

I am born a new today

1

From the fifth floor of the wartime naval force office building, which also functioned as the Correctional Facility, Ilango looked out to the streets of great, grand New York City. Situated on Flushing Street, the place had doubled as a detention camp for illegal immigrants and had been his only home for the past two months. Darkness from the night continued to seep through with all kinds of thoughts swirling Ilango's mind. At last, the dream of escaping this detention camp would soon become a reality. From tomorrow onwards, he would be a real free bird. The Court of Justice has allowed him, who hitherto, has been detained in prison as an illegal immigrant waiting to

be released on bail. Now, he could hope for the solution of demanding refugee status. He can go out without any constraint and face the challenges that life has in store for him. But before we continue, it would now be helpful to the readers to learn some details about this man.

Ilango: He is a Tamil citizen of Sri Lanka. A young man. One of the thousands of Tamils who fled from their Mother Land following the 1983 ethnic riots. The conflict, wrath, and hostility between the two main social groups – The Sinhalese and the Tamils – are known to have a long-fought socio-political feud of over two thousand years. However, since 1948, when the foreigners who had last ruled the island (e.g. the British) left Sri Lanka, the ethnic clashes resumed. The past historical events of the island greatly contributed to the current situation. Beginning from Thuttakamini/Ellaalan, continuing through Rajarajan I/Rajendran, then Singai Paraasaran, and ending with the king of Kandi Sri Vikrama Rajasinha – such a lengthy history cannot be brushed aside with one stroke. The enmity and distrust between these two ethnic groups gradually intensified to the present stage of treacherously raging fire. Further deliberate, strategic settlements on the basis of ethnicity, the method of grading in Education, political priorities on the basis of religion have just added fuel to the fire, so to say. But, these are all superficial reasons. The deep-rooted causes are really the distinctly different traits, problems and conflicts on both the socio-political and economic fronts.

A grand procession all over the sky. Near the Moon, a few sparkles lay. The sky of the city; the sparkles of the city; the Moon of the city; the flash and glitter of the city. Its pomp and colossal extravaganza are not just affecting the Earth but have a miserable impact on the sky too. That is the reason why the

innocent and gullible villagers are migrating from villages to cities and from the poor soil to the rich foreign lands. Migration takes place everywhere in numerous ways and due to numerous reasons. There have been migrations in search of treasure; migrations for the sake of women; migrations for the sake of very survival, fleeing from one's own bomb-ridden nation... and for those forced to exit their land and enter another for fear of their lives, this sky and the moon and the glow and the sparkles therein would always give solace. Oh, how many poets have turned towards the Moon in times of gloom, within and without- to get some peace and hope!

Once again, Ilango's mind turned towards his future. There were many compelling reasons for his migration. Many political and economic compulsions. His very survival demanded that but the additional responsibility of bringing up his family made him adhere to this course. Once he left, there are so many problems awaiting to confront him. New place, new set of people, new culture; the incessant struggle to keep going in a new habitat. He has to keep his body and mind intact to keep his struggle for survival fresh. He had not more than a mere 200 American dollars in hand. Keeping this meagre sum as some sort of investment, he continues his struggle.

“What is it that you are so deeply contemplating?” asked Arulrasa, standing in front of him. He is another Sri Lankan Tamil who migrated as a refugee. Out of all the refugees who had come to stay with them, and later going away one by one, these two remained alone. They didn't have any familiar people here. So, both of them resolved to face life in New York, together. The others had someone or other known kin living in New Jersey, Connecticut, Long Island and in several

other places.

But, sadly, these two didn't have any. Therefore, they resolved to face life with a connected front.

Back home, Arulrasa had worked as an accountant in a reputed firm.

“Well, tomorrow, after going out where do you plan to stay?”, asked Ilango.

Arulrasa showed him the India Abroad advertisement and said: “Here you can have a room for 30 dollars weekly rent, the ad said. First let us go and stay there for some days. And, from there let us try for some job. I have three hundred to four hundred dollars. You have some two hundred dollars. This is enough for a beginning.

I tried to contact them over the phone, in the afternoon. It is a Marathi family. There are a lot of people staying in those rentals, it seems. First, let us go there. What do you say?”.

“Ok, sounds good. We can also seek some suggestions from those living there. So, let's go there first. Then, we can discuss any further plans. First and foremost, we should step out of this cursed prison”.

After that both of them sat along with the others detained there and watched old movies being shown in the T.V., placed in the hall, for some time. When that became tiresome, they ticked the time away playing ‘table tennis’. Feeling tired with that too, they came over to the dormitory and stretched themselves on their respective ‘bunk-beds’. It was nearing the hour of

midnight. Along the corridors that linked the halls, there were guards of African-American origin, half-asleep. The official-in-charge for counting the prisoners had also come and gone. Prisoners belonging to all nationalities... from Afghanistan, those from Central America, from the Caribbean Islands – so many prisoners, prisoners of all kinds - illegal immigrants, those imprisoned for petty crimes, those awaiting the day of their deportation – almost all of them were sleeping. Arulrasa soon plunged into sleep. But, Ilango couldn't. At such times, he would generally write in his diary. As usual, he took out his diary from under the pillow and read several pages of it for a while. His heart could experience small ripples and bubbles of joy once again! He wrote further: “INDRU PUDHIDHAAI PIRANDHAEN” – Today I am born anew. His heart became lighter. He viewed those humans sleeping there. ”YAANEDHARKKUM ANJUGILAEN MAANUDARE!” – I Will Fear Nothing, My Dear Fellows!”. With new dreams and fresh hopes, bubbling with joy, Ilango fell fast asleep.

2

Ilango, who was in deep sleep, suddenly woke up with a jerk. All those nearby, except one, were fast asleep. What are all those dreams and imaginations overflowing in those minds of those who had been plunged into gloom and desperation? All wondering what the future held for them, feeling terribly low and fatigued.

Next to him lay Ranjith Singh, wide awake. He had arrived from Germany a few days ago. There, he had legally proper immigration documents. Here, he had arrived illegally and had applied for refugee status. They caught him and put him behind bars. He now understands the rules and regulations prevalent in America regarding the application for for

refugee status. “My friend, what is it you are thinking?” asked Ilango in English.

Ilango’s question created some ripples in Ranjith Singh’s deep contemplation. “Come on, you are blessed. Tomorrow morn you would have gone away. But, see my state? Because I landed here without an ounce of knowledge of these people’s laws and strictures, I have gotten myself into trouble”.

“What does your lawyer suggest?”

“As if you don’t know what it could be. He coolly said that I have to be confined here till the case pertaining to the request for refugee status comes to a close.”

“What is your plan?”

“Oh, who will consent to spend his days inside this cursed cell? Even if they are to send me, they will send me back to Germany only. And returning to Germany seems to be the only way out. The right choice, so to say. Unnecessarily, I listened to that agent’s empty words and paid him all my savings for nothing. Nothing at all. All because of my greed to make some quick bucks.”

“At least things look a bit better in your case. You can go back to Germany. You actually have proper citizenship documents there. But, see the pitiable condition of those here. Till there litigations are over they are cursed to remain here, languishing. Even after that, the requisition of many would still be an uncertain fate. They would be deported. Till that time, we should get along, with our dreams and future plans, hoping for a better tomorrow. Sometimes I feel like laughing my heart out

when I think of their queer rules and laws, you know”.

“If we succeed in illegally entering the country, then we can at least hope to come out with bail. But, if we are to be caught while getting inside the country through the air or the sea, that is all. Such people are treated worse under the law of this land. They are not allowed bail till their cases end. If I had an inkling of this before, I would have entered in guise of a tourist and then we could apply for refugee status, no? If I happen to see that agent again, I wouldn’t hesitate to strangle him. Ahh, my seething anger”.

“Must be a budding agent, who has yet to learn the peculiar laws of this land. Just like other lands, when you sought refugee status and applied for it, he must have overlooked it or didn’t care. In Canada, the moment you ask for refugee status they would let you out and, he must have thought that it would have been the same here. If only we had set off to Canada - as planned - we would have saved ourselves from all these entanglements. Anyhow, we are saved somewhat. Otherwise, we would have been languishing right here...”

Ranjith became a little contemplative and admitted, “What you say is true. In one way, I am better off, when compared to this lot. I realize that now.”

“A song from a film comes to my mind right now. It is the song of a famous film songwriter who was reigning supreme in his time. He was a Tamil scholar, and his knowledge helped him in writing good songs for films. The particular song I am referring to is a very nice song about life as a whole. It says, ‘Of course, there will be so many things in life. Each and every household will have its own sorrows and sufferings. Whatever the sorrows and sufferings, if we are to stand still, cursing our

fate, they wouldn’t go, disappearing.’”

“Indeed, a very poignant song. Must be the words of a person bruised and battered in life. Like us. And that experience is the basis for this song.” Ranjith laughed softly. Then, he continued. “Well, what about you? What is your story? I have so many Sri Lankan friends in Germany. And, they would tell me many tales.”

“Oh, please don’t remind me of that again. Before this, when I was a little boy I had seen people escaping such riots. I have heard tales about them. There was a riot in 1977. For the first time, the main Tamil Political Front had achieved their demand for a Separate State for Tamils. But, the resulting riot was worse than ever before. It was a riot that took place with the Government’s support. The struggle of the Eelam Tamils, oh, it is a very long history.”

“A tiny existence, a small planet. But what a beautiful planet it is! This blue sky, night, moon and its shine – oh how beautiful they are!”

Ranjith’s words surprised Ilango. “Hey, how come you are speaking like a poet?”

For that the other replied. “Writing and Reading are my two eyes. They are my very lungs. They are the two rooms of my heart. I cannot live without them. Yes, what you say is correct. I am a writer. And I am always enamoured by this universe, its immaculate design and structure. And, believe me, I have never been struck by anything with so much wonder and awe as this night sky! This is so splendid that it would always stir my imagination. The war and the resulting bloodshed and all such malice cruelly destroy this beautiful world. If we can go

on trying to grasp its meaning and enjoy the sight and sound of it, that itself is a boon unparalleled.”

That particular moment made Ilango feel like laughing, just a little. Being born in one corner of the globe and being in a cell situated in another, faraway corner, at the hour of night when the whole world would be sleeping, this conversation is taking place with another human born in another end of the world who had dwelt in yet another corner!

"Why do you laugh, my friend! Do I look like a madman? But, remember, it is such men who would have appeared so, insane and impractical, who had eventually

changed history and created history! This is what life is all about.”

“You are thinking just like me. If I had not stirred out of sleep at this particular moment, if you too hadn’t been so wide awake, we would have lost the chance for such a rare conversation. Thousands of years ago, a poet belonging to our race had sung so poignantly: ‘YAADHU OORAE-YAAVARUM KELIR,’ this small little planet should be owned by one and all, the human beings inhabiting this place”.

"If only we could have remained the same, you, or I, or they who lie there sleeping, and not have reached this sad state, isn’t it so?” – observing this left Ranjith Singh with a thin smile. Then he continued, “If only these Americans had known the words of your poet...”

Ilango acknowledged this and quickly replied, “Who said that the Americans do not know? As far as they are concerned, every land is their place and everyone is their kith and kin. Can

you think of any place in the world where they have not set foot? And, do they have any hurdle common to us? It is only for people like us, belonging to the third world, that all such problems pile up.”

Meanwhile, seeing them engaged in a conversation, the prison warden, of African-American origin, abruptly asked, “When everyone else is sleeping where is the need for you to keep chatting? If you can’t sleep, just go to the recreation hall and talk.” In doing his duty, he left the place.

“My friend! Just don’t worry. Let tomorrow be good to us. Good Night,” with that, Ilango stretched himself onto his cot once again. Ranjith Singh too responded with a “Good Night”, and climbed into his bed.

However, that night, sleep seemed to elude Ilango. He kept looking at the night sky through the window. He keenly observed those glittering, starry beauties. The words of Ranjith still echoed in his ears. . “Writing and Reading are my two eyes. They are my very lungs. They are the two rooms of my heart. I cannot live without them. Yes, what you say is correct. I am a writer. And I am always enamoured by this universe, its immaculate design and structure. And, believe me, I have never been struck by anything with so much wonder and awe as this night sky! This is so splendid that it would always stir my imagination. The war and the resulting bloodshed and all such malice cruelly destroy this beautiful world. If we can go on trying to grasp its meaning and enjoy the sight and sound of it, that itself is a boon unparalleled.”

The sense of surprise became overwhelming. Ranjith thinks exactly like him. Just like him, Ranjith, too, is a writer. For

Ilango, books remained an integral part of his life. He cannot imagine an existence without writing and reading. The joy that he experienced while writing is something unique and unparalleled. The way the books widen his knowledge and wisdom and the way writing broadens the depth of his thinking capacity and the potential of creativity. They sharpen our eagerness and curiosity to unravel the riddles and mysteries of our life. Generally, all the natural events make the writers' stallions of creative imagination gallop all too energetically and joyously, speeding through all possible directions. He picks up his diary and leafs through the pages. His eyes scan the earlier pages. -“Through the window, in that well of the night, the whole world is fast asleep causing the sky to tremble, the globe shivering uncontrollably, the thunder piercing through the stillness and the rain pouring down. The unleashing of the wind as the wolf howls – on such a night, in the sky, the momentary shine of a ray of lightning, resembling a lamp showing the way and its splendid beauty as that of an ace danseuse with steps so perfectly attuned to the beats of the thunder. All this stirs the imagination of a poet, without fail. As a result, a poignant poem is born!

he wonders. Oh, what a profound thing this lightning is! Just a moment, no, just a fraction of a second it lives. It shines and dies almost the same moment but within that hairline gap how beautifully it lightens the sky! The way the poor lightning dies the very moment it comes into being is no news. But, the message I get from it is this: within the fraction of the second that it lives, it lights up the sky and the earth and so does service to humanity! This is the message we should derive from lightning. Our life is brief, but, within that short span of life we should serve our society and humanity in the best possible manner. We should have service as our purpose of life.

Saying so, the poet goes on to wonder whether the world would benefit a little from his thought-process.

