Uthandi. It was a secluded spot where almond flowers sneaked through the kitchen windows, and snakes were our frequent companions. One day, after a cobra "shook its head" at our watchman (a promise not to return, he claimed!), I was reading the newspaper. I saw a note by journalist Karan Thapar about meeting actress Madhuri Dixit. He wrote, "When she opened the door, a 1000-watt smile exploded in my face." I rushed to Mythili, read it aloud, and asked, "What do you understand from this?" Without batting an eyelid, she said, "It shows that you are also in M.F. Husain's age category!" (Husain was famously obsessed with Madhuri). It was a repartee par excellence. We both had a hearty laugh. Mythili had completed her transformation from a shy, introverted girl to a woman with a sharp, beautiful sense of humour. And I like to think I had a little something to do with that.

Motherhood Beyond Birth

Parvathi, or Paru as she was fondly known, was a girl of sixteen with a face that mirrored the serenity of the goddess Thayar. With her curly hair, a sharp nose highlighted by a black tilak, and eyes deepened by kajal, her sweet smile was her constant companion. Naturally maternal and playful, she was the neighborhood's favorite caretaker. Parents would happily entrust their little ones to her whenever they went to a movie or a party. While her own parents urged her to "act her age," Paru was happiest when surrounded by children. As she completed her post-graduation, suitors began to circle. Fearing for her safety, her parents arranged a match with Venu—a bright, handsome young man. Their wedding was a grand, celestial affair. In fact, the children Paru had spent years mothering staged a playful protest, refusing to let the groom sit next to her until they were coaxed away. As the couple finally held hands, it felt like a union blessed by the heavens. In the quiet of their nuptial room, Venu asked Paru what she desired as a wedding gift. Without a moment's hesitation, she replied, "I want to be a mother." Surprised but moved by her sincerity, Venu felt a deep sense of joy. However, as the years passed, the joy faded. Each month brought the silent heartbreak of a failed cycle. The whispers began—well-meaning but nosy relatives and gossiping neighbours turned her "childlessness" into a public tragedy. Paru's sunny disposition soured; her smile was replaced by a permanent frown. They tried everything: IVF, Ayurveda,

homeopathy, and long pilgrimages to the Garbarakshambika Temple. Nothing worked. The social tide turned against her.

Neighbours who once begged her to watch their children now kept them at a distance. The breaking point came on Krishna Jayanthi. Paru had been helping her neighbour, Jaya Rao, care for her new grandson. But that morning, she overheard Jaya Rao's mother-in-law scolding her daughter-in-law: "I've told you a hundred times not to let that childless girl near the baby! Now the boy has a fever. This is what happens when you don't listen to those with experience." Stung by the cruelty, Paru ran home in tears. She prostrated before her decorated Krishna idol, sobbing and questioning her fate. In her distress, she wandered to a nearby maidan, where a pundit was delivering a discourse on the life of Lord Krishna. His words pierced through her grief: "Sri Krishna was born to Devaki," the pundit said, "but it was Yashoda who raised him. It was not the birth mother, but the foster mother, who witnessed the Lord's divine leelas. Motherhood is more than biology. There are biological mothers who cannot stand the sight of another's child—can they truly be called mothers? Go to the orphanages; find the children who have no one. Being childless is not an end; it is the beginning of a vast, beautiful relationship with the world's children." Paru rushed back to her altar, but this time, her tears were of relief. "What a beautiful truth You have revealed to me," she whispered. She realized that while she might not be a Devaki, she was destined to be a Yashoda. Her heart, once closed by bitterness, opened wide to a new kind of happiness—one that didn't require a biological bond, but a soulful one.

My Friend Ganesha: A Second Childhood

Once we celebrate Ganesh Chaturthi, we believe that all our hurdles have been swept away. Ganesha is a deity with a friendly countenance and a remarkably carefree nature. He is a god who truly enjoys his food, as content with a handful of simple puffed rice as he is with a plate of rich, sweet modaks. While he may not appear particularly fitness-conscious himself, he encourages health in his devotees by taking up residence under the peepal tree—quietly watching as we walk around him 108 times. Ganesha is a master of versatility. He comes in every imaginable size, from a tiny figure small enough to fit on a ring to the grand, towering Lalbaugcha Raja of Mumbai. He is never particular about his abode; he resides with equal comfort on a dusty street corner or within the golden walls of the Siddhivinayaka Temple. He is, above all, accessible to everyone, regardless of status, age, or wealth. Known for his wit, Ganesha famously won a coveted fruit in a divine competition by simply circling his parents three times, while his brother Karthikeya spent days flying around the world on his peacock. This story is a timeless reminder of his ability to "think outside the box" and his deep devotion. Paradoxically, though he is a bachelor, those whose marriages are delayed often seek his blessings under the shade of the peepal tree. Nothing escapes his attention, for he is omnipresent. In our rituals, he is often represented by a

simple, humble idol made of turmeric powder—a reminder that divinity exists in the most basic elements. He has always been a favourite of children, who see him not as a fearsome authority, but as a playful friend. Now, in my "second childhood," I too have come to believe that he is exactly that: a constant, comforting friend.

Of Elephant Bondage and Human Greed

Two years ago, in the Chamarajanagar district, a wild elephant wandered into a hotel, sending the staff scrambling for cover. Fortunately, no property was damaged and no lives were lost. Despite their terror, the staff remained calm enough to raise their voices and drive the stray giant back toward its herd. Such incidents are becoming tragically common, as deforestation and the blockage of traditional migration routes force these animals into human territory. Yet, for most of us, the idea of harming an elephant is unthinkable; a deep, ancient affinity has bound humans and elephants together for centuries.

Elephants have been our companions, our allies in ancient warfare, and enduring symbols of discipline. There is something profoundly humbling about watching a massive creature obey the gentle commands of a mahout. In India, they are revered as deities; in Africa, they are respected as kings. However, recent news from Namibia has shocked the conscience of the world: due to a severe drought, hundreds of elephants are slated for slaughter, their meat to be distributed to the hungry. Tragically, the global community seems poised to remain a mute spectator to this catastrophe. One of the most remarkable traits we share with elephants is the capacity for complex emotion. Led by a wise matriarch, elephant herds exhibit a degree of compassion and

cooperation that mirrors the best of human families. They are known to mourn their dead, standing vigil over a carcass in a display of grief that is hauntingly familiar to our own.

Their intelligence is equally legendary. At Mfuwe Lodge in Zambia, wild elephants have maintained a "mango route" for decades. Every year, between October and December, they calmly walk through the hotel lobby and corridors to reach a nearby wild mango tree, much to the delight of the guests. They remember the path; they understand the space is safe.

I have felt this connection personally at the Pinnewala Elephant Orphanage in Sri Lanka. Established in 1975 to rescue the injured and orphaned, it is a sanctuary of second chances. I once had the opportunity to play with a calf there and was even allowed to feed it milk from a large bottle—an experience that stays with me to this day. Thankfully, there are modern efforts to repay our debt to them. In Jamnagar, the Reliance Industries Group has established the Greens Zoological Rescue and Rehabilitation Kingdom, featuring a state-of-the-art elephant clinic. This facility, recently highlighted by the India Today Group, provides a safe harbour for medical care and rehabilitation.

Yet, these sanctuaries are small Band-Aids on a gaping wound. Our collective greed is visible in the rampant deforestation that shatters elephant habitats. If we truly honour these majestic creatures, we must look beyond the reverence we show them in temples. We must respect their role in maintaining ecological diversity and restore the traditional routes we have stolen. Otherwise, our "worship" is

nothing more than a hollow ritual, and our bond with the elephant will be broken forever.

Source-News paper reports and social media

Pillow Talk

I boarded the flight from Bangalore to Mumbai and found my seat. On my forehead, I sported a straight red Vaishnavite line—a habit I picked up after a nonagenarian assured me it would help me avoid the ICU on my final journey. When that same gentleman tried to convince me that adding two white lines would prompt Garuda to personally escort me to heaven, I stopped him. I told him that as a marketing man, I had travelled quite a bit on my own and could likely find the way without a celestial GPS. Seated next to me was a dhoti-clad gentleman in his seventies, sporting the same red line. It was chemistry at first sight. "You are from...?" I asked. He had clearly been waiting for the opening. "I live in Bangalore with my first son," he began, "but I am traveling to Mumbai to stay with my second. I hate Mumbai in the summer, but I am helpless against the machinations of my daughter-in-law. Thalayanai Mandhiram Pottu Ennai Kilapivittuta." Having been away from Chennai for three decades, I missed the nuance of the expression. Seeing my puzzled look, he agitatedly explained: "Pillow talk! It is the biggest weapon in a woman's arsenal. God has equipped them with this self defence-cum-offence mechanism to influence the male species." I felt turbulence in the air, even though we hadn't yet pushed back from the gate. As we levelled out at cruising altitude, Ramanujam continued his rant. "Last Sunday, the whole house—son, daughter-in-law, and grandson—slept until 11:00 AM because they'd watched Mission Impossible the night