Another poet revels so much at the sight of the little sparrow flying happily on all directions across the sky, happily drinking the wine of daylight spilled over everywhere and mating its pair, chatting and singing and merrymaking, hatching its little ones and feeding them and waking up well before dawn while remaining active throughout the day. All this he hails in his song that asks his fellow-beings to be like the sparrow, free and liberated.

Yet another poet, a bard, who has written so many things to tell even after his death, mistakes an insect as a full-stop in his writings and pushes it away by the back of his hand. Then, realizing that it was not a dot but an insect he writes, “Oh, you are no more. My heart experienced a pricking pain. You must have opened your mouth and screamed in pain. I didn't hear. In that split-second when I caused your death killed in broad daylight you lay there like a thin line. Even that was hardly an inch long. As the tender shoot crushed under the feet of wild buffalo, as the ant crushed under the long train, as the valuables of our house not locked, lost forever, you disappeared without a trace. Thus your absolute 'real' turned into absolute illusion. Oh, your death is not just, it happened by mistake, oh, don't you curse me, my tiny little friend, oh, can you forgive me, my little friend?” – thus he laments in deep anguish.

As he read those lines Ilango could feel a kind of pleasure pervading his heart, and for the second time he caught up with sleep that night.

3

When Ilango woke up again from deep sleep, it had not yet dawned. All the others were still in bed, fast asleep. Ilango felt a little surprised to see it. “What is this, something unusual that I am not getting sleep...?”, he wondered. That noon he was to be released from the detention camp. Could it be the impact of this realization in the innermost depth of his heart that had caused the sleeplessness in him? Possibly... The ecstasy of freedom is something miraculous; indescribable. The ecstasy of breaking the shackles is something very unique. Once again, his eyes moved in all directions. The hour of the night appeared to still be immersed in the stillness before day-break. The prison warders were also more than half-asleep.

Just for a short while. The dawn would soon break. Another blossom of the day would open its petals in the all too busy city. His life would be pushed into another place. In that new place, only God knows what all events and environments await him. It doesn't matter; as long as there is the determination and enthusiasm in him to love life and welcome it with open hands, he need not have any fear. As the soft blades of grass, which, despite the incessant stamping of numerous feet, keep on stirring afresh, he too would be forever rising. And, as the feathered species that never get tired of hailing the day-break, he too would be singing the glory of a new day. It was during the last several months that everything in his life turned upside down.

He held a prestigious post with a governmental organization, but ultimately landed himself inside the prison of a foreign land due to the twists and turns of oh so many events. In his mind, the recollections of the 1983 riot soon began to unfold. Even today, he finds it hard to believe that his friends, and his own self, managed to escape. That day he and his friends had to go to ‘Neer Colombo’ city on an official errand. He was then dwelling in the locality called Kottaanchenai in Colombo. His friend was in the Kalkisai area. Getting up in the morning, even when he went to the Armour Street and boarded a bus, he was unaware of the fact that the riot had begun and worsening. But, on the way he came across several shops and structures that were burned and charred. Yet, the full realization of the situation escaped him. Even seeing the Sinhala woman standing nearby, pointing at the burned shops and saying something, thanks to his slight proficiency in Sinhalese, he couldn't fully understand it.

Even in appearance, he looked like a Sinhala man. It is a common practice among the Sinhala youth to sport a beard without moustache. Hence, the girl must have mistaken him for a Sinhala youth and shared some information or viewpoint with him. After that, when he proceeded to Kalkisai and walked towards the house of his friend, a group of Sinhala youths standing on the way cast a strange look at him but even that failed to din into him the volatile situation. Then, he and his friend once again boarded a bus. It was when they reached the Purakottai bus terminus and were awaiting the arrival of the bus that would take them to NeerColumbo where the conversation between two Sinhalese standing nearby reached their ears. His friend knew the Sinhala language very well. Only then the gravity of the situation dawned on them. His friend said: “The problem seems to be pretty serious”.

“What? Please explain!” Ilango hurriedly demanded. And, his friend responded, “From what they are saying, the riot and arson have already begun. And, it is turning more and more serious by every passing minute. Like a deadly tornado, so to say. We cannot go to Neer Columbo today. Let’s go to the office immediately. That is the safest thing to do. Only now everything seems crystal-clear. The charred remains of shops that you came across in Marudhaanai, the strange glance of those Sinhalese near our house. It all makes sense now. The faster we reach our office, the better for words of these men suggest that a riot could break out right here at any time.”

Ilango could see the truth in his friend’s observation. Without delay they got into a bus and reached their office. When they went inside the people there looked at them, curiously. A Muslim worker there came over to them and informed them of the ethnic riots and that they have begun in various parts of their land.

He cautioned them to be vigilant. He was born as a Muslim and brought up in Columbo, in the area called Grandpase. He is fluent in both Tamil and Sinhala and he would always share with them the important events taking place in and around Sri Lanka. And, despite the fact that the two of them worked in the organization in a higher cadre, they would mix with him freely. And, he too would reciprocate their warmth. That’s why he made sure to caution them. They thanked him and for a while, pondered over what they should and could do.

“I don’t think it is advisable to return to our place. Where else we can go?” asked Ilango’s friend.

“Well, during the last riot and arson, the Ramakrishna Hall had been of great help- so I have read in Newspapers. So, it would be better to go there, I feel. What do you say?”

“What you say sounds good. But, how do we reach there?” asked his friend.

“See the parking lot, there are many company cars. Shall we go and ask our director?”

“Ilango, I wonder what the director would prefer to do in a situation like this. As it is we are fighting with him to make our job permanent. If he is to recollect all those clashes and say no to us means...?”

“Come on, nothing wrong in trying, no? If we get help, great. Otherwise, we have to think of some other way.”

Deciding this, they proceeded towards the director’s cabin. Director Simon had no smile on his face, not even then. He greeted them grimly and enquired, “Good morning, please

come. What is the matter?”.

Ilango swiftly answered, “Good Morning Sir, Hope you are aware of the present situation.”

“Of course, I do. It is indeed unfortunate. Let me see whether I can do anything to help you.”

Ilango and his friend said in one voice: “Thank You Sir”.

Ilango continued, “Thank you very much for your words of assurance Sir. We feel that it would be safe to go to Ramakrishna Hall in Wellawathai. If you can help us to go there...”

“Tell me Ilango, how can I help you in this?”

“Sir, if only you wish, you can help us by giving one of our office cars to go.”

Director Simon contemplated this for a while. Then he said, “I am sorry, but I can’t say anything in this. For, no driver will agree to this. I think it is safe for you to just remain here.”

Both of them thanked him and returned to their places.

Ilango disappointedly stated, “If he had wished, he could have helped us easily. I don’t think any harm will come over to the wagons belonging to the State Government’s Departments, especially if driven by Sinhala men. His friend was rationalizing the Director’s behaviour, explaining, “Maybe, but he is also thinking of the olden days and that’s why he is behaving like this.”

“I expected him to behave in this manner. And, he has proven

me right. At this instant, I have made my decision”.

“Oh, what is that?”

“If I somehow come out of this riot, unscathed and alive, I would never set foot inside this damned office. That is for sure. Let this be the last humiliation that we have suffered here.”

“Ahh, Ilango, this is what I call your weakness. You never consider for a moment the possibility of adjusting and compromising a little but set forth to implement your instant decisions at once. Sometimes we have to bend a little. If we have to get something done, we have to be prepared to even fall at one’s feet, you know.”

At this juncture, the Muslim official entered. He looked a little agitated.

Ilango immediately noticed, prompting him to ask, “What is wrong? Why are you looking ill at ease?”

The official anxiously replied, “The sooner you leave this place, the better.”

Ilango’s friend became a little frightened. “Why do you say so?”

And, the official replied. “They are planning to attack the Tamils working here. It is better that you leave this place before any such attempt.”

“What is this, this man is throwing a bomb like this?” Ilango’s friend was obviously frightened.

“Come now, Friend, he is just speaking the truth, isn’t he? Let us move away from here as fast as we can. Come.”

At that moment, they could hear a commotion outside and so all of them moved towards the entrance. Ilango, too, went out as one among the crowd. All those working in the Government offices and private firms in Marudhaanai St had already gathered outside, trying to catch a glimpse of the events. What was it that they were looking at with bated breath? Along the road that proceeded towards the Pillayaar temple in Kappithaavathai, there was a lorry speeding past carrying armed thugs. The goondaas wearing Longs and Shirts had wooden sticks in their hands. In the short while since they had sped past, a thick cloud of smoke rose from the side of Pillayaar temple. Alas, we see the fate of Kappithaavathai Pillayaar himself, who had thousands of devotees, of whom the most revered prime-minister Premadasa is also one.

As Ilango contemplated of what happened, a Tamil man of a heavier build came running from the place where the temple was located, with cuts and wounds on his ear. He ran in great haste towards Vijayavardhana Maavathai road. He strove to stop some bus or some other vehicle fully loaded with people, but none of them halted.

At that moment, a small crowd poured into the streets in hot pursuit, running after him with wooden sticks in their hands. Of those who came running, one man moved closer to the people watching what was happening there. And, the man eyed each and everyone of those standing there, scrutinizing them. When he reached Ilango he stopped a second. “Themiladhaa, Sinhaladhaa?” he asked with suspicion. “Singala”, said Ilango,

in a half-hearted manner, not saying anything more than that. If another word were to fall out of his mouth, the ‘Kaadaiyan’ would smell the truth that he most definitely a Tamil. Ilango realized that the situation was getting out of hand. Meanwhile, the Tamil man with the cuts and wounds had disappeared. He might have got into some bus’, thought Ilango. And, he slowly walked back into his office.

Ilango was instantly asked by his friend, “What? How is the situation outside?”

“Looks like the situation will get out of hand, turn worse. I had a miraculous escape.”

At this time, the higher officers of the Department Kandarithnam and Balakrishnan, who were working as the Civil engineering Advisor of the United Nations Development Organization, were seen moving towards the entrance in great haste. And, Kandharathinam’s secretary, Imelda, was also hurrying along with them. Oh, where were they going in such great haste?

Ilango said to his friend, “We will also go with them. If they too leave then we will be stranded here all alone.”

Both of them followed Kandharathinam. Outside there was the official wagon waiting for them and they got into it. Without waiting for their permission, Ilango and his friend got into it hurriedly. And the driver of the wagon steered it towards Marudhaanai.

In the meanwhile, someone must have passed on the information to the goondas, who were parading, that some Tamils were escaping in a vehicle. Some of the thugs came running towards

their vehicle. If they had been caught by them, they would have been gone for ever. And, the driver of their wagon could go up to Gamini Theatre in Marudhaanai Saalai and not beyond that. It was too tense. The driver hurriedly took a u-turn and proceeded along Vijayavardhana Maavathai towards Lake House.

Kandharathinam and Balakrishnan looked a little worried. But, Imelda was on the verge of tears. Worried to death that she would also be manhandled by the thugs, along with the Tamils in their vehicle, she felt suffocated and started crying. It was when they were proceeding along the roads and streets of Colombo, that Ilango came to realize the full intensity of the all-pervading riot and arson. How fast these calamities spread their vicious nets all over... along the roads there were vehicles owned by the Tamils - they were all set on fire. It was not possible to see whether there were people inside those burning vehicles. There were many shops burning in most of the streets and roads too. Ilango asked Kandharathinam in English. "Where do you plan to go?"

And, he responded saying, "Both of us are going to Hotel Oberoy. Imelda is going to her home in Thegivalai. Where are the two of you going?"

"Oh, it is fine then. The driver can leave you at the hotel and then leave us in Ramakrishnan Hall. Imelda has to be taken that way only, isn't it so?"

Imelda was still crying.

The two officers were taken to the Oberoy Hotel; as they left,

the driver started along Galle street.

A little elderly, the Sinhala driver looked at both of us and asked, "Where do you want to go?"

The friend announced that it would be better to take them to Ramakrishna Hall.

But, the driver of the wagon said, "Sorry, I can't come as far as the hall. I will leave you at the junction where the road to Ramakrishna Hall and the Galle street meet. There you can get down and proceed on foot."

Ilango wasn't surprised with that, "Oh, that's enough. Thank you very much."

All along the passage, the scenery was unchanged. Stores and shops were burned in raging fire. There were vehicles upturned, smashed and burnt. Tamils, men women and children running with the fear of death were written large on their faces... the tension was mounting with every passing moment. The lucky birds were happily flying up above, in the sky, blissfully ignorant of what was happening in our midst. Of course, Ilango to envied them. Oh, how they go round and round, fluttering their wings, being so carefree!

The driver of the wagon halted at the said junction and requested them to get down. Leaving the officers at the hotel, he seemed to have left his courtesy and politeness there too, which he had earlier extended to Ilango and his friend. Ilango looked at his friend and asked, "What, shall we get down and walk?"

His friend nodded and so both of them hurriedly climbed down.

It was exactly at that moment that a group of ‘Kaadaiyargal’ (thugs) holding knives and sticks in their hands, roaring so dangerously was emerging from a slum near Dehiwele canal. They were shouting something in Sinhala and were proceeding in the direction where these two had just arrived. Oh, no time to stop and think. Ilango and his friend got into the vehicle in a flash once again. Imelda whose tears had stopped rolling down at last, began to cry again. Ilango asked the driver to leave them both in Dehiwela. Frowning, the driver started the engine. Fortunately, the fanatic group didn’t stop their vehicle and trouble them. When they drew near Dehiwela, at the junction where the road to Colombo Zoo turned, the driver of the car stopped the vehicle once again. It was then Ilango noticed two Sinhala Police men were happily chatting with a group of Sinhalese, appeared to be real thugs. Then, he asked the driver.

“Why have you stopped? Can you leave us at Ramakrishna hall on your way back, after leaving Imelda in her place?”

For his plea, the driver of the vehicle said in a harsh, raised voice, “Who can give a guarantee to my life?”

Ilango looked askance to his friend and whispered, “This man will shout like this and may even help the thugs catch hold of us. Before that, let’s get down. That alone is the wise thing to do. It would have been better if we too had got down at the hotel itself along with Kandharathinam.”

Thanking the driver and Imelda, Ilango started walking towards the road in the opposite direction, heading towards the seashore. He told his friend this, “Don’t speak to me about anything. But,

just follow me. Got it? Don’t look agitated or afraid. Sport a calm and composed exterior. We can walk like this and get into the Library Road and reach the sea-shore. From there we can go to Ramakrishna Hall. And, while we walked along the seashore, if I keep enjoying the sight of the sea and the sky, don’t be surprised. If some thugs happen to come along the railway track we will not cause any suspicion in them. Got it. So, in the climax, I might even have a bath in the sea!”

Saying this, Ilango began to walk towards the seashore and his friend walked behind him, a few steps away.

4

Even in those early hours of the morning, there were some European tourists happily taking a bath in the sea. “Foreigners are happily enjoying a bath in the sea, but myself, who is a son of the soil keeps running to escape death. I don’t have even the freedom and rights that these foreigners have.” Thus a thought invariably came to prevail upon Ilango that very moment, creating a chasm in his mind. Observing that the movements of the thugs going along the metro train routes from Colombo to Kaali was increasing, he got down into the sea-shore sands and began to walk in the direction of Ramakrishna Hall, watching the sea and its beauty

and the people bathing there. Every now and then he looked back to make sure that his friend was following him. As for his friend, he looked like a rural Sinhala youth with curly hair and slightly fair skinned. Also, he can talk Sinhalese fluently. So, he could easily escape the wrath and the consequences. But, Ilango’s situation was different. Armed with only a few Sinhalese phrases, such as ‘Oeyaage nama makkadha?’ or ‘dikkath dikkath thennavaa,’ he is completely at a loss when it comes to speaking in Sinhalese. An incident that took place in his university life would be enough to highlight his proficiency in the Sinhala tongue. Once, the senior students who ragged him, ordered him to go buy half a ‘rathal’ of sugar. He went to the grocery store near campus, which was owned by a Sinhala man. He uttered the phrase ‘Ekka Maaraa’ which is used in Sinhala to mean one-and-a-half ‘raathal paan’ and asked for ‘seeni maaraa’ (the correct usage is ‘seeni baagayaa’). It is easy to see how he became the object of ridicule to those there.

Another incident is also worth remembering. It took place while he was traveling in a train. Once, when he was traveling in ‘Yaazhdevi’, the Jaffna to Colombo train, he was going from Colombo fort to Yaazh Nagar and felt like buying a mutton role from the restaurant there. But, that particular restaurant was run by a Sinhalese man. So, he asked him, using what little he knew of the Sinhala tongue, ‘roll keeyadha?’ For that the shopkeeper responded saying, ‘Ekka Visippagaa.’ Hearing that he felt very happy while wondering how this shopkeeper was selling a roll so cheap, only twenty-five satham (Cents) per piece when in their place it was being sold for one rupee and a ‘satham’ per piece. And, he happily bought two rolls and relished them and then gave fifty sathams (Cents) as their

cost, to the shopkeeper. And, the way the shopkeeper glared at him unsettled him greatly and only then he found out that the actual price of one roll was not just twenty-five satham but one rupee and twentyfive satham (Cents). Due to such situations, along with the prevailing climate of turmoil and hostility, he lost all interest to learn Sinhala tongue. And if some Sinhala 'Kadaiyan' (Thug) were to test his skill and expertise in using Sinhala language at this juncture, he would be doomed. The one and only thought that occupied his mind then was to somehow seek entry into Ramakrishna Hall. Somehow, his mind believed in that tumultuous moment, that just like in the previous turmoil, this time also the thugs would spare him.

Somehow he and his friend reached the gates of Ramakrishna Hall. It was a 'so near yet so far' scenario. The front gates of the Hall were locked. And, right in front of the front gates, there stood a group of thugs, watching the Hall keenly with a look of amusement and curiosity.

He and his friend stood along with them and pretended as bystanders, watching the events happening. Every now and then, a handful of Colombo Tamils were coming in wagons and alighting in front of the Hall. And, the security guard of the Hall was cautiously opening the gates to let them in and closing them in. It was during one such moment that he and his friend joined a group of affected Tamils seeking shelter and entered inside. Inside the Hall, there were many Tamils, terror-stricken as to what would happen next. Outside the gates, the group of thugs, remained fixed to the ground, watching keenly. And, the group kept growing larger with the passing of every minute. Among those Tamils who had sought shelter in the Hall, there was a honeymooning couple that had come there to celebrate

their unity. They looked miserable.

Here, a Tamil youth, slightly taller than the rest, and of sturdy stature looked at the Tamil youths gathered there and said, "In a little while, those thugs watching us from outside would barge in. We shouldn't be afraid. We should stand up against them with courage."

Hearing that speech, Ilango couldn't help feeling that it was a kind of unwise and impractical bravery. In such situations it would be good to approach and handle the problem at hand tactfully, without getting emotional and enraged but remaining calm and composed. One shouldn't be hasty, which makes everything all the more complicated. While he was thinking on these lines the young man who spoke earlier went inside and brought, from out of the blue, long iron rods, in the size of 'alavaangu' and handed them to the other Tamil youths.

Outside, the delirium and the frenzy of the thugs were gaining momentum, every second. Every now and then the Sri Lankan armymen came in Jeeps shouting "Jayaveevaa" too enthusiastically, which made these thugs more arrogant and atrocious. Standing in front of the Ramakrishna Hall, some Sinhala Policemen were having a good fun watching the events unfolding. This emboldened the thugs, who tried to barge into the Hall. Realizing that the situation was turning out of control, they took to their heels. Seeing that the thugs were pushing their way in, the Tamils inside the Hall were scared to death and began to run helter-skelter inside the Hall.

It was the very same guy, who was giving advice to the Tamil youths that they should not be cowed down by the Sinhala thugs but to face them bravely, who disappeared from the spot,

running away. The others too dropped their belongings and ran off, in all directions, seeking a safe corner. As they had to run for their lives, Ilango and his friend got separated. The Tamil women went to the terrace, climbing the stairs.

And there, not even having a place to hide, they crowded and huddled in the spot between the water-tank and the floor of the terrace, terror-stricken.

When Ilango reached the terrace, there was no place left for him to hide except for behind the pillars protruding into the terrace. The plight of the women huddled under the water-tank was miserable. An elderly Tamil man, as if he had made up his mind to face whatever happened, leaned against a pillar and kept on watching the sky. The clouds wandering there masqueraded as refugees. It was then that he, by chance, saw the same young man, who had initially offered them weapons, lying on the water-tank and staring at the sky. Those beneath couldn't see that he was lying up above.

At this juncture there was a thick ball of smoke and fire rising above from the direction of Wellavathai, indicating that the ethnic arson and riot were wreaking further havoc. Ilango could now see the Tamils running along the railway tracks, towards the direction where Dehiwela stood.

Elderly women ran, struggling to keep their sarees up to their knees, so as not to topple and tumble down. Some of the tourists staying in Hotel Brighton on the opposite side were having fun watching all these. Some others were taking photographs. And, at this juncture the Sinhalese thugs set ablaze a bus that stood in the campus of Ramakrishna Hall, which belonged to Pillayar

vilas of Yaazhpaanam. And, they banged another Jeep against the glass wall of the first floor. Now, the thugs gained entry. One of them came up to the terrace and peeped.

Looking around he shouted, "Uthaa Innavaa" and went away. Returning within minutes, he stood near the stairs and gestured to those huddled there to climb down. And those who did so were dispossessed of all their belongings and only then they were allowed to move on. Many of them had to let go even those few jewels, cash and such valuables, which they had managed to take with them while escaping in dire urgency.

When there is no guarantee even for the safety one's life, who at all needs money and belongings?

Those who had now climbed down were once again driven to the terrace by the menacing shouts and screams from the thugs gathered downstairs. Again the hapless Tamils ran helter-skelter, in all directions, frightened to death. Many of them hid themselves inside the toilets or elsewhere in the bathrooms. The honeymooning couple was huddled inside a toilet for some time. The couple was shocked and terrorized.

Among the thugs, some even tried to set the Ramakrishna Hall on fire. The police-men, who had up till then been watching everything as passive bystanders, stirred and stepped in. Seeing them, the thugs didn't proceed but went outside and began to watch the resulting events unfold again. At that juncture, there were men women and children breaking open the houses of Tamil people and taking away all the valuables inside those houses. The army-men were encouraging the thugs, speeding past us in their Jeeps and shouting "Jeya Veevaa."

After that the policemen who entered inside ordered that everyone there should leave. But, when thugs are wreaking havoc, where do they go? Hence, all of them got into the house of the chief monk of Ramakrishna Hall. At the same time, while fleeing away from the Hall, many of the Tamils clung to the coconut tree there and jumped outside as their escape. His friend must have been one among them, for, he was not to be found among those who sought shelter in the monk's house.

The problem was not over with that. Some of those thugs, who somehow found out that the Tamils were inside the chief monk's house, made it a point to circle the house. Among those who had been trapped inside, some were affluent Tamils of Colombo. They tried with all their might to use their influence and contact the higher powers of the land, but all their efforts proved in vain and they became fatigued. Anything might happen at any moment... the situation proved to be so volatile and dangerous. Any moment, at any moment, the thugs would get inside and ransack the place... everyone there seemed to be lifeless.. helpless, having no future at all... a handful of thugs tried to barge inside the chief monk's house with weapons in their hands. Those inside were watching all the events outside, with bated breath and terror-filled eyes.

It was then that the incident took place. Only then, Ilango observed that the chief monk was a strong and sturdy man, looking firm and majestic and also endowed with great courage and mental strength. He pulled a lengthy easy-chair and placed it in front of the door, thus blocking the way for anybody to step in and sat on it, all too casually. The manner in which he did it all, as if telling the thugs that they could enter inside only after killing him sort of paralyzed the thugs in some way.

If that chief monk had not resorted to such a move, I wonder what would have taken place... The situation persisted into the evening. Meanwhile, those who had been trapped inside the Ramakrishna Hall came forward once the situation began to improve. They began to prepare tea with the available resources and brought it to the monk's house, offering it to those sheltered inside. It was only then that he met his friend again.

“What happened Ilango?”

“Oh, that is a long story. It is a miracle that we managed to escape. I will tell you all in detail afterwards.” After that, they all joined hands and prepared food for all those remaining there, sharing it all among themselves. That night, the lorries came in. They gratefully stepped in and were soon all huddled together in the lorries, just as cattle and sheep. and brought to ‘Saraswathi’ Hall in Pambalapitia and were left there.

5

From Ilango's Diary...

When we arrived at Saraswathi Camp, there were absolutely no facilities for the refugees, not even the bare essentials. My fellow-students at the University, the other Tamil youths, and I came together and formed a Volunteer Team. Then, till that time we left for Yaazhpaanam in the ship called Chidambaram, It had been sent by the government of Tamil Nadu to evacuate the refugees, We remained in that camp and served as volunteers. Till I reached Yaazhpaanam, my voyage in the vessel called Chidambaram was unknown to my family back home. My family was in the dark as to whether I was alive or not. I sought the help of a person

belonging to my village, who was with me in the refugee camp and who found a berth in Sri Lankan government's cargo vessel called 'Lankarathna.' He was returning home. I had requested him to inform my family about my condition. On reaching Yaazhpaanam, he went on to stay with his relatives there in Kaithadi and hence he couldn't inform my family about my situation. Only after I arrived in Chidambaram and reached my home, did he return and visit my family to inform them of me being alive.

The bitter experience of turning into a refugee in one's own land proved to be terribly unsettling, even inflicting an acute psychological impact. True, my people had been undergoing such alienation, oppression, suppression, humiliation and what not for many, many years. But, this first hand experience of it all was distinctly different. It was a miracle that my friend and myself had managed to escape; this realization dawned on us when we interacted with the refugees who we met afterwards (and from reading into various other pieces, including international journals, radio broadcasts). Usually, such arson and riot would engulf the rest of the country while sparing the Capital City, escaping their wrath and remaining unscathed. This time, however, the capital city, Colombo, was set ablaze.

When we were running to safety, huddled inside a State wagon thanks to the grace of an Indian engineer in Colombo, the thugs had poured petrol over a mini-van carrying Tamils and set it on fire, eliminating them cruelly. They had caught hold of a hapless Tamil youth riding in with his bicycle and bashed him to death. Another Tamil had been disrobed by them, humiliated and was

subsequently set ablaze. In Kirulapanai, they had killed the little sister of a young Tamil woman right in front of her eyes, so turning her into a psychological wreck and then subjected her to gang-rape before finally killing her too. As is the rule, this time also, the labourers of the Tea-Estates in the mountain regions - the Tamils of Indian origin - have become the target of wide-spread arson and violence. The Sinhala Government headed by J.R had squarely put the blame on the L.T.T.E assault on the 23rd of July was carried out against thirteen army-men in Thinnaiveli, for all this anti-Tamil arson and violence. But, keeping it as an excuse, the Sinhala thugs enjoying the support of ministers Ciril Mathew, Gamini Thisanayaka and such others went on to carry out their well-planned and systematic assault against the Tamils. Even in such a hostile scenario, there were indeed many good-natured Sinhala people who went out of their way to save the Tamils living in their neighbourhood, from the thugs.

As soon as J.R. Jeyawardhane won the seat of the President of Sri Lanka in 1977, there was a terrible ethnic violence on an enormous scale. And the present President described it as the outcome of the Tamils voting in favour of a separate State, saying “WAR MEANS WAR: PEACE MEANS PEACE’ thus worsening the current state of affairs. It is indeed very apt to describe J.R.Jeyawardhane as the most experienced and cunning jackal in the political arena. It was he who, by the undertaking of a ‘paadha –yaathraa’ to Kandy, forced the agreement that was between the then Prime-Minister Bandaranayake and S.J.V Selvanayagam to be torn to pieces. He was an expert in using his power and avenging his political opponents. It was he who had made the premier Sirimavo Bandaranayage lose

her fundamental political rights. This time, arson and violence against the Tamils in a well-planned, systematic manner were unleashed with the blessings of his cabinet ministers. This was used as another excuse for the killings of the Sinhala Policemen, who were shot at the election meeting that took place in the courtyard of Naachimaar temple in Jaffan, in the year 1981. Now, right under the nose of ministers like Gamini dhisanayake, ethnic violence was unleashed onto the State and the Jaffna library was burnt to ashes. The office of Eela Naadu Daily was ransacked and set afire.