before. I went to the kitchen to make coffee, but I couldn't even find a matching filter. Then, a milk sachet burst, splashing everywhere. Imagine me, over seventy, mopping the floor on a Sunday morning while they slept happily!" He told me how he waited until Monday to "give vent to his ire," presenting what sounded like a verbal PowerPoint on the state of their fridge—stocked with smelly pizza, half-eaten fruits, and chutneys that had long outlived their utility. "She didn't say a word," he lamented. "She just gave me a scornful look and slammed her door. Too late, I remembered my brother's advice to watch my words when Rahu and Ketu are in transit. By Tuesday, my second son called from Mumbai, saying he 'needed my help' and had already emailed a ticket for Thursday. They are kootu kalavanigal—partners in conspiracy." We parted ways in Mumbai with the usual pleasantries, but his rant stayed with me. It echoed years of conversations I've had with other seniors. Take Mr. Sadagopan, who complained, "My daughter-in-law never speaks to me directly; she goes through her husband." I suggested that perhaps he hadn't made her feel like she truly belonged. Too often, seniors follow the outdated advice of "keeping a distance" to maintain control, rather than removing the barriers. Then there was the gentleman offended that his daughter-in-law asked him to wash his own coffee cup when the maid was away. I asked him: "If you were at your daughter's house, wouldn't you wash the vessels just to help her out? Why is the daughter-in-law different?" He had no answer. The most "tactical" case involved a young couple who planned a secret trip to Greece. They whispered and packed in private, only for the "CCTV neighbour" to spill the beans to the father-in-law. He was livid.

"My son is groaning under EMIs! He should go to our village temple instead. Plus, they leave on Ashtami—totally inauspicious!" I told him that his desire to "fix" their plans was likely the exact reason for their "surgical strike" of a vacation. Perhaps the saddest story was the man whose daughter-in-law stopped eating with him, citing his habit of spilling food on his kurta. He was furious: "Does she know I washed her husband's underwear until he was ten?" The solution was a simple bib and some empathy, but instead, he overheard her referring to him as "immovable property"—the reason they couldn't go on holiday. Nearly all these men had lost their wives. Without a matriarch to "rule the roost," they felt adrift in a changing world.

MyTake

(With a Nod to Rajdeep Sardesai)

When a girl leaves her comfort zone for a new home, she arrives with anxiety. Seniors should be the ones to extend that comfort zone. Don't hand her a 50-page manual on your son's likes and dislikes; an executive summary will do. Trust her intuition; she'll compile her own research soon enough. If you accept her as a daughter, half the problems vanish. If she accepts the seniors as her own parents, the "reporting errors" disappear. Communication should be assertive, not abrasive. We should strive for a home environment that feels like a golf course—full of humour, light, and space. If a woman feels at home, that golf course has no boundaries. As for the men, remember: the old era of the "frying pan" is over. Never underestimate the power of a kind word or a listening ear. An honest compliment can turn a "conspiracy" into a community.

Prudence Over Emotion: The Modern Senior Woman

They say "resilience" is a woman's middle name. After a recent nine-day stay at a retirement home (RH) near Bangalore, I've seen that resilience in its most modern, unsentimental form. I am what you might call an "immovable property." Last year, my daughter and her family skipped their holiday to stay with me at home. This year, I used all the force at my command to push them out the door, insisting that I, too, needed a change of scenery. Because my health limits long-distance travel, I moved into a guest house within a retirement community just 40 minutes away. The RH is a well-oiled machine: 40 fully furnished apartments where meals are delivered in hot cases, housekeeping is seamless, and a nursing station is always on standby. It sits within a larger gated community of 900 apartments, a vibrant world of toddlers on the lawn and busy supermarkets. But the real story lies in the demographics: 18 single women live here independently, compared to only seven single men. These women, aged 65 to 92, are not "left behind"—they are a confident, self-governing tribe. While the men rarely meet, a dozen of these women gather every evening for an hour of conversation. They are a self-help group, ready to rush to each other's aid at a moment's notice. I spoke with a 92-year-old widow of a scientist. Despite failing eyesight and the recent loss of a son in the US, she lives alone and refuses to move

in with relatives. Her hard-earned wisdom was blunt: "Do not hand over your money or property to your children as long as you are alive." I met Lakshmi, a retired government servant in her late sixties. She loves her children but values her autonomy more. She has curated her own space rather than navigating the lifestyle of a daughter-in-law or the crowded home of a growing family. She is "confidence personified," having secured her savings for her daughter's future while keeping the reins firmly in her own hands. Then there was Ganthimathi. When I asked what she would do if she became immobile, her answer was strictly pragmatic: for a price, she can hire the best caregiver without the "rumbling" or resentment that often accompanies family care. She has even installed a railing along her living room wall to ensure she completes her hour of walking every day. Even Meera, who remains happily married, lives in an apartment side by side with her husband. After 50 years of marriage, she wanted her own space and her own bathroom. They remain a devoted, cheerful couple—just with two front doors.

The Lesson Learned

The stereotype of the "timid" elderly woman is dead. These women are a resilient lot who refuse to "put up with nonsense," even from their own children. They have prioritized health insurance and professional care over emotional expectations. They have found solace and happiness in the company of kindred souls. I returned home with a profound impression: these women are not just surviving; they are ruling their lives. For them, prudence has finally, and rightly, ruled over emotion.

Reel Justice, Real Consequences: The Fine Line Between Film and Reality

In the 1973 classic *Zanjeer*, a young Vijay Khanna (Amitabh Bachchan) witnesses his parents' murder on Diwali. The only clue to the killer's identity is a white horse charm on a bracelet—a *zanjeer*. Twenty years later, Vijay is an honest police inspector haunted by this trauma. He eventually befriends the local goon Sher Khan (Pran), who reforms his ways and becomes a loyal ally. Together, they track down the crime boss Teja (Ajit). In a final confrontation on Diwali, Vijay recognizes the bracelet on Teja's wrist and takes his revenge, shooting him dead. The film was a massive success, earning Amitabh the iconic nickname "The Angry Young Man." While these stories often seem like pure fiction, real life frequently mirrors the screen. Take the recent case of 30-year-old Gopal Singh Bhati. In 2002, when Gopal was just eight, his father was crushed to death by a truck in Jaisalmer. The culprit, Nakhat Singh Bhati, served seven years in prison, but for Gopal, justice was incomplete. He waited 22 years, purchased a pickup truck, and staged a "fatal accident" to kill Nakhat in the exact same manner his father had died. Though he attempted to flee, a thorough investigation by Inspector S.A. Gohil uncovered the cold-blooded premeditation behind the crash. Revenge isn't always so

extreme; sometimes it manifests in smaller, "tit-for-tat" rivalries.

My friend Raman once hid his cousin's history notes a week before finals after the cousin spitefully shared Raman's own hard-earned literature notes with an arch-rival. Upon seeing his cousin fall ill from stress, Raman returned the notes just in time. Today, the two remain close friends—one a retired professor and the other a judge. Rivalry, jealousy, and envy are deeply rooted in human nature. While jealousy is the desire for what others have, envy is more malicious, seeking to pull others down.

Perhaps the most commendable stance is to adopt the philosophy of "Que sera, sera"—a phrase popularized by Doris Day meaning "Whatever will be, will be." It encourages us to accept the future's unpredictability and let go of the things we cannot control.

A Matter of Height—Does it Really Matter?

“One of the more curious talking points of the 2024 U.S. Presidential debates was the physical stature of the nominees. At 6'3" (191 cm), Donald Trump is among the tallest presidents in American history, trailing only Abraham Lincoln and Lyndon B. Johnson. Historically, height has often been conflated with leadership in the U.S.; data shows that the taller candidate frequently wins, though there are notable exceptions. During his debate with Kamala Harris Trump famously insisted that no "artificial lifts" or boxes be used to elevate her height—a move many saw as an attempt to maintain a sense of physical dominance. We saw a similar dynamic in 2016, where his towering presence behind Hillary Clinton became a defining visual of the campaign. Yet, history suggests that height is rarely the true measure of power. Take Abraham Lincoln, the tallest president at 6'4". His imposing height certainly complemented his presence, but it was his iron-willed leadership during America's most turbulent era that defined him. Similarly, Franklin D. Roosevelt played a monumental role in World War II despite being confined to a wheelchair for much of his presidency.”

In the Indian context, Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri provided the ultimate counter-argument. Standing just 5'2" (157 cm), he was short in physical height but a giant in stature. There is a famous account of him standing beside the 6'2" Pakistani

President Ayub Khan after signing the Tashkent Agreement. While the physical contrast might have evoked whispers, Shastri's bold leadership had already brought his opponent to the negotiating table. He gave the nation the rallying cry of "Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan," proving that true impact isn't measured in inches. The sports world offers similar lessons.

Sunil Gavaskar and Sachin Tendulkar, both around 165 cm, often looked small standing next to giants like the 188 cm Matthew Hayden. Yet, their cricketing achievements remain unparalleled and formidable. Closer to home, standing at 155cm, I have never felt my height was a barrier to a successful career. I once had a colleague over six feet tall; together, we were affectionately known as "the long and short" of our organizational success. My height only became a comedic point when helping my wife, Mythili (at 150 cm), reach the top kitchen cupboard—attaining my own "Viswaroopam" through a simple step-stool, much to our mutual laughter. Ultimately, a person's true stature is measured from the neck up, not the waist down.