This time, instead of defusing the arson and riot, he had justified it in his speech to the people of the nation. Even before the army men’s killings in Thinnaiveli, there arose the possibility of another ethnic violence in the land. It seems very much probable that the J.R. Government had meticulously planned to use this ethnic violence as an excuse to kill the Tamil activists and militants who have been imprisoned. This was likely to weaken the economic strength of the Tamils and also to avenge his political rivals and opponents. Additionally, the J.R. Government made use of this ethnic violence and volatile situation to carry out another diabolic plan.

Now he was to sabotage the resettlement plans for the Tamils of the mountain-region, who had come to settle in the frontiers of North-East part of the country following the ethnic unrest in 1977.

Maybe that was precisely why the Sri Lankan government brought many Tamil families off the mountain – region who had been living under such resettlement projects, forcibly to come and settle in the mountain-region once again when the

arson and violence grew strong and so made them to suffer the heat of the arson and violence with nowhere to go and no one to turn to.

Maybe that was the reason why the Sri Lanka State had thought it fit to arrest people like the founders of Organizations, such as Gandhiam, who were running these resettlements, well in advance where they were harassed, intimidated and tortured.

The nature of the present violence, the fact that its fire raged in the capital city and the way the news of it spread far and wide, all over the world with the help of technological advancements, has turned the Eelam Issue an international one. As far as Tamil Nadu was concerned, all the political parties raised their voice of protest in unison. The Prime-Minister of India, Mrs.Indira Gandhi showed great concern in Eelam Tamils' Issue this time. That's why following J.R's interview in a British Journal called 'Daily Telegraph', dated the 15th of July, wherein he had said that he had no time to spare for the plights of the Yaazhpaanam Tamils and that he had no concern for their lives, the Indian Prime-Minister Indira Gandhi had expressed the concern of India against the deteriorating situations of Yaazhpaanam. The Daily Telegraph had published that also a few days before the onset of the ethnic violence.

When we were languishing in Saraswathi Camp as hapless refugees, Indira Gandhi sent her foreign Affairs Minister, Narasimha Rao, to Sri Lanka. All over Tamil Nadu, there were protest marches, meetings, fasts, and other outcries in support of the Eelam cause. A Tamil belonging to Islam, who name was Shahjehan, set himself on fire, to highlight the plight of the Eelam Tamils. The Tamil Nadu State Government headed

by M.G.R sent its vessel Chidambaram to lend a helping hand to the Eelam Tamils. In the heat of this ethnic violence, a Tamil tourist from Tamil Nadu by the name of Dhanapathi was killed by a Sri Lankan hairdresser, with his neck sliced, in Kadhirkamam. Following this, M.G.R's Government asked for compensation from the Jeyawardhane government.

In my life at the Saraswathi Camp, I, needless to say, had gone through many experiences. Initially, for several days the refugees had to remain without food, having nothing to eat. During those times, the priest from the adjacent 'Bampalappatti Kadiresan Temple' came forward to cook as much of food as possible and served to those assembled there. To receive it, even elderly women in their very advanced age, used to climb over the parapet wall of Saraswathi Camp and go to the Kadiresan Gurukkal's house. The others fed themselves with coconuts, tender-coconuts, anything from the trees in the temple premises and managed to feed their hunger.

It was during that time, when we were in the refugee camp, when many more Tamil prisoners were massacred in the Velikadai prison, on the 27th of July. Already, many, including Kuttimani and Thangadurai, had been killed in Velikadai jail on July 25th.

When the riot and arson had subsided, to some minor extent, some of our Sinhalese co-workers, learning that we were staying in the refugee camp, came to see us. We met them at the entrance. They expressed regret for all that had taken place. They even extended an invitation to us to go and stay with them. We thanked them for their concern and for taking the trouble of coming all the way to see us. We conclusively

decided that staying in the camp would be the safest thing for both of us. If we were to stay with them, the thugs will likely threaten their lives too. And, we did realize what a wise thing we did in refusing to accept their invitation. The very next day, I think it was a Friday, news spread of hearsay – ‘Kozhumbil Kottiyaa Vandhittudhu (Kottiya has arrived in Colombo).’ Kottiya is ‘tiger’ in Sinhalese. The Sinhala people living in the city escaped in great haste, certainly warded off by the news. A Sinhala family living next to that of a Tamil in Vellavaththai or Thegivilai came running to the home of the Tamil seeking shelter. That Sinhala family had, in fact, saved their Tamil neighbours in the ethnic violence, which took place a few days earlier.

As a result of the news spreading like wildfire, arson and violence erupted, once again. This time, everything was more intensified, if one can even envision such a thing. The situation that was slowly becoming better suddenly deteriorated with the news of the Kottiya arrival. My friend who, relying on the improved conditions, had left for Kirulappanai to have a bath in a house there, but soon came back running, to save his skin. After his ‘safe’ arrival, he recounted innumerable incidents that he had to encounter along the way. Many Tamils, who had already made their safe escape, chose to return to their places, relying on the improving climate, in order to evaluate the damage of their households in this second round. This incident clearly showed the extent of the fear that the very term ‘Kottiyaa’ had caused amidst the Sinhala people.

This reveals another psychological truth. Although the Sinhalese comprised the majority of the island’s population,

they do have some sort of minority feeling in them. The reason for this could be due to the forty five million Tamils living closeby, in Tamil Nadu. The unnecessary apprehension and fear resulted from the possibility of the Eelam Tamils joining hands with the Tamils of Tamil Nadu and turn them into a minority group in their own land. It could be that the history of the island in the yester years and the invasions of the Tamilaga kings on the island have increased this sort of fear in them.

Those responsible for instilling the fear and representing it in the shape of the tiger were the Chola kings of the olden times. Once upon a time, the royal flag of the Cholas had the outline of the tiger imprinted onto it. The tigers were flying all over Eelam. During the reign of King Raja Raja Chola I, Sri Lanka came under the control of the Chola dynasty, after the rule of the Chola King Ellaalan. After that, during the reign of his son, king Rajendra Chola I, the Sinhala king Magindha abandoned his country and ran away, fearing capture at the hands of the Cholas. His crown was seized from him and the whole island was enslaved. These incidents took place during the reign of the Chola Kings and are described in Sinhala works, such as Mahavamsam. It was during the reign of the Cholas, Tamil monarchs, that the island was completely under the control of Tamils for a longer period. It seems as though the Sinhalese regard this particular period in Sri Lanka’s as a woeful one when Buddhism and the language of Sinhala were utterly paralyzed.

When he was a small boy, Dutugaimunu would lie in a huddled fashion. The reason he would offer for such a posture was that when the Tamil regime reigned supreme in the North and the

sea in the South, none could hope to lie at ease, well-stretched. That's why his victory over the Chola King Ellaalan the following victories are viewed as the greatest historical victory of the Sinhalese.

That's probably why the Sinhalese, who feared and hated the Cholas with their tiger-flag, didn't have any such fear or bitterness against the Pandiyas with the fish-flag. Though the Pandiyas had waged war against Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese didn't mind befriending them and forming a camaraderie with them.

In today's scenario, these are all unnecessary and unwarranted apprehensions. The basic factors that fuel such fears, suspicions and apprehensions are indeed socio-political and economic ones. Yet, many of the gullible masses do not realize this. The politicians who make use of such apprehensions of the people with invested interest are fully aware of these historical facts. Whenever it suits their fancy, they magnify all such feelings of bitterness and reap benefits out of it. It is the ordinary people who suffer the bitter consequences of it all. It is they who are easily enraged by all these. It is they who are the most affected.

In this beautiful island when will peace prevail again?

When will the people, belonging to two ethnic groups, would live in harmony, with mutual love and respect? When will they live with the spirit of trust and brotherhood? Either together or separate – when at all they would live in peace and prosperity, enjoying equal rights and also staying united? Will it ever come...?

"What is it, you are still wide awake? Don't you feel like sleeping?" It was my concerned friend Arulrasa, lying in the upper berth of the two tier cots.

"We are going out this dawn, no? That is why I am feeling a bit restless. I don't even remember falling asleep tonight. You are a blessed soul. How come, you are able to get sound sleep?"

"Everything is in our mind only. This seems to be a very big issue to you. That's why you are feeling terribly restive. Well, once we go out, what are you going to do? What is your plan? Do you have the need to go, meet anybody?"

"Let us go and see the room in the Indian household. If we like it, let us be there and find out some job for us. That is the first thing to do. Everything comes after this. Ok?"

"That's fine. But, we have no legal documents needed for employment. The first thing we must do after going out is to find out whether we can get some kind of 'Social Insurance Number.' If only we have one, we can get some job. Otherwise, we won't be able to secure any good job. Then, we will have to work stealthily in some cafes or restaurants and things like that. As for myself, I can somehow manage any job. But, I am worried about whether you can cope with such a situation."

"Oh, come on – are you teasing me? I can also cope up with any kind of job. I am not one to feel ashamed in such matters. Our work is our god. This is my gospel."

Thus, the two pals discussed many things – especially the way they should face the outside world, how to succeed in getting

a new job and living in new surroundings, how to protect themselves, how to survive, how to get through the inevitable bouts of depression, how to get back their hope and energy to face life with all its hurdles and adversities, how to plan for the future, how to achieve their dreams... As the pair discussed, the city woke up with its usual hue and cry. If it were to be their hometown, the entire place would have been reverberating with the musical renditions of the roosters! And, the heart would have been filled to the brim with uncontaminated happiness while listening to the splendid symphony of the morn. Nevertheless, dawn always proves to be capable of bringing along hope and happiness, no matter where one is ...

The heart that gets into trance in the rain

6

That morning, as the inmates were finishing the last bits of breakfast, the sky turned dark and rain started to pour. At about 10 o'clock in the morning, the Resettlement-in-charge officials arrived with all the required paperwork. And, once Ilango and his friend Arulrasa filled up the relevant forms, finally, the officials permitted them to leave the camp. As they stepped outside, finally outside, their hearts felt rather heavy. When they thought of those who were left behind in the detention camp, they couldn't do anything but hope that they too would find their leave. Their hearts briefly held dried-up dreams, along with fatigue and frustration. The pair was terribly sad. Those in the camp could easily see this and asked us, as their friends, not

to forget them. They encouraged us to come and visit them whenever we could. We assured them that we would do so and asked them to tell us of any things they needed or wanted. We assured them that we would do everything possible to get them out of the camp.

When the pair finally left, it was exactly midday, 12 o' clock. They possessed nothing but the documents given to them by the Immigration authorities, which released them on bail. They were soon given back the 200 dollars that was sequestered from them earlier. Of course, they also left with an added wisdom and maturity along with hope and enthusiasm, enough to face life in a new, alien land with bizarre climate patterns to boot. There was no sign of the downpour stopping. Just as the coconut trees were in abundance back home, with their leaves narrowed down at the top, here the concrete trees stood tall and high, smothering the sky in all directions. Getting drenched in the rain, the city-bred were hurrying by, silently. Acting as the city's rivers, hundreds of wagons were speeding along in innumerable rows, roads. Occasionally one or two pigeons of the city were seen shaking their feathers. Drenched in rain, the pigeons persisted in their pursuit for food, in pairs. A New Sky! A New Earth! The rain that keeps pouring down everywhere! After going round and round inside the four walls of the detention camp, they finally made it into the vast world, inhaling the free air. Splendidly happy, that they were.

Contacting that Indian couple living in the 'Long Island' and confirming their arrival, the pair continued their journey. Feeling that it would be better to have some coffee or tea before reaching the Metro Railway Station, searched for a restaurant

nearby. They found a small café, not crowded. Seemed like just a handful had gathered inside to escape the pouring rain. Both of them chose seats near the window and turned their attention towards the people moving in great haste along the road. Oh, how innumerable the shades and shapes of humans there are! Most of them were immigrants. 'And, in such great haste! Born somewhere and brought up somewhere else and eventually landing here, why do they keep running hastily?'

In Ilango's mind thoughts about the people at the detention camp began seep throughout. 'It is for this that they keep waiting eternally there, inside those four walls. Lying, with all their dreams dormant inside. Losing all their kith and kin, near and dear ones, deprived of their land and belongings and their sense of belonging. Leaving their land and crossing the seas and languishing here, apprehended by the Immigration authorities and being confined inside those four walls... Time has been so unkind to us...

With the eight directions falling apart

theem tharikida dheem tharigida

The mountains on both sides breaking apart

Water as deluge flooding flowing flooding

theem tharikida dheem tharikida

thakkath thadhinkida dhithoem –

The sky comes down falling falling falling

with drums played by demon

The lightning slices off
 thaam tharikida thaam tharikida thaam
 the clouds clap and blow
 the wind pierces through the sky with
 a howl...koo...koo...
 chatahachada chatachada tattaa – so
 the sky rhymes and clears its throat
 with all the eight directions
 go smashing oh brother
 wherefrom the rain has come!
 The very universe sways and
 shivers as the very demon
 Sedan too leaps and jumps in a frenzied dance
 The directions too jump and leap
 The celestial beings too jump and leap
 Oh, what a divine scene we have just now seen
 A diuine scene seen seen seen! – we have seen the
 Delirious dance of Time
 With our own eyes oh, with our very own eyes!

In Bharathiar's poems we can come across the pride and the power that the words possess. "The heart, which leaps with hope and confidence, oh, we have born anew today" scatters throughout the piece, breaking apart the mountains with slicing and piercing lightning and the gorgeous drum-beating of thunder and the clapping and banging clouds and with the screeching and howling wind that pierces the sky and go beyond gets immersed in the rain.

Another song which has so very poignantly depicted the rain and its splendour is the poem penned by the Eelam poet Kavindran (Aa.Na.Kandasami). Bharathiar's poem gives us the picture of rain in a very realistic manner and Kavindran's poem goes further and brings out the inherent in the scene:

I was looking through the window the
 Entire world was plunged in deep sleep in that
 Well of the night when
 A thunder banged and shattered the serene silence
 Making the sky tremble and the whole universe shiver!
 From out of blue, at once, rain began to pour
 As if the sky was torn
 With a dangerous howl
 As like that of a wolf, torrential rain landed
 and the stormy wind too , shaking everything.

Too wild a wind that could swallow everything.
 Is it the gale, the tornado of Time
 That was all set to annihilate mankind?
 Both the doors of the window shivered and banged
 Chaos as that of the all annihilating storm at that time
 The world came apart
 When a lightning carrying the lamp
 For the dying world
 Flashed for a split second
 As a celestial beauty dancing to the music of rain
 It came
 And disappeared.
 And poignant ponderings came to be.
 What is the purpose of this glow?
 What does this shine?
 Life is but for a split second
 Or even less
 Birth and death come and go
 In that too small a spa of Time.
 Poor lightning experiencing its own death

on the very bed of its birth
 Quivering and agonizing
 Is nothing new. In that the glow that
 I witness makes the world
 Shine and go away running.
 Oh, what a great service it has offered
 To the world in that tiny little time of its life!
 Service was its life-breath. Once it served it
 dies off and joins the sky/
 I used to wonder at its breath-taking beauty.
 But, now I realize the noble message it carries aloft
 Yes, the message is this
 That we should be of some help to others
 While we live for a short while
 And we should strive for it
 Each and every day
 Thus I became contemplative
 Then came a thunder that shook everything
 I returned to this world of mine.
 Wonder whether this small piece of pondering
 Would benefit the earth atleast a l little

In the middle of night when the entire world is deep in slumber the sky that pours down in a torrential rain! The wind whizzing with the howl of a wolf! Devilish wind! The lightning as the damsel from paradise, dancing to the music and beats of thunder! Her dance, for a split second, succeeds in making a poet ponder over the ways of life! The danseuse called lightning has a great message for the people of the world. What is that? Her life would be over in a fragment of a second. But, in that swift span of time, she serves the world and goes away, feeling immensely happy about being of service to the people! Oh, what a noble way to live!

He had watched the rain an umpteen number of times, yet it still proved to be a great source of inspiration and imagination to him! He never got tired of looking at the rain and listening to its beats. In those rainy moments, the poems mentioned surely come to his mind every time. They all add to his rapturous watching of the rain! The scenic beauty of rain and the memories they resurrected; these poets gave his mind, which was frustrated and fatigued, a fresh energy and hope. It is the lightning that gives light, even while living for a fraction of a second! Let us be like lightning, let us face life, weathering against all odds.

7

Mrs. Padma ajith

When the friends reached the city of 'Long Island,' it was 4 p.m. The metropolitan city was plunged deep into the busy-bee scenario typical of the evening hours. The house of the Indian Couple stood near the 36thstreet junction of the underground metro rail. In Manhattan, at the junction of the 59th junction the metro train G with green colour identity should be bought. For the first time, Ilango was traveling in the underground metro train. The trains speeding by, one above the other and the concrete forest of the great grand city caused him to go dumbstruck. The Indian couple's house was located close to the Metro rail junction. A large supermarket stood close to the house. The moment he pressed

the calling bell, the mistress of the house expected by them, Mrs. Padma Ajith, opened the door and inquired: "It is you Mr. Ilango who had called just a while ago asking for a place to stay, am I right?"

In response Ilango said, "You are right Madam, I am Ilango. He is my friend Arul. We would like to stay here for some time." She turned towards Arul and greeted him with a "Hi!". Then, she gestured to both of them, politely asking them to come inside. "Why are you standing outside? Please come inside. I will show you the rooms. See whether you like them."

It was a compact little house with two more floors above the first floor. The first floor was home to both Padma Ajith and her husband, Ajith. By this time, Padma's husband Ajith came to join them. Inspecting them for a bit, he went on to ask, "Are you from Tamil Nadu?"

In response Ilango said, "We are Tamils. Sri Lankan Tamils." Following the ethnic riot and violence, our island had become part of the hot global news by then.

"Oh, from Sri Lanka. We have heard of what is going on there. Are your families still living there?" When Ajith asked so, his wife Padma joined her husband and observed. "Alas, a very sad incident indeed. I have also heard of it. Let the problems come to an end and normalcy prevails once again." The predictable conversation continued as Mrs. Padma Ajith took them on a tour of the first floor, one that Mr. Ajith had no interest in joining, understandably.

In the first floor, there were three rooms. The bathroom and

kitchen were common. The rooms were spacious. In the first room, there was a young man, fair-skinned and of slim stature, having a neatly trimmed moustache and bearing a bright, happy countenance. Lying on the floor, on a bedsheet, he immediately arose upon seeing them. Mrs. Ajith, seeing the young fellow, informed the new arrivals, "He is Mr. Gosh. He hails from West Bengal. Like you, he too is a recent arrival. You can get useful information and tips from him."

Then, looking at the young man, she introduced Ilango and his friend. "They are from Sri Lanka. They have come here in search of a place to stay." Hearing her words the man called Gosh turned towards them and said, "Hi, nice to meet you; during your stay here, I will help you in any way I can." His youthfully handsome smiling face and friendly speech pleased the weary pair. In return, they too conveyed their thanks to them. Mrs. Padma took leave of him and guided the two friends to the next room. She soon remarked, "Gosh is a good fellow. Very helpful He would always be willing to lend others any help he can. For you two, you'll find him to be useful in helping you look for a job. Now, he alone stays in that room of his. We allow a maximum three persons to stay in a room. No cot. You should lie on the floor only. If you wish, you can bring or buy a cot. We have no objection. For writing letters you can use the table and chair, in the kitchen. If you like to stay, both of you can share the room with Gosh."

In the second room, there was a person looking tall and sturdy, having a thick moustache and beard. He looked like a Punjabi man. And. He was deep in sleep, unaware of the presence of visitors. Mrs. Padma Ajith softly spoke, "Mansingh is already asleep. Let us not disturb him. At present he alone stays in this

room. He is a truck driver with a very famous company here. He lives in California. Whenever he comes to this part of the country, he would stay here only. He has been our customer for very long!” She couldn’t hold back a chuckle, and went on, “He is a nice fellow, but, a little rough. We should talk to him carefully.”

The next room was shut. Pointing at the room Mrs.Padma Ajith said, “In that room, there is a permanent resident, paying rent on a monthly basis. He is a Brahmin. He never gives any trouble. He would be minding his own business. He works as a male nurse in one of the hospitals here. It was his ambition to become a doctor. And he strives hard to achieve his goal. He has been working at it for many years. He would be forever reading and studying to make his dream come true.”

After that Mrs.Padma Ajith steered them towards the bathroom. The friends liked the place and its inmates very much. Mrs. Padma Ajith asked them, “In the next floor, the room layout is pretty much the same. But there are also separate kitchens and bathrooms. Do you want to see them? They are not yet rented to anyone. No one stays in them.”

The friends discussed in Tamil about it for a few minutes. Ilango said thus to Arulrasa: “I like this place a great deal. The house-owners and also the people living here look good and kind. What do you say?”. Arulrasa responded saying “I too am of the same opinion. Let us stay here. A place like this can allow us to search for jobs without too much worry.” Mrs. Padma Ajith waited till they discussed the issue at hand and then asked, “What do you say? Do you like this place?”

Ilango replied in the positive. “We like this place very much. We have decided to stay here. How much is the rent?”

Mrs.Padma Ajith replied in a business-like tone, “Rent is thirty-five dollars per week.” She soon took on a softer tone, “But I will rent it out for thirty for you for the current state of your land is indeed a matter for worry and concern. And, I too have taken a liking for you. You look every inch decent and peace-loving”.

Hearing her kind words Ilango gratefully replied, “Thank you very much Ms. Padma Ajith. We are deeply indebted to your kindness and benevolence.” Giving her sixty dollars as the rent of first week both of them placed their travellers’ bags in the room and got the room-key also from the mistress of the house.

The next plan is to pay a visit to the local supermarket and pick up provisions for the week. Prior to that, they felt it would be good to have a little chat with Gosh. They conversed with him, speaking on various issues. Their conversation took an interesting turn in the area of literature. Ilango profusely and almost too excitedly stated, “I have read a lot of poignant works of Bengali literature. In Tamil, S. Krishnamoorthy, Tha.Naa.Kumarasami, and many more have translated Bengali works in a splendid manner. I have read the novels of Tagore, Sarathchandrar and my most favourite novel is the one written by Adhin Bandhopadhyaya’s ‘Neelakanda Paravaiyai Thaedi’(In search of the Nellakanda bird), which was so poignantly translated by S.Krishnamoorthy and was published by the National Book Trust. It is a great piece of work, describing the

events and happenings of the period of the Freedom Struggle of India and the divide between Hindus and Muslims, the condition of the widows in those times and provided many other insights. It consists of exemplary descriptions of Nature. Really, it is a marvelous piece.”

The novel begins with a description of the Eesam Sheik, who goes to announce the birth of a male child to Dhanababu of Tagore’s household moves on , getting unfolded with the description about the river Shonali and the Dharmuj creepers that have their face turned upwards, towards the sky and the people and other species living there, the fragrance of the grains coming there, floating in the air, the sonorous noise of the waterfalls pouring deep down... and we can read the descriptions about Nature and its various elements and get immersed in their sweetness-par-excellence”.

Coming to know of the sound knowledge that Ilango had in Bengali Literature, Gosh became immensely happy. He was also a lover of books by nature. “Oh, you first go to the shop and after you return let us have a talk, which would indeed be soothing to the mind and heart,” said Gosh. With his heart brimming with genuine satisfaction and happiness, he saw them off.

8

Fabulous Feast

The supermarket was a surprise in itself. After leaving their land and taking shelter in an alien soil, this was the first time both of them were visiting such a place. The supermarket had anything and everything – fruits, meats, beer and various other hard drinks and soft drinks – almost everything under the Sun. For quite some time, there was intense discussion between the friends as to what to buy and what not to buy.

“We are going to cook for the first time in our new place. We should do it in a somewhat distinct manner. What do you say Arul?”

“I completely agree!”

“All right, what do you propose to do?”

“We are going to cook for the first time in our new home. Why not give a small feast to the rest of the residents there? Let us start our new life with a feast, what do you say? That will make them happy. And, it won’t cost much.”

“Since I know you are an expert in cooking, what do you suggest to be on the menu?”

“Cooked, hot rice and an excellently fried chicken side-dish, chicken soup, fried potato chips, boiled egg-pieces, and another side-dish made of grains and one more with vegetables and a beverage made of ‘Iraal’. We have all the facilities there. It will not be hard.”

“You give such a long list, yet, you have forgotten one important thing, you know?”

“That goes without saying, for, can there be a feast without the drinks? Of course not. Don’t be jump to conclusion. I am planning to buy a dozen ‘Budweiser’ beer. If you like whisky, we can buy one of the ‘old smuggler’ brand. It doesn’t cost too much. And, I noticed a beer store nearby anyway.”

With that, the two friends planned things meticulously, without wasting time and getting great a joy out of it. They bought all the required items and also the ‘drinks’ and returned to their new abode. Seeing them coming back with ‘Foodwiser’ in their hands, Mrs. Padma Ajith spoke to them in a very polite and decent manner, without getting angry:

“We don’t mind you having a jolly good time, feasting and drinking, without proving a hindrance to others. You are going

to begin a new life. I wish you all the best.”

Gosh felt extremely happy. Oh, how many days had just sped by since such a happy get-together where one could sit and chat with friends and relish a real good feast! With such joy reflecting in his voice too, he observed, “Today I am very happy. For, it has been ages since such a gala with singing and dancing took place!”. In the meanwhile Arulrasa opened the ‘Old Smuggler’ and placed it on the dining table in the kitchen. He messily arranged the potato chips on a plate, placing it next to the drinks. Then, he announced, “Friends, just have these to your hearts’ content without any reservation. Ok, come, let’s all drink.” Following his small speech he poured the whiskey in three glasses. At this moment Mansingh awoke from his sleep and decided to pay the party a visit. His eyes turned towards the whiskey, ready to be served. A little smile sprouted on his rugged face. Seeing Mansingh, Gosh extended a pleasant, friendly invitation to him. “Mann, why don’t you join us in this revelry? Do you have any objections? If you too join us we would feel very happy!” Of course, Mansingh joined the party. His mood and musings were exactly on the lines of Gosh. Oh, how many days have gone by, since we had such a revelry! In the mechanical, monotonous everyday life of the city, they were thus enjoying the present moment, singing and dancing and merrymaking, just like the free, little sparrow, with no worries in the world. It was a gala event for them and time sped by all too joyously. But, Arulrasa always made sure to keep an eye on the cooking! Every now and then he brought a plate full of fried chicken pieces as a sidedish, and also fried fish. For all those who had assembled there, these dishes provided great joy and pleasure. Tasting those fried chicken pieces and fried fish,

they drank the Old Smuggler. After finishing it, they dipped their tongues into ‘Budweiser’. As the nectar descended inside, the body experienced a slight swoon and quiver which turned the very fact of being something divine and the life began to unfold in the real sense of the term.

Gosh said: "My dear friends of Sri Lanka! Thanks a lot for your great sense of hospitality! Arulrasa’s cooking is something fabulous! He can start an exclusive restaurant any time! How did you learn to cook all this, Arulrasa?"

“Well, my dear friend from Bengal, I too thank you wholeheartedly for your kindness. Everything is learnt by sheer experience. For a short while, I was working as a chef in a Greek ship. Apart from that, I was staying with my maternal uncle during the school breaks; he owned a huge farm. During my life in that farmhouse, I had learnt a lot. My uncle was an expert in preparing deer and lamb. This is but just a small portion of his vast knowledge and expertise in cookery.”

Mansingh joined their conversation, “Oh friend, what Gosh says is right. You cook splendidly well. You won’t find it difficult to get job in the restaurants here.”