Stranger than Fiction

Government is a family

A civic agency employee outsourced her Government job to a proxy for a mere ₹ 10,000 salary. This was unearthed during a massive drive. In another case, a woman officer had allowed her son to log into the official computer and handle her work. When asked to explain, the son said that his mother was busy cooking, and he had stepped in to help the public.

Go on a honeymoon again!

Chandrababu Naidu hints at 2-child minimum eligibility for local body polls. Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu proposed restricting local body election eligibility to those with more than two children, aiming to address declining birth rates. He criticised the trend of smaller families and lifestyles, calling for policies to encourage larger families. Speaking in Naravaripalle, Naidu said, “Your parents bore four to five children, and you reduced it to one. Even smarter people are now opting for a double-income, no-kids lifestyle. If their parents had thought similarly, they wouldn’t exist today.” He emphasised that countries like Japan and South Korea are already grappling with ageing populations and plummeting birth rates.

Apple comes to Prayagraj

Laurene Powell Jobs, American billionaire and wife of Steve Jobs, visited Kashi and offered her prayers before heading to Maha Kumbh. She is expected to stay in the camp area to get a deeper understanding of Sanathan Dharma. The possibility of her participating in the Akhara procession is being talked about. This is yet another expansion of Apple in India. [Since left the place due to reported allergy problem] Noble beggar

A 70-year-old beggar from Kandhamal district's Phulbani, Tula Behera, has garnered nationwide attention after being featured in the central government's 2025 calendar alongside Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Known locally as Tula Mausi, her remarkable story reflects extraordinary generosity and humility. In December 2022, Tula Mausi made headlines when she donated Rs 1 lakh—her life savings—to the Jagannath temple in Phulbani. The money, painstakingly gathered over years by seeking alms near the temple, was used for the renovation of the aging temple structure. Her act of selflessness resonated widely, earning her admiration from across the country.

IIT Baba:

The Prayagraj Kumbh Mela revealed IIT Baba's true identity: Abhey Singh. His hometown is Haryana. Abhey was a whiz academically from infancy. He did well in school and college. He got into IIT, a dream for many youngsters. He earned an IIT Bombay Aerospace Engineering degree. Abhay got a placement position at IIT. He was a business employee. Dissatisfied with life, he resorted to his favourite

photography. It didn't satisfy him either. This led him to spirituality. Abhay Singh quit his job and family to become a monk. He surprises everyone with his saffron-clad English fluency. Media and YouTubers interviewed him on his IIT background. Abhay Singh claims he now lives spiritually.

Rasnath Das:

He worked on Wall Street after attending the nation's top IIT. Rasanath Das made a lot of money in stocks. But neither his education nor his work satisfied him. He chose spirituality. Rasanath Das earned an MBA from Cornell and IIT. After studying at top universities, he found a high-paying job abroad. Leaving this behind, Kasanath Das donned saffron.

Khurshed Batliwala:

Khurshed Batliwala, another Bombay IIT graduate, followed a spiritual path. He's an IIT master's graduate. Through Art of Living, he teaches spirituality domestically and globally. His life experiences inspire others. His lifelike lectures impress youngsters.

Source-News paper reports and social media

Subbuni Mama: The Self -Appointed Genera

[courtesy my late wife Mythili]

I first met Subramani—fondly known as "Subbuni Mama"—when I was a schoolboy running errands for my uncle's card games in Madurai. A wealthy man with vast properties, his true "vocation" was fixing the lives of others. If you so much as whispered that you were looking for a groom for your daughter, Subbuni Mama would materialize by your side. He wouldn't leave until the last guest had been fed and the couple had been waved off with tears. He found the hall, the priests, the cooks, and the music; he even insisted on choosing the bride's sarees. The real test of his "services" came during my youngest sister Vidya's wedding. Vidya was a Ph.D. scholar in English Literature—private, assertive, and entirely unimpressed by traditional meddling. When we prepared to shop for the muhurtham sarees, Vidya suggested a trendy new boutique near the Meenakshi Temple. "No, no!" Subbuni Mama cried. "We go to Dhanalakshmi & Co. The owner was my classmate; he'll give us a discount." At the shop, Subbuni Mama took charge with a terrifying vigour. He interlocked his hands behind his back, paced the aisles, and eventually plonked himself in front of the counter. "Do you have kooraipudavais [NINEYARD SAREE] for this girl?" he shouted, pointing at Vidya. "She's getting married in two weeks!" Vidya's face turned crimson. As a scholar of

literature, she valued nuance and privacy; Subbuni Mama valued neither. He pulled out a shocking-pink silk saree—a garish shade that hurt the eyes. "Look at this!" he beamed. "Vivek (the groom) will love this colour. You must wear what he likes!" The salesmen joined in the chorus, laughing and telling Vidya that the groom would "swoon at her feet." I saw Vidya gritting her teeth so hard I feared for her enamel. Acting quickly, I dragged Subbuni Mama out on the pretext of needing coffee, giving Vidya forty-five minutes of peace to make her own selection. When we returned an hour later, Vidya was smiling, her teeth intact. She had chosen her own sarees, and the bill came to ₹18,500. Subbuni Mama peeped at the bill and jumped as if stung. "Daylight robbery!" he yelled. He turned to the shop owner—a man with a pleasant, unshakeable grin who reminded me of the cricketer Muttiah Muralitharan. Subbuni Mama began a relentless negotiation, eventually browbeating the "Smiling Assassin" into a ₹500 discount and a free shoulder bag as a "gift." "See, Vidya?" Subbuni Mama said, handing her the bag. "You can take this on your honeymoon!" The salesmen roared with laughter again. I caught hold of Subbuni Mama's hand, pushed him into the first available auto-rickshaw, and leaped in after him before Vidya could explode. "We still have to buy clothes for the groom," he wailed as the auto sped away. "We'll do that later," I said firmly. "Without the ladies." Subbuni Mama sat back, perfectly calm. "You are right," he pronounced. "Your sister Vidya is a very angry young woman."

The Altar of Deception

The Balaji Temple in Chennai was crowded as usual, but amidst the sea of devotees, two families stood out, engaged in lively banter. This was no ordinary visit; it was the "informal meeting"—the first step in a potential alliance. After mandatory introductions and the discovery of mutual friends, the boy and girl were permitted a private conversation. An hour later, the girl's uncle suggested they move to a nearby Saravana Bhavan. Over Masala Dosa, Vada, and fragrant filter coffee, both parties gave the green signal. There was one condition: the engagement had to happen within ten days, as the boy's sister, visiting from Muscat, had a flight to catch.

The Protagonists

Srinath was charming—tall, dark, and handsome. Priya was enchanting, with a fair complexion and an endearing smile. Both hailed from large, middle-class families with a retinue of uncles and aunts. The families took comfort in this, believing that "elders' influence" would keep the youngsters on the right path.

The Warning Signs

The engagement was seamless, and the wedding was set for four months later. During this period, the mask began to slip, though Priya didn't see it. Srinath asked her for a loan of ₹2 lakhs for an "emergency," promising to return it in three

weeks. When she expressed her inability to pay, he didn't press further. He also "confessed" to being an occasional drinker and meat-eater—revelations that, in their Brahmin context, were scandalous, yet Priya admired his "honesty." He even spoke of his altruism, claiming he was financially supporting a fatherless girl in Delhi.

The Marriage and the Meltdown

The wedding was celebrated with a level of pomp that stretched the girl's family's finances to the limit. Post-marriage, the couple lived separately during the week, citing the distance between their workplaces. The first real blow came when Srinath convinced Priya to swipe her card for ₹3 lakhs to help his sister show a bank balance for a housing loan. Weeks passed, the money never returned, and Priya's card was blocked. When she confronted the bank manager about a cheque Srinath had given her, the manager laughed. "He is a habitual offender," he said. "His account stays in the negative."

The Discovery

Determined to find the truth, Priya stayed at her in-laws' house for a few days. She noticed Srinath never left his phone or wallet unattended—until one morning, he forgot them while heading to the shower. Inside his wallet, Priya found a pawn ticket. The description matched her Stridhan—her wedding jewellery. His phone records revealed long, midnight calls to a suspicious number on New Year's Eve. When her mother-in-law claimed the jewellery was safe in the attic, and Srinath countered that it was in a bank locker, the

"last straw" finally broke. Priya left and hired a private detective.

The Ugly Truth

The investigation revealed a life of pure perfidy. Srinath had lost his MNC job months ago. He spent his days gambling and living off his mother's meagre earnings. The "girl in Delhi" was merely one of many questionable contacts.

The Resolution

Faced with irrefutable evidence, the families were summoned. While the uncles expressed "shock," the truth was clear: they had hoped marriage would "fix" him. Priya's family gave them an ultimatum: return the jewellery and cash (totalling ₹7 lakhs) and file for a mutual divorce, or face jail. To expedite the process, they cited "non-consummation" of marriage—the fastest legal route. After the mandatory waiting period, the decree was granted. The two walked out of the court without so much as a "Hi."