Gosh intervened, “I am also working in an Export/Import company owned by a person belonging to Mansingh’s clan. Our company imports clothes from India and send them to the big and established textile centres here. He is a nice fellow. In the showrooms situated in the middle of the city, he has provided employment for the Whites only. Designing a variety of readymade garments he orders them from India and does business here. He has a flourishing business. He stores the

clothes that he imports, in a warehouse here and sends them to various shops in different regions across the States. All those who work in the warehouse are our people. Presently there is no job-opportunity. Soon, as the Nathaar festival is fast approaching, there would be job opportunities opening up for a few extra people. At that time I will surely try my best to get you jobs there. You can trust me.”

Ilango who had remained silent all this time, but now posed a question, “Gosh, is there any way I can get a job without delay? I don’t have any relevant certificate, which could fetch me a job. I am presently trying to apply for a Social Insurance Number.”

Mansingh gave forth his viewpoint related to this issue. “Both of you have committed a terrible blunder.”

Ilango and Arulrasa asked in the same voice, simultaneously “What?”

And, Mansingh warned, “Yes indeed, you shouldn’t have come to New York at all. Should have come to New Jersey or Boston or some other city People who have gone there face no difficulty at all in securing a Social Insurance Number. But, in New York, there are millions of illegal immigrants. Hence, the immigrant authorities will be very strict in these matters. I know a person who has been working here illegally for the past two years.”

Ilango and Arulrasa felt that there was indeed some truth in what Mansingh was saying. Ilango realized and said, “That must be true. Of those who have come with us, the rest have gone to Boston and New Jersey and have obtained all the

relevant certificates and documents and are now employed!”

Gosh butted in once again and said, “Friends, why do you worry now? If such problems do arise, you can go to Boston or New Jersey and apply legally for your Immigration files and then obtain the relevant documents and certificates from there. Then you can try for good jobs! Till that time, you can work in cafes, restaurants and inns or in some factory while trying to save up some cash. I think finding some such job here won’t be a problem to you. Here, along Eighth Avenue, I know a Greek man named Peter, who runs an Employment Bureau. His main occupation is to get jobs for illegal immigrants in some café, inn or factory. I will give you his address. Go and meet him. You have to give him 80 dollars. As soon as you secure a job, he’ll collect the eighty dollars from you. When I came here, it was only through him that I managed to get a job.”

Mansingh suddenly remember, “What, he is the one running an Employment Bureau? I, too, got my first job through him!”

So they went on conversing, happily chatting and discussing new prospects. The house owner, Mr. Ajith, who was listening from the first floor, came to join in the middle of the conversation. Ajith was a naturally friendly and jovial person. Hence, it is no wonder that he added to the zest and fervour of the feast and merrymaking. Thus that night was spent all too happily with song and dance, feast and what not!

The pride and glory of 42nd Road

9

Ilango and Arulrasa had planned to spend the day wandering in the Manhattan area of New York City. As far as Ilango was concerned, he was prepared to get into any kind of job at once. But, Arulrasa was not prepared for that. The dialogue between the two, given below, which took place that morning, is enough for anyone to understand why such a difference in opinion existed.

“Okay Arulrasa, as Gosh said, it seems like we should seek the help of the Employment Bureau agent, Peter.”

“The lone that must be available with Peter is playing guitar.”

“What, playing guitar? But, I don’t know how to do that.”

Giving out another sarcastic smile, explained, “That means washing the cups. It’s a type of code language.”

“What is wrong with that? Why should we feel ashamed about it. whatever the job we get, let’s do it! So what?”

“Ilango, I am not up for it. I will not seek the help of Peter for a job. In this Manhattan place, I will go wandering around and find some other job.”

“Arul, I too have the wish to do that, but, when we are penniless, how long we can hold on? I have just one hundred-and-fifty dollars with me. Before it gets dried up, I should try some way save some money. So, are you coming with me to Peter or not?”

“Of course, I will but let’s do sightseeing today. Let’s go around Manhattan. From tomorrow onwards, we can begin our job-hunt.”

“If we are going to Peter’s, we should go early – Gosh said so yesterday. He told us to be there by six o’ clock. No chance today anyway, since it’s past nine.” Upon hearing this, Arulrasa smiled a little.

“Arul, why are you smiling?”

“Well, the job is just washing the dishes. But, to get that we need to work so hard!”

“Not just that. It is not as if we will get that job in just one day. From what Gosh had said, it appears that sometimes we require to go there by six o’ clock itself and wait till 4 or even 6 PM. We don’t know anything until they call us in; we are penniless.

We have no legal documents, so we must do this. We have to play the game and see. No other choice.”

“Fine, let’s get something to eat and get going.”

Downstairs, Padma Ajith was watching T.V. where Billy Joel was singing Uptown Girl. It was a song from his latest album ‘An Innocent Man.’ This song is ubiquitous, literally heard in every nook and corner of the world, so to say.

Ilango felt happy to see Mrs. Ajith, “What a blessed soul Mrs. Ajith is. See her. Relishing to the full the sweetness of the Uptown Girl!”

Arul was quick to point out, “In the soil which is known as the land of abundant opportunities, don’t be disheartened. Cheer up man.”

“Let’s just wait and see what this land has in store for me.”

When the friends finally left, after having some food to munch on, it was past 10 AM. They walked towards the Metro Train Railway Station. Once there, they bought the relevant tokens and later arrived at the world famous Times Square located on 42nd road. This road was something else. There can never be anything like it anywhere else in this vast globe. The great, grand 42nd Road was filled with advertisements of anything and everything. Year after year, this too was where the New Year celebrations take place on such a grand scale. This tradition started in the year 1907 and hasn’t slowed down since. Times Square stands between Broadway, where world-renowned theatres are located, and the Seventh Avenue of the 42nd Road.

It is the time-tested and world-famous Daily New York Times that has given this area of 42nd Road, the proud title of 'Times Square.' In 1904, New York Times built a building of its own on the 43rd Road and that's the reason why the road and the places in the adjacent area, including the 42nd Road, came to be called 'Times Square.' Prior to that, this place was considered a dangerous area. It was previously called Longacre Square and only after New York Times arrived there that the name of the place was changed into Times Square.

Following it, the places in the nearby and surrounding areas, all kinds of night clubs, theatres, shops, cabaret spots and a lot more came into being and by the 1920s, the place had progressed into a bona fide tourists' paradise. Following THE Stock Market Crash of 1929, the numerous clubs and outfits in this place suffered a steep drop in income. And, to make up for that, in the 60s and 70s, was when other forms of services came into place. These included centres and bookshops that were there to titillate the audience and viewers with explicit scenes and descriptions about sex and related issues, pornographic books in the guise of providing guidance and counselling in matters of sex, places where the body of woman was the sole commodity, bookstores that sold such implicit and explicit books on sex, stores that made available gadgets for sex-stimulation and such other things, film-houses for screening exclusively 'adults only' movies theatres that provide Peep-Hole Shows, centers for providing Live shows where the act of sex could be viewed live... Areas like these were adjacent to the junction where the 42nd Road and the Eighth Avenue meet. In the middle of the 70s, the place which had become a place of all sins, and came to be referred to as Sink Hole by the

city-based Journals and Dailies. As a result, the place suffered a setback in being a famous world-wide tourist spot. Realizing this, the business houses encountered great setbacks but were reforming. As a result, 42nd road was slowly regaining its past glory and splendour.

It is in the place where this significant 42nd road and the Eighth Avenue meet where the main bus terminus of New York City is located. Here, the Road and the Fifth Avenue come together as a point of interest, one that occupies one of the most famous libraries in the U.S. 'The Public Library of New York' stood in splendour.

On one side, stood the abode of education. And, on the other side stood the great centre of sex. This astonishing Road is indeed another miracle of America! It is a veritable heaven that lures not less than 26 million tourists every year to come and enjoy the pleasures it offers.

From the Metro Rail Station, the pair of friends went along the main bus terminus situated at the junction where the 42nd Road and the Eighth Avenue meet. When they finally surfaced, the great grand paradise of America welcomed them, wholeheartedly. In the locality filled with clubs, pubs, cabaret spots and recreation centres, occupying every nook and corner of the place, they found the spot in between it all where Peter's office was situated. The two approached the building and stepped inside. They did not want to start the jobhunt today, it was too late already; their main intention was just to see where the office was. With that out of the way, they decided to explore the landscape for a bit.

The camels of the desert that have lost their way

10

Agent Peter's office was located on the second floor of an old office building that stood close to the main bus terminus of New York. Peter, his personal secretary (who happened to be his wife too), and the office assistant Henry, an elderly person with a hunchback, were the only three officials there. Peter and his wife Christina were inside a cabin containing a glass partition. Outside the cabin, a chair and table were kept for Henry. The illegal immigrants of the third world, in search of jobs, would assemble in the hall right at 6 AM till 5 PM for the dish washing jobs that Peter would offer them. Those were the only jobs available to people like them. In New Jersey, as well as in New York, hundreds of restaurants

run by Greeks were scattered throughout, which offered their services of Peter. In taking advantage of this illegal immigrant status, these workers were often worked inhumanely hard throughout the day. Patiently bearing this and being all too willing to toil hard like cattle, these immigrants worked to pursue dreams about their future with a wife, children and family. Just one visit to Peter's office and spending several hours watching the goings-on of the day would be enough for anyone to realize this.

Office assistant Henry would arrive there at 6AM, sharp. It was he who organized them all and gets the office ready for them. All the jobseekers would arrive even earlier if they could; they eagerly await his arrival each morn. They eagerly await with their cold breakfasts and coffee. Agent Peter would arrive there exactly an hour after that, and then by eight o' clock, Christina would arrive. Once Peter makes his appearance, then nobody there would think of leaving the room, either to get some more food or even to attend to the nature's calling. Of course, there was a valid reason for that. While selecting for jobs, Peter showed his idiosyncrasies in his selection process. While conducting interviews throughout the day, Peter's eyes would swirl around every now and then, watching those men sitting there, waiting. And, at such moments, Peter would be evaluating them and their characteristics and their peculiarities.

With the help of his years of experience in the field, he appeared to have an in-depth knowledge of the owners of the cafes and the restaurants he helped. Therefore, his observations gave him insight into choosing the right employee for the right employer. Whoever would have the patience to bear long hours

of waiting, bearing it all with a sweet disposition and a pleasant smile would have a good chance at a posting in some nice cafes and restaurants. And, those who go out often, feeling restless and impatient, for those chatterboxes, jobs in comparatively more difficult restaurants would come their way. Gosh had already warned Ilango of this. It is because of this point alone that some of the people had already trained themselves in the art of waiting patiently in order to earn a good recommendation from Peter.

Some of those who would be waiting to get employed by him would lose their patience and cool on the first day. They would leave the place with the vow not to step inside his office ever again. Some were patient enough to prolong this reaction until the second day. Thus, with a sizeable number of the eligible candidates leaving one after another, among those who would remain would win the grace of Peter! These blessed souls would be accompanied by Henry to the bus terminus at the Metro Rail Station. It is at this time when Henry would give several pieces of advice to the chosen ones. These were rare moments in time, moments when Henry spoke.

Ilango had been waiting in Peter's office for three full days. The success came on the fourth day. He had decided to try just one last day. It proved terribly tiring to be there from morning till evening. This week he must get a job by hook or crook, he thought. It would be enough to just work for a few weeks; he had devised a well-thought out plan to undertake another initiative using the money earned from a few weeks' employment as capital.

In these three days he had become well acquainted with Musthafa of Afganisthan and Michael Hailing from Ghana. They helped him overcome the fatigue of the long waiting hours. Musthafa had come from Afganisthan as a refugee and had gone to various countries before finally landing in America. Michael had originally come there for higher studies, but after completing them, he didn't want to leave America and has since stayed on as an illegal immigrant. Everyone had the American dream; riches, fortunes, and finally settling with a home in the new land.

Michael had also turned a bit impatient near the end. It could be heard in his conversation with them. "Friends! I have come to think of whether it is necessary at all to wait so much and get this kind of job. We have come here in a desperate situation with the hope that we would be getting some job immediately. But, this fellow is dragging on and on. If I had known this earlier, I would not have come to this place at all..."

Hearing that Musthafa responded, "What you are saying is correct, but not reasonable. Where else can we go, searching for a job? Wherever you go, they keep asking for the Social Insurance Number, don't they?"

Michael replied, "If only we can shell out some 200 dollars, we can easily get a social insurance card with any name we want. Once I get a sufficient amount of money in my hand, I am going to follow through with that plan. Our very being here is illegal here so, what more do we lose by resorting to another illegal action? It is only when we acquire a Social Insurance Number when we can easily get a job in some nice factory, you

know.”

In Ilango’s case, there was some difficulty in getting employed in such a way. He explained his position to them, “Though I am also staying here illegally, I stepped onto this land through a perfectly legal way. So, if I were to get caught in the act of committing an illegal act, my requisition for refugee status would be brushed aside. So, what you propose wouldn’t be suitable for me. All the same, what Michael says is absolutely true. A person I know has attained a Social Insurance Card in exactly the same way and is now working in a factory.”

During this time, they discussed of any alternatives, and at other times, they talked about the agent Peter, the job of washing the cups, the city of New York, many other things. Sometimes, having nothing to talk about, they would be deep in contemplation. At such times their thoughts would invariably crowd around their personal life, their relatives left behind in the violent native land. Naturally, many feelings of fear surfaced. Right from the day of first existence, the very beginning of society, there existed the need for human movement, moving from place to place as a strategy for their very survival. Starting from the line from Silappadhikaaram which says, “KALAMTHARU THIRUVIN PULAM PEYAR MAKKAL’ migration takes place due to various reasons. And, today’s immigration takes place mainly for socio-political and economic reasons. Ilango continued with such thoughts as he remembered the poignant poem of the renowned poet of Eelam, V.I.S.Jeyabalan that has the following lines:

Myself,

just like the camel that has lost its way
and have arrived in Alaska

being in Oslo

A poem that speaks to any migrant whose purpose was to move due to the prevailing socio-political and economic reasons. Be it Musthafa or Michael or his own self – they all appear as the camel that has lost its way and has landed here. The fact is, real camels may have not even survived in Alaska, but these human camels would surely find ways to survive and get along with life. Or at least venture on all possible roads in order to do so.

Ilango’s thoughts expanded into another time. Memories of one’s childhood and teenage years would never fade. He thought of the way he used to get up early in the morning to study for his P.U.C exams. His father would wake him up without fail during these times. Mother would bring hot tea with lots of milk. From the mango tree in the garden, a Cuckoo would always be singing. The hours of dawn and early morn would be filled up with the boisterous sounds typical of the morning hours. These were the true morning hours! During these hours, the wind whistles and swirls around the palmyra leaves, swinging and swaying each one. This can be both seen from the eyes and heard by the ears from a distance. Oh, the sweetness of studying in the night with the glow of the moon falling all over you as a gentle breeze caresses you, all coming through the windows, singing a soft lullaby

The thought of his mother and what she was thinking came to

Ilango's mind with a soft smile accompanying him for a fleeting moment. How can one escape a dry smile at the thought of all that one has to undergo for securing the job of dishwashing... During such an existential crisis, anything might be possible any time. His Present very clearly revealed the fact that Time the tyrant had all the power to make the impossibilities possible.

At last, on the fifth day, which was a Friday, in the noon the boon-giving eyes of Peter fell upon him. When he called Ilango's name, the way he felt proved to be something truly indescribable. In that short span of time, Ilango's made several calculations about his future, in the following manner:

1. To retain this job as far as possible.
2. If only he works at least for a week he would be able to survive for the next few weeks.
3. If the job and the work spot proved to be congenial, let's work there for a while and save as much as possible.
4. At the same time, we should continue to try to legally secure the Social Insurance Number.
5. Should hand over the case claiming the refugee status to the hands of a Legal Aid Centre running on a non-profit basis. By doing so we can save at least a little.
6. Once we get the Social Insurance Number, we should search for a job as much as possible, that would suit his qualification.
7. We should stay in America at least for a year and stabilize

our financial condition.

8. If such a plan doesn't work out, we should move over to Canada.

9. There, we should start all over again, from square number one, our struggle for survival.

With such plans for the future, Ilango entered inside Peter's cabin. Greeting him, Peter asked him to sit on a chair nearby. "My dear young friend! Please be seated, be relaxed," she advised. "Good fortune has begun to smile at you. In fact, golden times await you. I am going to send you over to a restaurant in New Jersey. It is a quality hotel that excels in serving seafood. The owner, Napoleon, works as the head chef. And you will work under him."

"Is it so? Thank you very much Sir, I will try to fulfill my duties in the best way possible and be loyal to you, working hard and not doing anything to bring a bad name to you. I will try to work hard and try my best Sir."

"I like you very much young man. Particularly, the way you said that you would try to—I like it very much. Instead of saying that you would work hard, you have said that you would try to work hard, which rings more true. You will survive and come up in life. Napoleon is a very nice fellow. But a little strict. He would always treat those working under him with due respect. One more thing...."

With his eyes, he asked, "What is that?"

“Three square meals a day, also boarding, you will get free of cost. When you go there, Napoleon would be waiting for you with the necessary preparations. And, he would take you to your place. He will explain in detail all aspects of the job. If there is to be some problem at work, don’t be a loggerhead and quarrel with him. You call me directly, over the phone. What else? Give 80 dollars to Christina and get your receipt and go. Henry will accompany you to the bus terminus and will then see you off. My best wishes to you. If you have any doubts, ask them now.”

Ilango quickly took it all in. “Nothing as of now. If I need something later on, I will surely contact you. Thank you for securing me this job.” Saying this, Ilango took out the 80 dollars and gave them to Christina. He got the receipt from her and left for the bus terminus with Henry.

The tale of Ilango turning into Ilangaa

11

The restaurant so well known for its seafood was located near the main bazaar street in a city called Newark, which was in New Jersey State. When Ilango reached there, it was past 10 AM. As Peter had informed, the head chef, Napoleon, was awaiting his arrival. Upon seeing him, he took him straight to the restaurant and introduced him to the assistant chef, Mark. This Napolean was indeed in stark contrast to the one of history, Bonaparte. He stood a little taller than 6 feet and with a thick, silvery moustache, he resembled the great grand Hollywood hero who took tinsel town by storm, Charles Bronson. In contrast, Mark looked youthful with a wide smile and round face. Several female attendants were

seen throughout the restaurant.

Looking at Mark, Napoleon introduced Ilango in the following manner, “Mark, your headache is over from now onwards. Henceforth, this one will be your trusted assistant. He is joining duty right now. Brief him while clearly explaining to him all his duties and responsibilities. His name is rather difficult for me to pronounce. Tell him your name, won’t you?”

“Ilango”, said Ilango.

“Ilangaa” – so, dragging the word Mark tried pronouncing it.

“Not Ilangaa. Ilango,” repeated Ilango.

Once again Mark and Napoleon tried pronouncing his name and dragged it to “Ilangaa”.

“That is also correct only in a way. I belong to Ilangai. So, the word Ilangaa too sounds appropriate in a way,” saying this made Ilango smile a little.

At that moment a female attendant of the place came running. Calling her “Emily,” Napoleon told Ilango this, “Ilangaa, she is our employee, Emily. A very good woman and a friendly person. She will need your assistance and cooperation. There are more like her, working here. Some more will come in the evening only.”

Emily looked at him with in a friendly manner and quickly said “Hi” before scurrying away to attend to the rest of her chores.

Napoleon turned towards Mark and said, “Mark, please explain

the nature of his job to Ilangaa. So that he can begin his day here as soon as possible. But first, come to my cabin, I have to brief you on several things.”

They went towards Napoleon’s. Gesturing towards the chair nearby, signaling Ilango to be seated there, Napoleon paused till Ilango sat and then said, “The people here will be very cooperative. They will be if you do your job perfectly. You will have your food here morning, afternoon and night. Today, after your work is over, I will take you to your lodging and leave you there. From tomorrow onwards, you should come to work from there. You can walk the distance. It is not that far. It is the house of an elderly couple I know. They have rented out the rooms upstairs. Like you, there are several others that are staying there to. The couple is a nice pair, you know.”

Noting Ilango’s silence throughout the conversation, he warned, “Ilangaa, if you have any doubts or questions in this issue, it’s better to ask me now.”

Hearing that, Ilango asked hesitatingly, “You have not said anything about the hours of work, how much salary I will get...” – without completing his sentence Ilango paused.

Napoleon’s responded immediately, “Your working hours are from 10 a.m to 10 p.m. Just that. Within that time you should complete all the works assigned to you. If not, you have to stay back and finish your chores. But, as according to the order given to me from higher-ups, you will be paid for the usual hours only. For each hour you will get three dollars. At the same time, you should also take into consideration the fact that you are given three square meals a day, free of charge. If you

need any more clarification, you can ask me when the need arises. Now, I am going to entrust you in the hands of Mark. He will explain to you the nature of your job and all that you are expected to do here.”

After that, Napoleon left Ilango under the care of the assistant chef, Mark.

Mark told Ilango, “Ilangaa, if you wish to have something to eat let’s eat and talk.” In saying so, he brought toasted bread with eggs and cooked, salted ham. Along with that, he also brought cups of orange juice. He also offered some tea, if he’d wanted. For a while, he was just watching Ilango eating those items. Then, he began to list the job’s chores to Ilango.

“Ilangaa, your most important chores are these: firstly, you have to wash and clean the cups that the female attendants would be bringing every now and then. You have to wash them in the ‘dish-washing machine’ and keep them in their places. When you are doing so, you are not to throw away the butter-pieces, jam and all that were left unused in the plates and cups. Instead, you should collect them in another cup. With that, you should also collect the peelings of lobsters that would also be left unused at times.

That is your first piece of important work. If you are slow in doing this, the female attendants would become disorientated and their work will suffer. So, the moment they come and place the cups and dishes, you should wash and clean them at once. Secondly, you must cooperate with me. I would keep the pans that I use for frying fish and other meats in those wash-basins

over there. While washing the cups and dishes, you should have an eye on those wash-basins too. When you see the basins filled up to a certain level, you will wash them (and any utensils you may find). The next important chore is washing and cleaning the kitchen floor, which becomes dirty and sticky every now and then. Not just the kitchen, if required, if asked, you should clean the floors of the restaurant too. Finally, when our business comes to a close every night, you should sweep and clean the entire restaurant thoroughly.. After collecting the dust and garbage in a sealed bag, you should bring it outside. These are all your daily chores. True, the work is a bit difficult. It is in your hands to make it less difficult.”

Mark’s detailed explanations and descriptions found Ilango dumbstruck. In his life, he never had to resort to manual labour as a means of survival. This was the first time he would be doing so. He was never a very strong man. He was of a weak and vulnerable physique prone to be afflicted with all kinds of ailments. Till that date, whenever he would turn weak in health, he would start suffering from various pains, including knee and back pains. While in his mother’s place, his mother would not allow him to even peel the coconut rind. She looked after him so very dearly.”

Once again, it was Ilango’s silence that tipped Mark off. “What Ilangaa? Are you afraid? Have you any previous experience in such chores?”

If he said ‘no’ they might send him back! Waiting for so many days and at last he acquired such a precious, coveted job. Oh, no, how can he afford to lose it so easily...Hence, Ilango

answered as follows:

“What? Afraid? Me? Not at all. This job took me along for a trip on memory lane. That’s all/.”

"Memories of the past!" Mark sounded surprised.

"Once, I performed such chores in a ship owned by a person of your land. Why, even when I was in Sri Lanka, I had performed such chores at the Subhash Café in our place. ('Oh, hail thee Subash Café!', his heart greeted with gratitude). And those memories came flooding in," explained Ilango.

Laughing, Mark observed, "What you are saying is of course true. Old is indeed gold!" Saying this, Mark thought to himself, 'This fellow looks thin and vulnerable. But, must be real smart in such matters. Not bad, Peter has indeed chosen the right person. The suffering that I had undergone all this time, for washing and cleaning the pans and cups, despite having two helping hands, is enough. Bloody thieves, both of them ran away without a word, ditching me. Thank god, this fellow doesn't know about it. Otherwise, he would be feeling really afraid of taking up this work. Let us wait and watch how he manages this job.'" Blissfully unaware of what was going on inside the Mark's mind, Ilango, with the alias Ilangaa, put on the uniform and began his work for the day.

12

With hope intact

The light cool climate typical of the hours of dawn was omnipresent. The horizon looked red. And, it lent a rare beauty to the early morning's pale darkness. The Morning Star and the Full Moon were still playing with the beautiful damsels, the stars, dreading their parting with every second. Ilango's mind replayed the whirlwind of events that occurred. He could stay in the Greek restaurant hardly a day more than a week. It proved unbearable to remain there for even a couple more days. On Friday morning, before starting his daily chores, he was about to disclose his decision to Mark. However, he could see that Mark didn't expect it, not that soon. His question had confirmed it.

"Don't you like the work here?"

Ilango decided to speak the truth as far as possible, being true to his conscience/ "It is not that I don't like the work, but - "

While he was half way through his sentence Napoleon cut him short and shot another question, "Then, is the work difficult to do?"

"That is the foremost reason. Working for too many hours, non-stop, and when I return home at last, it is just to go to bed, sleep and get up early and return to work. This is what is proving very hard. The body feels terribly fatigued and broken. Then..."

"Secondly..."

"The income is not proportionate to the hard work. It is not something easy to do, the work of two single-handedly."

When Ilango uttered these words, they must have made Napoleon a little startled. His next question made it clear, "What? Doing the job of two? Who told you so?"

"Where is the need for anyone to tell? The mere quantity of work tells it all. Don't you see?"

Ilango's blunt words must have saddened Napoleon a little. "Being here is illegal. In such a condition what better job can you expect?"

The way Napoleon stressed the illegal immigrant's pitiable existence angered Ilango. In a voice that expressed his anger,

which was rarely shown by Ilango, "Though my stay here is presently illegal, I have the relevant documents with me, you know. True, I have entered this country as an illegal immigrant and circumstances have thus forced me to come and stay here." Speaking in this way, Ilango stopped and wondered whether he should explain his situation and personal life incidents to this fellow at all. Thinking along those lines, he changed his aim of conversation, "Just think of me not being able to do this kind of job. Let me go and search for a job that I would be able to perform. If I am to remain here and do all the chores for one more week, I would surely become mad. Even now I can continue in this job, but on one condition..." Ilango hesitatingly paused.

Hearing of this, Napoleon asked, "What? Are you laying down conditions now? You are the lone person who dares to lay down conditions in these circumstances. Well, tell me your condition, Ilangaa."

"I will work for ten hours only. And, I should be paid proper salary for the number of hours I work everyday. If I am required to work for more hours, I should be paid extra for that. I can't offer my hard labour for free. I need to be able to earn the deserved amount of money for peace of mind. There should be proper reward for the work that we do."

Ilango's reply greatly surprised Napoleon.

"Look here, my friend, you are a hard-working man, I know. You work skillfully and real hard. I am really worried about losing you. For, it would be very difficult to find another person like you. But, I have no right to offer you what you ask for.

The proprietor of this restaurant would not agree to that. In New York, there are millions of people struggling to get into this kind of job. If I tell Peter he would send me another fellow in no time. Yet, let me thank you for your real hard work this whole week. Today evening I will calculate and pay you salary for the work done. I wish you a bright future,” said Mark.

The way Mark spoke genuinely made Ilango look at him with some respect. As for Mark’s side, it wouldn’t be too difficult for him to get workers for meagre salary. Ilango was reminded of Agent Peter’s words and his example of the ‘stark standing on one leg in the manner of a sage doing a penance.’

At that moment, he started to think about Emily. Of the female attendants in that hotel, she was somewhat different. She was studying Hotel Management in a New Jersey college. In fact, it was Emily who told him the truth about the two people doing his job previously. She would feel sad and concerned, seeing him sweat and slog and told him once in a while during breaks, to go and try for some job in New York.