The Aftermath

Was the family truly ignorant? No. They chose to sacrifice Priya at the altar of "conventional thought," hoping a wife would magically reform a habitual liar. This story serves as a stark reminder: in an era of polished profiles, a pre-marital background check is no longer a luxury—it is a necessity

The Altar of Trust: Karna and Bhanumathi

In our modern world, where "silent marriages" and "grey divorces" are becoming the norm, we often forget the foundational stone of any relationship: unshakeable trust. To understand its power, one must look back at a legendary, yet often misunderstood, episode from the Mahabharata involving Karna and Bhanumathi, the wife of Duryodhana.

The story goes that Karna and Bhanumathi were deep in a game of dice in her private chambers. Duryodhana suddenly entered the room. Out of respect and a startle, Bhanumathi rose quickly. Karna, unaware that his friend had entered and thinking she was trying to leave the game midway, reached out to pull her back by her sash. The pull was so forceful that the strand of pearls she wore snapped, and the precious stones scattered across the floor. In that era, such a scene—a man in the private chambers of another's wife, pearls scattered in a scramble—could have been the spark for a violent tragedy. But what did Duryodhana do? He did not reach for his sword. He did not cast a glance of suspicion at his wife or his best friend. Instead, he quietly knelt on the floor and began picking up the pearls. He simply asked Karna, "Should I just collect them, or should I string them back together for her as well?" This is the ultimate Altar of Trust. Duryodhana knew the character of his wife and the loyalty of his friend so deeply that his eyes refused to believe

a scandal that his mind knew was impossible. In today's age of "checking phone messages" and "tracking locations," this ancient snippet serves as a mirror. If we cannot trust the person we share a home with as much as Duryodhana trusted Karna, then our relationships are merely "brain-dead" arrangements. Trust is not just about the absence of betrayal; it is the presence of a faith so strong that even a broken string of pearls cannot shatter it.

The Anatomy of Communication

It is remarkable how we rely on our own anatomy to describe the world around us. From our intellect to our insecurities, our body parts do the talking long before we open our mouths.

The Head and Neck:

- He is a brainy fellow.
- People with a swollen head will eventually bite the dust.
- He was head over heels in love with her.
- Success has gone to his head so much, I wish someone would wring his neck!

The Eyes and Nose:

- His eyes missed nothing, yet revealed nothing.
- He has an eye for detail.
- He is a slimy fellow who avoids eye contact when he speaks.
- He is a Nosey Parker, always poking his nose into others' business.

The Mouth and Torso:

- He is a loud-mouthed fellow, known for his constipation of ideas and diarrhoea of words.
- He thumped his chest in a show of triumph.

- He simply could not stomach the insult.
- He shouldered the responsibility cheerfully.

The Limbs and Extremities:

- The long arm of the law will ultimately catch up with you.
- His fingers moved over the violin strings effortlessly.
- He legged it down the road when he saw his rival, as he's tired of having his leg pulled.
- He develops cold feet the moment he is accosted by a policeman.
- My boss keeps me on my toes all day long.

In the Indian Context:

- Kaan Bharna: To "fill someone's ears" with gossip or poison their mind.
- Haath Dho Lena: To "wash one's hands" of a hopeless situation or a lost cause.
- Charan Sparsh: The act of "touching feet" as the ultimate sign of respect and humility.
- The Indian Head-Shake: The side-to-side tilt that serves as a universal language for "I understand," "Maybe," or "Yes."

The Camera Room's Secrets

Vasu was sixteen when his grandmother pulled him into the shadows of the "camera room." At eighty, she was the silent sentry of the house on Chitrai Street, watching every soul that entered or left the narrow, tunnel-like corridors. Her grip on his school uniform was surprisingly firm. "Run from here right now," she whispered, her eyes darting toward the hallway. "Run, or you will lose your life." Vasu had implicit faith in her. Without a word, he followed her instructions: skip school, flee to his maternal uncle Rangan's house, and—most chillingly—throw away the lunch his stepmother had packed for him. He didn't know then that his father's wealth—a hoard of gold and sprawling acres—had turned his home into a death trap. His stepmother, Sridevi, desperate after being told she could no longer bear a son, had conspired with her brother and a local apothecary. The plan was simple and cruel: a slow-acting Ayurvedic poison mixed into Vasu's daily meals. Vasu escaped the poison, but he couldn't escape hardship. Life at his Uncle Rangan's was a different kind of prison. While his cousins studied, Vasu was treated as a farmhand. Yet, he persevered, earning his degree while fighting a gruelling legal battle for his rightful inheritance. By twenty-eight, he had secured fifteen acres and a small house—enough to finally think of a life of his own. He found Prema. She was a teacher, steady and kind. Her brothers saw the "gem of a man" Vasu had become, even if his own father, Ramanujam, remained distant, nursing the wounds of their

legal feud. But as the wedding date approached, a shadow longer than the Srirangam temple towers fell over them. A registered letter arrived from a woman named Karpagam. She claimed to be Vasu's legal wife, alleging he had fathered two children before abandoning them. The accusation of bigamy hit Prema's family like a physical blow. Her mother fell ill; her father, always cautious, retreated into silence. "I have never seen this woman in my life," Vasu told the brothers. He looked them in the eye, and they believed him. What followed was a frantic race for the truth. The brothers tracked leads from cardamom estates to the backstreets of Trichy. They didn't just find evidence; they found a tragedy. Karpagam's real partner, a man named Shankar, had taken his own life because of her infidelities. They found hospital records where Shankar was named as the father, and a photograph that proved the timeline of her lies. The plot unravelled in a courtroom. Bribed with 50,000 rupees and the promise of a house by Vasu's own relatives, Karpagam's confidence shattered under cross-examination. When the photograph of the late Shankar was produced, she broke down, confessing to the perjury that nearly destroyed a man's future. The judge sentenced her to eighteen months. The masterminds behind the curtain remained legally untouchable, but their power over Vasu was gone. Decades later, as Vasu and Prema celebrated their sixtieth wedding anniversary, the "camera room" was a distant memory. He had lost his father's gold, but he had gained a legacy that money couldn't buy. Standing among his children and grandchildren, Vasu offered a silent prayer to the mother he

lost too young, and the grandmother who, from a small room in Srirangam, had saved his life.

The Great American Hurry: Losing the Art of an Ordinary Sunday- nature does not hurry

I watched Arun rush to his car, a sandwich in one hand and an iPad in the other, keys dangling precariously from his belt. "No time!" he shouted as he dived into the driver's seat. It made me pause. Is this really life? We work to fulfil our most basic needs—hunger being chief among them—yet here was a young man, supposedly in his prime, who couldn't find twenty minutes between 5:00 AM and 8:45 AM to sit and eat a proper breakfast. This isn't just "busyness"; it is a modern indiscipline. We stay up late, wake up late, and immediately drown our brains in the digital noise of WhatsApp. By the time we reach the office, "nutrition" consists of three mugs of tea and a skipped lunch. To align with foreign time zones, we stretch our hours until dinner becomes a forgotten concept.

The Biological Tax

Nature, however, keeps a strict ledger. The results are visible in every hospital waiting room: early balding, heart murmurs, chronic back pain, and declining fertility. I am astonished at the shift in demographics; the patients are no longer the elderly, but men and women in their mid-thirties struggling with "old age" ailments. Take 19-year-old Suresh, who eats only while staring at a computer screen. Is he truly so "meritorious" that he cannot spare ten minutes for his

digestion? Or consider Balajee, who chants his morning pooja mantras at breakneck speed, as if challenging God to keep up with his pace. Even the elderly aren't immune. Eighty-two-year-old Vijaya refuses to hire help, rushing through a stressful morning of cooking while her 87-year-old husband, Reddy, sits in the living room like a sentry—ready to intervene because she frequently forgets to switch off the gas in her hurry.

The Era of Instant Gratification

We have become a society of "instant" everything. Even our arrival into the world is being rushed; C-section deliveries in India have jumped from 3% in 1993 to over 22% in 2021. While we accumulate wealth, we fail to enjoy the very life that wealth is meant to support. This relentless pace is even impacting global population replacement ratios—a trend that is now sounding alarms in India. The tragedy of this "rushed lifestyle" was punctuated recently by a headline in the Times of India (Jan 17, 2025): a 17-year-old student in Tumakuru collapsed and died of cardiac arrest while simply chatting with friends after class. When the young start falling before they have even begun to run, we must ask ourselves what we are racing toward. It is high time we teach the next generation that "merit" is not measured by how fast you eat or how little you sleep. We must teach them to value restful sleep, mindful meals, and the quiet joy of a balanced day. As Lao Tzu wisely noted: "Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished." We must learn to love the peacefulness of an ordinary Sunday—before we run out of Sundays altogether.

The Mechanics of Speech

It is curious how the automobile, once a luxury, has now parked itself permanently in our vocabulary. Even if we aren't behind the wheel, we use car parts to navigate the complexities of life. Consider how often we "drive" a point home or "idle" away our time. Here are a few ways we use the car to express our human condition:

- The Wheel: He was wheeled into the hospital with head injuries, the very circle of life turning toward recovery.
- Steering: He steered his life with such care that he reached every long-term goal he set for himself.
- The Brake: He had to apply the brakes firmly when his wife's spending began to accelerate beyond their means.
- The Horn: He tooted his own horn so loudly and so often that his friends eventually covered their ears in discomfort.
- The Clutch: My grandson clutched my hand tightly while crossing the road, a manual transmission of love and safety.
- The Radiator: His face radiated with pleasure the moment he saw his high scores in the NEET exam.

- The Rear-View Mirror: Don't fret over last month's troubles; after all, they are merely in the rear-view mirror now.
- The Engine: In modern politics, we often hear how a "double-engine sarkar" is the only way to speed up development.

We talk of "putting spokes in a wheel" to stop a career in music, or being offered a "comfortable seat" at an interview. We even worry about the "bee in someone's bonnet"—though in India, we might just call it the hood! Whether it is the "speed vs. accuracy" tormenting a decision-maker or the simple act of shifting gears, we are all just trying to keep our internal engines running smoothly.

The Middle Class Trap: Why we Stay where we are

Last year, my balance sheet revealed a sobering truth: I hadn't saved nearly as much as I should have. Given that I enjoy free boarding, lodging, and the many perks of staying with my daughter, my savings should have been substantial. This realization prompted me, at the age of 89, to adopt a new discipline: maintaining meticulous written accounts. In our household, we follow a clear principle: I cover my personal expenses and medical bills, reimbursing my daughter if she pays on my behalf. Conversely, if I spend on household matters, I collect the amount from her. This system has worked seamlessly for years. Why, then, was I falling short of my savings goals? With no travel or dining out, my analysis revealed the true culprits: soaring medical insurance premiums, house maintenance for my Chennai property, and the occasional impulsive purchase—particularly fancy dress materials. There are also "sentimental expenses" I choose not to budget strictly: offerings for our family temple, the annual varushabishegam feast for villagers, and family gifts that, I admit, tend to be a bit ostentatious. While my new budget is back on track, observing the world around me—and my daughter's "different league" lifestyle—has led me to reflect on why the modern middle class struggles to move upward. Costs are skyrocketing, and consumer patterns have shifted dramatically:

1. **The Price of Prestige:** Tuition for elite schools, which often produce well-groomed but snobbish children, has become outrageous. Annual fees of ₹2-4 lakhs feel less like an investment in education and more like the price of name-dropping.
2. **Fragmented Entertainment:** Many homes now run 2-3 separate TV connections. The days of watching as a group are gone; everyone retreats to their own screen.
3. **The Luxury Tax on Housing:** Maintenance fees for modern complexes have soared. Residents pay for clubhouses, pools, and spas regardless of whether they ever step foot in them.
4. **The Debt Trap:** Rents are at an all-time high. For homebuyers, a 20-year loan ensures they eventually pay back double the principal.
5. **The Cost of Aging:** Medical expenses for seniors are climbing, with insurance premiums doubling in just the last year.
6. **The AMC Burden:** Annual Maintenance Contracts for water purifiers, refrigerators, and dishwashers have risen by over 50% in two years, often necessitated by frequent voltage fluctuations.
7. **The Death of the Simple Meal:** Dining out has become prohibitively expensive. A lunch for four at an upscale spot costs ₹4,000. Iconic, affordable spots like Saravana Bhavan or Sukhnavas have been replaced by the likes of Little Italy and Karavalli.
8. **The Travel Necessity:** Train journeys are seen as a relic of the past. For the upper-middle class, an annual

international holiday is no longer a luxury—it's a perceived necessity.

9. **Credit Card Aristocracy:** Families are drowning in EMIs and usurious interest rates. We've traded "living within our means" for a lifestyle built on rolled-over debt. Double-income households have enabled this consumerism, but the pandemic exposed the fragility of this model. India once boasted one of the highest savings rates in the world; we were taught to save diligently. But today, with savings failing to outpace inflation and the lure of "credit card aristocracy," the middle class seems destined to remain exactly where it is.

The President, The Pilot, and The Nine-Yard Saree

Ours was a partnership of forty-two years, built on a shared love of reading and the ability to find humour even at our own expense. Despite a nine-year age gap and the fact that she was a post-graduate while I was a mere graduate, we lived as the best of friends. My journey into the world of "snippets" actually began with a lesson in humility. While I was busy writing on heavy management subjects, Mythili started blogging in English after completing an MS Office course. She quickly became a hit, capturing the delicate balancing act of middle-class life. When she won a diamond ring for an article, I proudly drove her to the award ceremony. We were seated at an oval table when the organisers announced: "Authors in the first row, attendants in the second." I quietly vacated my seat beside her and moved behind. It was then I decided to join her world of storytelling.

Years earlier, when I was President of our recreation club in Goa, I decided to enter a music competition. Against the protests of Mythili and the children, I practiced Venkatachala Nilayam in the bathtub, water up to my neck, while my family exchanged looks that suggested I had finally gone mad. On the day of the event, nerves took hold. My colleague, Gomes, handed me a cup of coffee that tasted "different." Suddenly, I was floating. Lord Balaji appeared before my eyes, and I sang with a devotion that would have made Purandara Dasa

proud. The audience cheered for their President, unaware that Gomes had "blessed" my coffee with a generous splash of brandy.

Marriage, however, required more than just music; it required "management." Whenever I felt the family was drifting, I would call a meeting for a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats). It was a very objective exercise—until it was my turn. Mythili told the daughters to bring at least two A4 sheets to record my weaknesses, as one simply wouldn't be enough. Even health crises were met with her sharp wit. At 58, I suffered a massive heart attack—a triple-vessel block.

After a successful bypass surgery at Escorts, I found the hospital food unbearable. I suggested to Mythili that she wear a traditional nine-yard saree and smuggle in idlis and coconut chutney in the folds. She and my brothers pounced on me, refusing to aid my culinary "jailbreak." Later, in our retirement in Chennai, I was made President of our apartment association. During a water shortage, a neighbour rang our bell at 5:30 AM. When Mythili answered, the lady asked, "Where is Mama? I need to use the restroom urgently, and there's no water!" Mythili woke me up, but later gave me a stern dressing-down: "Resign immediately! I don't want ladies queuing up to tell you about their restroom emergencies." That was the end of my presidency.

Our twentieth anniversary remains my favourite memory. Being busy, I had forgotten the date entirely until I noticed my daughters and wife exchanging glances. After the driver

left for the evening, I felt a wave of guilt. “Don’t you remember it’s our anniversary?” I asked, pretending I had known all along. I suggested we go to the park, watch the birds, and hold hands under the moon “like the old days.” My daughters waited for her to explode, but Mythili didn’t lose her cool. She simply smiled and said, “By now, I know all your tricks. I prefer cash.” We dissolved into laughter. That was our secret: we never let a tricky situation end in anything but a smile.

The Truth Files: Fake Judges, Golden Hoards, and Love-Struck Tigers

1. 750 Pairs of Shoes, but Nowhere to Walk

Jayalalithaa, the late Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, remains a symbol of both immense power and staggering excess. During a 1997 raid on her Poes Garden residence, investigators uncovered a hoard far beyond her declared wealth. While her official assets were valued at ₹188 crore, the raid revealed a fortune allegedly worth ₹900 crore—roughly ₹5,000 crore in today's value. The inventory was cinematic: 10,500 sarees, 750 pairs of footwear, 800 kg of silver, and 28 kg of gold. By 2016, further investigations saw those figures climb even higher, marking one of the most high-profile corruption cases in Indian history.

2. Johnny's 300-Kilometre Quest for Love

In the wild, the search for a mate is a marathon. A tiger nicknamed 'Johnny' has captured the attention of conservationists by trekking 300 kilometres toward Telangana. His journey hasn't been quiet—he has successfully hunted five cattle along the way. Recently spotted near Laltekdi village, Johnny is heading toward the Kawal Tiger Reserve (KTR). Forest official Prashanth Bajirao has urged the public to remain calm, noting that tigers on the move for

mates rarely pose a threat to humans. Officials hope Johnny's arrival will naturally revitalize a reserve where previous relocation efforts have failed.

3. The New Student Hustle: Babysitting in the USA

For Indian students in the US, the dream of an American education now often includes a side of childcare. As traditional off-campus part-time jobs become scarce and riskier, many students—particularly from Telangana and Andhra Pradesh—are turning to babysitting within the Indian diaspora. Offering \$13 to \$18 an hour, the role is often safer and more convenient than retail or warehouse work. "It's better than other jobs," says one Texas-based student. "I get paid to care for a four-year-old, and the parents even handle my transport and meals."

4. The Fake Judge of Gandhinagar

In a case of "stranger than fiction," a man named Morris Samuel Christian operated an entire fake tribunal in Gandhinagar for years. Posing as a judge and arbitrator, Christian set up a mock courtroom complete with "staff" to dupe people involved in land disputes. He even went as far as issuing "official" orders to District Collectors. The elaborate ruse finally crumbled when a court registrar, Hardik Desai, realized the tribunal had no legal standing. Christian has since been arrested for impersonation and fraud.

5. The "SBI" Branch That Never Was

In Chhattisgarh, scammers took "fake it 'til you make it" to a criminal extreme by opening a fraudulent bank branch. They installed cabins, professional furniture, and a convincing State Bank of India (SBI) logo. The victims weren't just customers, but the employees themselves. Job-seekers like Jyoti Yadav paid up to ₹6 lakh in "security deposits" for positions promising ₹30,000 a month. The scam lasted only a week before a manager from a genuine nearby SBI branch noticed the anomaly. While the masterminds fled, the incident serves as a chilling reminder of the lengths scammers will go to exploit the vulnerable. [News paper reports and social media]

Source-News paper reports and Social Media

The World in My Pocket

I have borrowed the title from James Hadley Chase's thriller of the same name. However, I am talking about the mobile phone. Gone are the days of booking a trunk call and waiting endlessly for a connection. Today, news is instantaneous, and the boardroom has moved to the palm of your hand through conference calls. Video calls bring loved ones into the room without you ever stepping out. You can even leave voice instructions for the maid to ensure chores are handled while you're away. No one "forgets" a birthday anymore, thanks to digital assistants who nudge us to send greetings at the stroke of midnight. Our pockets now hold an explosion of information—Google, YouTube, and WhatsApp offer more than we can possibly consume. But this convenience comes with a shadow. If you browse a music track, you are flooded with similar recommendations. After a quick look at my horoscope, I am now bombarded with alarming zodiac alerts. I once searched for a TV cabinet, and suddenly, my digital world was plastered with furniture ads. It feels as though a silent observer is constantly snooping, and privacy has become a relic of the past. The phone is also our most persistent taskmaster. Set an alarm for a flight, and it won't let you rest until you're awake. Need to find a hidden address? Switch on the GPS, and you're there—provided it doesn't lead you into a lake, as happened in a recent viral mishap! We've outsourced our memory, too; with "Favourites" stored on speed dial, many of us have forgotten

the phone numbers of our own siblings. The transformation doesn't stop at communication:

- A Personal Theatre: You no longer need to rush to the cinema; global blockbusters and niche documentaries are ready to stream while you're on the bus or tucked in bed.
- The Global Marketplace: From a head of garlic to a high-end laptop, the world's inventory is available for delivery with a single tap, making the "mall" a virtual experience.
- A Healthcare Hub: You can consult a doctor across the country or track your heart rate and sleep patterns, turning your phone into a pocket-sized clinic. Financial transactions now happen in a flash via UPI and mobile banking. The era of standing in long queues to update a passbook is over. For brevity's sake, I will stop here, though the list of possibilities is endless. So, am I not right in saying that the world is in your pocket? If you lose that device, your world seems to crumble—at least until you get a new SIM card. Elon Musk has suggested that mobile phones might soon become redundant. Until then, let's enjoy the world in our pockets.

They are Unemployed-are They?

Rajagopalan, a purohit, left his job as an IT engineer, learnt Vedas, and is practicing as a purohit. When I consulted him for conducting Mythilis last rites, he said he would come home and discuss. After seeing the house in an upmarket complex, his rate went up dramatically. I had no choice, with the body arriving any time from the hospital. He explained that he was earning well, was his own master, and people had to listen to him instead of vice versa in his job. He is unemployed as per statistics.

I met a petite girl, well dressed, in her late twenties in the lift. I politely asked her in which flat she lived. She replied that she was working as a maid on the 11th floor. She was a graduate but preferred to work as a maid, as she had to pick up her son from school at 3.30 pm. She worked for 7 hours, and she charged Rs 2,000 per hour, and in two houses she prepared lunch, charging Rs 4,000 each. In all, she was earning Rs 18,000 a month. With pride, she said that working couples depended on her. So saying, she started her scooter and drove away.

She is unemployed as per statistics.

I went for a haircut and was pleasantly surprised when the barber spoke to me in Americanised English. In my conversation with him, I learnt he left his job as a BPO employee and has been doing haircutting after training for

the last three years. He had chosen this profession with the ultimate aim of starting a boutique. He also said getting a bank loan was easy. He is unemployed as per statistics.

We had called Abdul to check up the washing machine in our house. He said he was not free for two days. On the third day, he came, changed the printed circuit board, and pocketed Rs 8,000. As is my normal practice, I enquired about his work and estimated his income at around Rs 30,000/-. He laughed and said more than double of your estimate. He was an ITI-qualified person and worked with Samsung before becoming a freelancer. As per statistics, he is unemployed.

Two ladies left their lucrative jobs and are taking private tuitions for maths and physics. They charge Rs 500 per hour, and they have a waiting list. They are unemployed as per statistics. Manjunath drives his own taxi, mostly airport trips, and earns well. He is a postgraduate.

He is unemployed as per statistics.

Mustafa, an IIM graduate, is the founder of ID Idli batter and has built a 100 crore-plus business empire. Sarath Babu, an IIM-A graduate, makes Idlis in bulk and sells to institutional canteens.

Ramanappa, an educated fellow, is one of the Isthriwallahs in our complex, employing two more people. We have to remind him at least twice before he picks up the clothes for ironing. His daughter is studying in an English-medium school. Another Isthriwallah has two grown-up daughters,

one a trained nurse and another pursuing a catering technology course in Ooty.

Call a mason, plumber, electrician, mason, and a carpenter for a job, and you will find that they are not prepared for daily rates and quote a flat rate for a job ~ and no bargaining, please. Most of them come on SPLENDOR/PULSAR motorcycles.

To conclude, jobs do not necessarily mean government or corporate jobs. “Find a need and fulfil it” is the taraka mantra for eking out a livelihood and, quite often, making it big, like Raghavendra, a mechanical engineer, and his wife Divya, a chartered accountant, who founded and own the bomb blast-famous Rameswaram Café in Bangalore.

I can give hundreds of examples— it is time to inculcate the spirit of entrepreneurship and let employees become employers. This only highlights the need for vocational training instead of a degree in humanities, trailing with 40% unemployment and 10 million added every year. The day is not far off when technicians will fly away to Japan, Germany, France, etc., beset with people who cannot even lift their fingers. The Indian mindset has to undergo a dramatic change to look at technicians with respect and dignity and move from WHITE to BLUE.

They Need a Father

Lalitha came from a traditional, conservative home where life followed a predictable rhythm—until it didn't. Today, she sat alone, her thoughts wandering as her children, Ravi and Jayanthi, were away attending her brother Mani's second wedding. It was a simple affair, limited to family and close friends, but it stirred a whirlpool of memories in Lalitha's mind. Ten years ago, she and Mani had shared a wedding canopy, marrying Suresh and Sudha on the very same day. It had been a celebration of unbridled happiness, a "perfect match" for both siblings.

Mani settled in Bangalore with two daughters, while Lalitha moved to Bombay, blessed with a son and a daughter. Life was a serene stream. Then, the tsunami hit. A sudden heart attack took Suresh, leaving Lalitha a widow in a city that suddenly felt cold and vast. Damu, Suresh's closest friend, stepped in like a pillar of strength, managing the funeral rites and helping Lalitha move back to Chennai. But tragedy wasn't finished with the family. Soon after, Mani's wife passed away on the operating table during her third delivery. The house was now filled with motherless and fatherless children. As Mani struggled with the high-pressure demands of his job and a string of unreliable nannies, the family decided he must marry again. It was seen as a necessity—a practical solution for a man.

Meanwhile, Damu, now transferred to Chennai, became a constant support for Lalitha. He handled her bank accounts, the children's needs, and the errands her aging parents could no longer manage. One afternoon, Lalitha teased him, "Damu, when are you getting married? Shall I ask my parents to find a match for you?" Damu's reply was quiet and steady. "I don't know much about love, Lalitha. But if my devotion to Suresh and his family counts as love, then so be it. I want to marry you and raise my friend's children as my own." Lalitha was shell-shocked. When her father overheard the proposal, his reaction was swift and stinging. "Unthinkable!" he roared. "What will society say? Mani's remarriage is a necessity; he has a career and children to be tended. But for you? This is an affront to our culture!"

Driven by a sense of duty to Suresh's memory, Lalitha moved to Trichy to live with her in-laws. While her father-in-law was kind, her mother-in-law held a cold, unspoken grudge, as if Lalitha were somehow responsible for Suresh's death. The atmosphere was thick with barbs. When Lalitha's son accidentally broke a flower vase one afternoon, the grandmother's voice sliced through the air: "First you swallowed your father, and now you begin to swallow our precious belongings!" Lalitha retreated to her room and bolted the door. Sobbing before an idol of Lord Shiva, she felt a sudden, clear whisper in her heart: Your children need a father. That is just as important as a child needing a mother. The fog lifted. The "yardstick" of society no longer mattered.

She picked up the phone and dialled Damu. "My children need a father," she said, her voice trembling but sure. The reply came back instantly, like a vow: "I am waiting."

Times have changed, yet many orthodox families still maintain a different yardstick for men and women. While a man's remarriage is often seen as a practical necessity, a woman's is often viewed through the lens of "culture" or "tradition." We must ask ourselves: if a mother is essential for a home, isn't a father's love equally vital for a child's future?

When Silence Speaks

Natesan, 58, parked his car and entered the house, whistling his favourite tune. He was in an ebullient mood, having received his transfer orders from Delhi to Chennai—his hometown—a pre-retirement concession. His mother, 75, and his brothers and sisters were all there in his mind's eye. He recalled the days when they would all sit together on the floor and their mother would make rice balls, serving them with greens and drumstick sambar. They used to fight if the size of the rice balls varied. Continuing his whistling, he broke the news to Vimala. Natesan continued, "We can keep Mother with us; after all, she gave birth to me when she was sixteen, and it is now time to repay her. We can also spend weekends with my brothers and sisters, as all these years we have been meeting them only once a year or at functions." "Yes," Vimala replied in a feeble voice. Natesan, in his exuberance, did not notice his wife's hesitation; he held her and started dancing. "Congrats," Vimala said in a happy tone, though her eyes betrayed her reservation and anxiety.

Natesan landed in Chennai with his wife and daughters and was warmly received by his siblings. "Come home for lunch next weekend!" cooed Natesan, without consulting Vimala and not cognisant of the time it takes to settle down and receive guests. "Bring Amma also with you," he told his third brother. "Of course," was the reply from his brother and his

wife, with a visible tone of relief. For the brothers and sisters, Vimala was non-existent at that time. A week passed quickly with unpacking and arranging things. The daughters left for the hostel.

For the first time in years, Natesan and Vimala were by themselves. That was all the more reason for Natesan to look forward to the visit of his siblings and his mother. On the other hand, it was nothing but trepidation for Vimala to get things organised while also handling her mother-in-law and her vicious temper.

Ambulu Mami, the mother-in-law, had given birth to ten children between the ages of sixteen and forty. She had managed deprivation with sacrifice and fortitude. She was a perfectionist and was admired for her culinary skills. On the contrary, she had a vicious tongue and did not mince words even with her daughters, let alone her daughters-in-law. Being widowed at the age of sixty-one had made her more liberal with her adverse comments and abusive language. Generally, everyone was on guard while dealing with her.

It was "happy days" here again when the siblings met for lunch at Natesan's house on Sunday. Childhood memories were recalled with loud shrieks and laughter. No one thought of Vimala, who was sweating it out in the kitchen, except for a formal offer to help, which was declined politely. It was the general opinion that, having been in the North, Vimala was not adept at dishing out South Indian fare. Adding insult to injury, Ambulu said, "Your Manni, having been brought up in the North, cooks saltless, spiceless food and does not know

our South Indian cooking. What to do? It is Natesan's luck, and you have all shared his luck with him today," much to the discomfiture of everyone assembled.

After lunch, everyone departed immediately, giving some excuse or other. Unwashed cooking utensils stared Vimala in the face. Noticing this, Natesan changed his clothes and started washing the vessels. Vimala almost started sobbing, having never seen her husband in the kitchen before. There was no follow-up call from anyone for almost a month, though they were individually invited. Natesan thought it was time to give them another try. Once again, the story repeated itself, but with a difference. This time, Natesan ordered the ladies to join and clean up the kitchen before leaving. Being the eldest, no one dared to question him. Vimala also joined the conversation for a while. Later on, it was learnt that two ladies made a caustic remark that such luncheon appointments were an "insult" if they included washing vessels and cleaning up the kitchen.

Eventually, Vimala was admitted to the hospital for a severe stomach infection. Barring a visit to the hospital with the mandatory oranges, no one offered to stay. One had to look after the aged mother-in-law, another's daughter was preparing for a competitive exam, and another had a severe cough and was low on immunity due to steroids. Natesan did not inform his daughters and roughed it out by alternating between the hospital and home.

It was then that realization struck Natesan: they were not kids anymore. Everyone had built their own nest, and

relationships were governed by self-interest, compulsions, and jealousies. He understood for the first time that the relationship between husband and wife is the only one of true accommodation and sacrifice, standing the test of time through thick and thin. After a long time, Natesan looked at Vimala endearingly, and she smiled in understanding. After all, when two eyes meet with such endearment, where is the need for the spoken word?

Why Girls Don't Want to Marry

Across the world, including in India, more women are choosing to remain single rather than marry. There is a visible shift in attitudes toward marriage. One major reason is that many women today are highly educated and financially independent. Some people interpret this change as ambition, while others dismiss it as arrogance. Take the case of Ananya. She is a highly qualified professional working as a manager in a top multinational company. At 34, she earns around ₹50 lakhs a year. She often jokes with her parents about finding a suitable groom, but she has clear preferences. She does not want to marry someone who works abroad and prefers an Iyengar boy with not more than a two-year age difference. Her work keeps her extremely busy, leaving her little time to seriously think about marriage. As she says with a smile, “I don’t want to become someone else’s ATM.”

Padma, an automobile engineer in her early thirties, is also doing well in her career. Her daily routine is exhausting. She leaves home at 8:00 AM to travel 25 km to work and returns only by 9:00 PM. By the time she gets home, she is too tired to manage household work, even on weekends. She is on a fast track in her career and does not want to quit her job. On top of that, the process of matching horoscopes feels like an unnecessary complication. Padma is not against marriage, but she wants it to happen on her own terms. Her younger sister,

who works in London, seems to have moved away from the family permanently.

Shreya, the elder of two daughters, has a different reason for her hesitation. She grew up watching her father constantly criticize her mother. Now in his eighties, her father still refuses to hire help, leaving her mother to take care of everything, including changing his diapers. Earlier, he even forced her to take up a job and often called her lazy. The taunts stopped with her mother's inheritance when she became economically independent and refused to share the family expenses. When she refused, he began asking her to contribute to his travel and other expenses. Watching these constant quarrels and insults has deeply affected Shreya and made her wary of marriage.

Geetha is the only daughter of elderly parents. Her father is in his eighties and her mother in her late seventies, both suffering from serious health issues. Geetha earns well, but nearly 65% of her income goes toward household expenses, the EMI for a flat, and expensive health insurance premiums. Looking after her parents is her priority. However, many prospective grooms hesitate when they learn about her responsibilities, even if she does not expect any financial support from them.

Each of these stories is different, but they share a common thread. These women are financially independent and capable of making their own choices. Many of them are ambitious and committed to their careers. Having experienced independence, they look for partners who

understand and respect their aspirations. The days when women automatically accepted traditional roles after marriage are gradually fading. Today, discussions about sharing responsibilities—both at home and financially—are becoming more open. In short, the quiet and obedient girl of the past is slowly being replaced by a confident and independent woman. Society, especially men, needs to recognize and adjust to this change. Only then can marriages become partnerships based on mutual respect and understanding.

Quote (Times of India)

“For women, marriage and health are more complex. While marriage can sometimes lead to a longer life, the quality of the relationship matters greatly. A loving and supportive marriage can improve mental and physical health, but a toxic one can increase stress and health problems. Women also often take on caregiving responsibilities, which adds emotional and physical strain. Because of this, the health benefits of marriage are less clear for women than for men. While love and companionship remain at the heart of marriage, the focus for women may need to be on the quality of the relationship rather than simply being married. In some cases, choosing to stay single or leaving an unhappy relationship may actually be the healthier option.”

With Relatives Like These, Who Needs Google?

Some relatives don't just cross boundaries; they act as if boundaries don't exist. They feel entitled to offer unsolicited advice, ask intrusive questions, and then—bizarrely—answer them on their own. For instance, a relative might ask, “Aren't you teaching your daughter to drive a scooter?” But before you can even draw breath to respond, they've launched into a monologue: “Traffic is terrible, roads are treacherous, and boys misbehave. Anitha broke her ankle when she fell after a boy tried to overtake her. Poor girl missed her exam because of it.” If they already have so much to say, why bother asking the question in the first place?

The pattern repeats: “When are you celebrating your 60th birthday?” Again, before you can reply, the lecture begins. “Make it simple and invite only relatives. Ramesh celebrated his Shastiaphapoorthy on a grand scale, and the poor fellow had a heart attack a week later. People cast an evil eye on such lavish functions.” By the time they finish, you've been relegated to a silent spectator in your own life's conversation. These “unsolicited consultants” can deflate even the most exciting milestones.

When Rangan was looking for a match for his daughter, Raghavan offered this gem: “Don't select an IT professional. That field is full of free mixing without any inhibition. With

American and European timings, there's no scope for family life." Rangan, who had just finalized a match with an IT professional at an MNC, was left visibly upset by the needless gloom.

Similarly, when Seshan bought a plot on the outskirts of Chennai, his brother-in-law, Shankar, remarked, "Oh my God, why did you choose this location? It'll take years to develop, and safety is a big question mark." This immediately deflated Seshan's enthusiasm. To make matters worse, the comment sparked a domestic rift, as his wife pounced: "Didn't I tell you the same thing? I'm not moving there." Shankar's passing comment disrupted the peace of an entire household.

When I suggested my wife, Mithila, pursue a B.Ed., relatives were quick to disapprove, despite our daughters being old enough to no longer need constant attention. "Who will take care of the children at 3 PM?" they demanded. Their negativity only strengthened our resolve. Though the process caused significant personal strain, Mithila's eventual success far overshadowed the challenges we faced. Even my own home construction wasn't immune.

When I purchased a plot on the ECR, a relative warned, "Don't buy a south-facing plot; it's bad for health and prosperity." I ignored the superstition, valuing the sea breeze instead. The advice kept pouring in—moves the kitchen, avoid the north-eastern bedroom. I changed nothing except installing a small mandap with a Pillaiyar idol. Twenty years later, that house has appreciated 200 times in value. The same relative's only response? "If it had been east-facing, it

would have appreciated 400 times.” I simply replied, “200 is my lucky number.”

While most interference is merely annoying, sometimes it crosses into cruelty. I recently visited my sambandhi's mother, a woman in her late eighties. A young couple in their mid-thirties came to seek her blessings, and without hesitation, she asked if the wife had conceived. When they said no, she brazenly remarked, “If it hasn't happened in ten years, something is seriously wrong with your relationship and diet.” She proceeded to recommend folk remedies while the couple tried to explain they were undergoing medical fertility treatment. I quietly left, but it took days to erase the image of that distressed couple. Women facing such scrutiny already carry a heavy burden; they don't need ridiculous suggestions making it harder. Whenever I face such "advice" now, I try to divert the topic—but, when exasperated, I have learned to firmly but politely shut it down.

Would I Like to Reverse My Age?

A group of seniors was discussing age-related factors. The Resident Welfare Association (RWA) had organized a charity marathon for seniors aged 60 and above. Suresh, 75, lamented that, had he been younger, he would have participated in the race. For obvious reasons, I maintained a studied silence. However, Suresh's statement raised a niggling question in my mind: Is it worthwhile to reverse one's age? Immediately, my mind dismissed the thought. In the process, I travelled back decades, reflecting on the struggles I endured to reach the current final lap in my life's marathon.

Enjoying the privileges of being the first child was soon overshadowed by the challenges of living in a crowded house, bustling with the arrival of siblings. Academic success became paramount, with the SSLC (11th standard) exams taking centre stage. Achieving good marks brought temporary joy but was quickly replaced by the anxiety of securing admission to a reputable college. Fortunately, I gained admission to a top institution in Chennai. The plan was to complete a degree and attempt the Civil Services Exam. Fate, however, had other ideas.

While pursuing a BSc in Botany, I managed to secure admission to a professional course in Agriculture. This was

during the era of the Third Five-Year Plan, where agriculture held a pivotal role. Sensing the opportunity, I shifted to the professional course. As anticipated, we were recruited by the government even before our results were out, with a princely salary of ₹90 per month, later revised to ₹137. My civil service dreams were dashed when I received a private sector job offer with a salary of ₹300 per month in 1960. Life became challenging, involving 20+ days of travel each month across Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. My next aspiration was to earn a four-figure salary, a goal that took a decade to achieve in 1967. I still cherish the lovely letter my father wrote to me to celebrate this milestone. From there, life took off. Each goal grew more ambitious. With four brothers and five sisters, a significant portion of my earnings went toward their upbringing and the marriages of my sisters. By the time I turned 33, the next goal loomed—finding a supportive partner who could navigate life’s challenges with me. Mithila entered my life, meeting every expectation. Unlike today’s times, we had no anxiety about starting a family. Our two daughters brought immense joy, though my professional commitments often left Mithila to shoulder the responsibility of raising them. Despite the challenges, she managed to nurture two remarkable human beings.

Professionally, I faced fierce competition, working with equally qualified and competent colleagues. Yet, something clicked, and I reached the pinnacle of my career. The price I paid for these achievements was my health, eventually leading to early retirement. Later, the anxiety of finding suitable life partners for my daughters arose. God was kind, though life

threw us another challenge. My second daughter gave birth to quadruplets—three girls and a boy. Two of the girls were diagnosed with autism. Supporting them to become self-reliant without formal education has been a monumental task. My daughter has dedicated her life to special-needs children through a charitable trust, Together Foundation, in Mumbai, providing vocational training. Now, a new challenge looms: ensuring lifelong care for her two daughters after the parents are gone. A self-financed project, Together Community, is underway in Hosur. This initiative will house 40 parents in villas and 40 special-needs adults in studio apartments, supported by a trust managed by the parents. The planning, training, and responsibility are overwhelming, and while I am not directly involved, my anxiety persists until the project's completion by mid 2026.

Reflecting on my life, it's evident that every stage brought its share of expectations and anxieties. Each demand required tremendous effort, often at personal cost. Yet, despite the challenges, life turned out better than I had envisioned. Today, my desires are simple: a clean bed, wholesome yet spiceless food, and a peaceful exit. Would I want to reverse my age and relive the trials and tribulations? Certainly not. At this stage, with fewer demands and reduced energy, I am content. Don't you think I'm better off this way, focusing only on what my physiotherapist recommends?

Ode to Vaidehi: From Firstborn to Guardian

You were the one who first elevated my status,
The firstborn who made me a "Father" in the eyes of the world.
I remember the swinging hammock where I became a poet,
Improving my rhymes and straining my voice in song,
Just to see you drift into a peaceful sleep.
In those early days at Blue Bells Nursery,
Mummy and I were like sentries at the gate,
Waiting on the pavement just to see your face,
Until the school authorities gently drove us away.
Later, you were the anchor for your younger sister,
Sitting patiently on the school steps together
Until the moment Mummy arrived to gather you both.
Life tested you early, and you never faltered.
When Mummy underwent her operation,
You stepped into the kitchen, a young girl with an adult's resolve,
Learning the alchemy of fire and salt to keep us fed.

Then came the grand transition—the bells of Tirupati ringing
for your wedding,

The journey to Madurai, and the leap across the ocean

From a tiny village to the sprawling heart of London,

Where you stood as an unwavering pillar of support for your
husband.

But your greatest strength was saved for home.

You cared for Mummy and me during her sickness with a
devotion

That no words can properly measure.

And for thirteen years now, you have cared for me without a
single murmur,

A steady hand in a world that often feels too fast.

Today, you have become my "stern headmaster."

You forbid me from travelling alone, a watchful eye on my
every move.

You audit my life with the precision of a commander:

Checking my backpack, my oxygen canister, my water,

Ensuring my biscuits and sandwiches are packed

Even for a thirty-minute journey to the doctor.

Every morning, you ask for my preference for lunch,

Ever mindful of a digestive system that has grown delicate
with time.

Vaidehi, you were my child who taught me how to be a father;

Now, you are the guardian who teaches me what it means to be truly loved.

About the Author

S. Lakshminarayanan (89), popularly known as SLN, is an Agricultural graduate whose career spanned nearly four decades of service in the Green Revolution initiative. After thirty-eight years of marketing experience, he retired as Vice President (Commercial) and a member of the Management Committee (MC) of one of India's topmost private-sector fertilizer firms. His expertise took him across the globe as a consultant for the World Bank and the United Nations (FAO), handling assignments in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Vietnam. He also served as a member of the Special Working Group constituted by the Government of India for fertilizer PSUs.

Despite a life filled with high-level strategy and international travel, SLN remains a storyteller for the common man. He often says his greatest achievement is not found in a Management Committee meeting, but in the 100,000 trees he planted as part of a green belt initiative—a living legacy left in the sands of time.

Now, in his 89th year, SLN has traded global and national consultancy for the quiet joys of gardening, counselling, and writing. Following his previous books, *A Dangerous Predicament* (co-authored with his late wife) and *Eagles Don't Miss*, he returns with this collection. It is a book written for the tired soul, born from a "pickled jar" of stories and a sudden spark of inspiration.

Synopsis: The Pickle Jar-Snippets for a Tired Professional and Exhausted Housewife

The Author's Journey:

Following the success of *A Dangerous Predicament* and *Eagles Don't Miss* (available on Amazon in paperback and Kindle), S. Lakshminarayanan (89) returns with his third collection. These previous works captured a decade of observations ending in 2023. The current manuscript, penned between 2023 and 2024, was "pickled" following a period of ill health due to postural vertigo. Now, with a sudden boost of energy and a renewed spark, the author presents *The Pickle Jar-Snippets for a Quiet Afternoon*.

The Essence of the Book:

This collection is a vibrant potpourri of observations designed for both incisive introspection and comic relief. It serves as a bridge between generations, exploring the shifting sands of modern life through the lens of a seasoned observer.

Key themes include:

- **The Changing Face of Relationships:** From the "volcanic" shifts in marital norms to the delicate dance with daughters-in-law, emphasizing how open

communication and humour are the true anchors of bliss.

- **Modern Conundrums:** A look at the high-stress life of the middle class, where the thief of joy is often compared rather than a lack of resources.
- **Social Reflections:** Thoughts on the dignity of blue-collar labour and the urgent need for vocational training over traditional degrees in humanities.
- **The Magic of Language:** A light hearted exploration of how animals, car parts, and even our own anatomy enrich our daily vocabulary.
- **Short Stories:** Three evocative tales that resonate with the universal joys and struggles found within every family.

Literary Spirit: Influenced by the wit of P.G. Wodehouse and the gentle realism of R.K. Narayan, the author finds echoes of Jeeves, Aunt Agatha, and the residents of Malgudi in the people he meets every day. Written at the "oldest old" stage of life, this book is a testament to the fact that, while the body may slow down, the "creative juices" of a storyteller never truly dry up. It is a book for the commoner—the tired professional and the exhausted homemaker—offering a quiet afternoon of "time pass" and reflection.