But, by nature Emily was a very strict person. Assistant chef Mark was a light-hearted fellow. And, he would always go melting at the sight of women. He loved to flirt with them and he would wait for an opportunity to feel them here and there. But, at their back he would abuse them, calling them ‘sweet street-walkers’. Each and every time the female attendants working in that hotel had to go into the kitchenette, Mark would make it a point to flirt with them for several minutes. Giving a pat on their back, caressing their bums and what not. But, he would never dare to do any such thing with Emily for, he knew that

he would never make any headway with her. Hence, he would be polite in his dealings with her.

Ilango’s wandering thoughts left Emily and came back to his present survival crisis. Seeing him come back so quickly, Arulrasa would surely make fun of him. “I know this would happen. That’s why I didn’t opt for the work in the first place. And, I know for sure that you wouldn’t last in this job” – so he would comment. Let him say whatever he wants. No use worrying. And, no use going to Peter once again. He would offer some such job only. I must try on my own to get a decent job back in New York. I should also try for Social Security Card. I can get along for about a week, I have some money saved up. The money at hand would be helpful in taking the next steps, but this time more carefully and keenly.

And with that he started his travels.

Within the great, grand travel through space, his small travel on earth continues. What a strange world! What a strange existence indeed! We are unable to realize even the speed of our own travel. And, with all these fundamental inabilities we keep raising hue and cry, making much ado about everything. Is there a minute when the world is free from violence. Somewhere, in some corner of the world, shells explode. The world is forever bleeding with violent clashes and riots that go on and on. All because of man’s foolish endeavours to be one up above the others, indulging in all sorts of activities, being in a small air-filled bubble, thinking that he would last forever. But, this bubble would burst and cease to be at any moment. It is already torn, gaining more holes. Wonder how many more

days we are going to be here, on the earth? And, why do we remain so ignorant of it all, living in a fool's paradise?

During such 'all alone' travels, in the early morning and the twilight hours, he would look to the sky above the dark city and then his mind would invariably become that of a true philosopher's, pondering over the various forces of life at work and the meaning of man's existence on earth – things like that. And, he would feel the urge to shed off everything and run away to some unknown destination. But, the next instant he would get entangled in the web of the practical world and plunge deep into it. He would plunge deep into the incessant struggle for existence. And, life would start its cycle once again. He remembered several lines from Mahakavi's poem captioned 'meendum thodangum midukku'. When the seasonal rains fail, in such a dry soil even the weeds and thorny wild plants wouldn't sprout. The plough couldn't get in, the bull would refuse to drag the plough, with the weight proving unbearable. Yet, the peasant wouldn't lose heart but strive hard and break open, even the rock. Digging all too deeper he would bring out water and grow paddy. But, alas, the paddy, the shoots of which would have all along danced and revelled in the soft breeze, would go to waste in the torrential rain, which would rip apart the night one day. The field would be flooded. But, even then the peasant wouldn't lose heart. No, he wouldn't .

When the flood recedes, he would once again take the plough and start digging the soil. He doesn't despair looking at the sky that scatter everything saved, never to be used again. His 'midukku' would start its onward journey from square number one with undaunted hope and courage.

The poem highlights the courage of the peasant weathering against all odds and adversities of life, in fact all challenges being faced by the whole of humanity, in a telling manner. So what if this job is lost. He wouldn't be disheartened. Never. There would surely be Spring in his life once again! Oh, his life would be renewed; re-energized; re-vitalized; rewarded...
meendum thodangum midukku...meendum thodangum
midukku....meendum..meendum...

13

Another day dawned. As usual, with the always available existential problems. Arulrasa and Ilango were deep in thought, wondering how to start the day and how to spend it. Ilango was first to speak his thoughts.

“Arul, I have to get a job really soon. What is your plan?”

“I am also seriously searching for a suitable job. But, nothing comes my way. Wherever I go, they are insisting on a Social Insurance Card. If you ask me, I think it will be better if we try to get that first. Let us go to the Immigration office and try our best to secure that Card. What do you say?”

“Arul, it’s a nice idea, but, of

course, there are many obstacles. But let’s first go there today and enquire. After that, we can then begin our job-hunting...”

“Ya, that is good. We will do that. Let us go find a solution to this problem. If we feel that it is not going to be helpful, then, like you, I should also gear myself to accept any kind of job.”

“Well, but do you know where the Immigration office is?”

“It is located in the Federal Plaza. Hmm...”

“What is wrong?”

“For securing this Social Insurance Card, we need several other identity cards. First and foremost, we don’t have any kind of legally acceptable documents or certificates for securing employment here. Not even the passport we have...”

“Why don’t we have the passport. We are giving it to Immigration only, no? They can very well verify it, can’t they?”

“Next... Gosh said...”

“What did he say?”

“We need to show our passport. And also, a letter of assurance from the employer who is giving us the job, confirming it and also a permission letter allowing us to work. If only we have all these we can hope to get the ‘social insurance card.’”

“Damn it, where to go for all these? One step ahead and two steps backward – this seems to be the curse of our life...”

"But, what else to do? Instead of lying idle it is better to try our best, isn't it so?"

"If this doesn't work out, what else to do?"

"If this is not proving good then, let us approach some social service organization and try to get some legally viable service. Seems like so many such forums and organizations are functioning here."

"Whatever it is, let us first go to the Immigration office and talk to an officer there. Let's show him the illegal immigration documents that we possess and start a dialogue with him. At present, that is the only document we have in our possession. Let us begin with it."

"Yes, without trying, we cannot come to a decision about the outcome. After all we cannot get anything without asking, isn't it so?"

"Of course, we have a Christian song that sings that message, don't we?"

"Which song you refer to?"

"Ask- you will be given; knock and the door will open. Ask and you will get, said Jesus; ask and you will get, said Jesus"

"Alright. Let's try asking the Immigration Officer. If we get, well and good. Otherwise, we have to do something and survive. That's it."

Saying so, Ilango continued, "Whether we get the Social

Insurance Card or not, we will continue to live. During the time we are here, we are going to try our best to secure it. If we get the card, life will not be difficult. We can secure a nice job and progress. If not, we should get into some job or other and survive. That's all."

They decided that somehow they should meet an immigration officer and explain their precarious position to him and try their best to secure the Social Insurance Card. They will also explain to the immigration officer the present situation of their island, Sri Lanka, its political events and their implications, incidents that have been taking place of late, the dark events of July 83, the way State terrorism is being unleashed on the Tamils incessantly and with increased venom - all these events must be explained to the Immigration officer in a detailed manner, with authentic proof. It is good thing they have collected various news-items and photographs that have appeared in the Western Media. They can be shown as valid pieces of proof. Thus, the friends discussed the initiatives that must be undertaken by them. After that, as planned, they decided to visit the Immigration Office situated in the Federal Plaza and so began their journey for the day!

14

It was Ilango who introduced the two of them to the female officer sitting in the reception hall.

"Good morning "

The officer responded, "Good day to you too. What can I do for you?"

:My name is Ilango. He is Arulrasa. Both of us have applied for shelter here," saying Ilango took out the photo-copy of the application form given by them to the American Immigration Department.

Receiving it, the female official looked at it for some time and then said, "This is the copy of your application form. We can't do anything with this. You will be receiving a communication from

them regarding your application. Come back after receiving that."

"Madam, regarding that, we want to talk to an official here. We don't know when we would be getting the said communication from them and we are not in any condition to even apply for Social Insurance Cards. For all those who had come along with us, and are now in other States, 'Social Security Cards have already been issued. Without that we cannot get into any job. That's why we would like to discuss the matter with some officer here. We will be grateful to you if you could arrange for that."

Ilango's polite words and humble tone touched the heart of the Immigration Officer. With her voice reflecting the impact to some extent she said, "I can understand your condition. But, to my knowledge I can't see how any other officer can help you without the said response coming your way. Anyway, I don't want to dishearten you or block your way. Try your best. Just be seated in those chairs till your turn comes. Ok?"

Her words provided some soothing effect to Ilango. And, this sense of relief was reflected in his next query too.

"Madam, one more question. Both of us have applied for the refugee status at the same time. So, can the two of us see the immigration officer together? Or, are we to meet him one by one only?"

"It is not possible for both of you to meet him at the same time. You have to meet him one by one only. And you may have to wait for minimum one or two hours".

Understanding the conditions, the two thanked her once again and returned to the row of chairs where the others were waiting for their turns.

“Arul, I don’t think this is going to work. Anyway, there is nothing wrong in trying, no? Let’s give it a try. We will not be losing anything.”

"Hey, what is this Ilango? As a rule you would be always thinking positively and now how can you get so disheartened? Let us try with the firm hope that things would work out. Then, everything will be ok. Let us get into it. Let us hope that it would be fine”.

"Yes Arul, what you say is of course true. However positive we are, sometimes hopelessness and despair must overcome us.”

"And, it is not without reason, you know.”

"What reason?”

"It is just that the human mind cannot remain static. It will always be oscillating. Just as the moon wanes into its crescent form and then grows into the full moon and then once again disappears completely, only to form again as a ray and then an arc and so on. Our mind and heart are like this too. Sometimes, even without any rhyme or reason, our mind plunges into gloom and despair. At other times, when one has problems overflowing, weighing heavily on him, his mind would nevertheless be brimming with joy and elation.”

Arul’s explanation surprised Ilango.

"Arul, what you say is indeed true. You know so much Arul, surprising indeed! You could have practiced to be a therapist! Sad that you did not.”

As they were chatting, an official soon called out, "Who is Ilango here?”

“That is me,” said Ilango and he stood up quickly. Then, turning towards Arulrasa he said, “Don’t go anywhere. Till I return stay here, ok?” Saying so, he followed the official and went inside. The officer who took Ilango to his cabin showed him the chair there and asked him to be seated.”

"My name is Tim Langine. Well, what brought you here today?”

Before responding Ilango took out the photo-copies of news-items highlighting the ethnic crisis and the ensuing war in Sri Lanka. In one of those a Tamil youth was surrounded by a group of Sinhala fanatics who had stripped him naked and teasing him cruelly before doing away with him. Seeing that the immigration officer frowned and murmured to himself “Uncivilized Brutes...”

Seeing him Ilango felt that the officer could be made to see the reason and offer some help.

“The Sril Lankan Tamils have suffered the onslaught of ethnic oppression and suppression. The situation is turning from bad to worse. That hapless and gullible man who is seen in the photo waiting to be butchered – he is a Tamil. And, I am also an Eelam Tamil”.

Thus, when Ilango tried to describe his plight and anguish to the immigration officer he could empathize hundred percent with the miserable Tamil in the photo; he could feel the shame, fear, agony and alienation by the fellow-Tamil. Oh, being there, stripped and abused, mocked at and being man-handled, standing there stark-naked and bleeding all over – surrounded by blood-thirsty, wild animals waiting to pounce on him – oh, what would have been the thoughts and apprehensions quivering in his heart? His wife, who would be waiting for his arrival with bated breath and sweet dreams, or his child who would also be equally eager to see his face or any of his loving friends who would stay wide awake thinking of him or feeling apprehensive about his safe arrival, or his mother who would be nearing the end of her life and for whom her son was her hope and anchor, his brother, sister – oh, how would he have undergone the unbearable pain of losing all his near and dear ones... The youth's miserable posture with eyes full of fear and his body bent and folded appeared as the very symbol of the sorrow of the Eelam Tamils.

"Sir, it is very difficult to survive without a job. Indeed very difficult. But, wherever we go asking for a job, they demand the Social Security Card".

Hearing that statement, the officer smiled a little. And said, "You are now in New York. It is not significant for its skyscraping structures alone but for another thing. Do you know what it is?".

Ilango promptly nodded in the affirmative. "Yes, I know. It is famous for the pubs and clubs and the night life with all sorts of

entertainment available to any." Observing this, Ilango smiled lightly. Hearing his words, Tim laughed with his bloated tummy jiggling up and down. "You have learnt a lot about New York and very accurately in such little time! Have you any direct experience?" asking this, he winked mischievously. And, he added, "But, 'that' is not the right answer," implying something unsaid.

"I don't know what you are hinting at," said Ilango, scratching his head.

Tim Langine continued, "Let me give you a small clue. Let's see whether you can find out then. The answer lies in your present existence. That's the correct answer to my question. Now, tell me the answer."

Ilango was a little amused by this officer belonging to the western world. Funny fellow. Speaking humorously. The usual air and stiffness of the officers are absent in this fellow and he speaks in a casual, unassuming and friendly manner. Just like a small boy, so full of joy. Not being able to answer his query Ilango made a successful retreat.

Langine continued, "How can you forget that which is so popular even with the illegal immigrants living in millions here, in New York? After all, you are one among them, aren't you? Here, all of them are working without having the proper, official and legal documents. Like those millions, you can also fare well. Go, and be like them. The proper response to your respective file should come from the State Immigration Office in Washington. Only after receiving it can we do anything. I

will send them a word about your plight and your request. I do hope that soon there would be a response from them. Till then, I sincerely hope that the city of New York will help you also to live on.”

“Well, if some of your officials apprehend me while I am working thus, illegally...” Ilango asked, giving a pause. For that, Tim Langine said promptly, “You show them the documents that you have now. They will understand. Though you are staying here illegally, you have legally registered your name. So, they will understand. If they try to threaten you or speak to you harshly, tell them that you are thus employed in order to save you from starvation and tell them to take you to a detention camp and leave you there, if they wished so. ‘Oh, leave us, damn you’ and they will then turn into thin air and disappear! Just don’t be afraid of anything. America will surely help you survive and prosper!” With that, the officer bid Ilango adieu. Thanking him, Ilango came out. The immigration officer’s humorous talk and his bloated tummy along with his suggestions and advice on how to lead the life of an illegal immigrant in New York proved to him that he was a mysterious chap. Ilango couldn’t help smiling to himself.

Selling umbrellas

15

The two friends were returning after meeting the immigration officer. Wanting to visit the library, they were walking along the Broadway Road. Ilango felt that it would be better to go and spend some time in the library, leafing through the pages of some Dailies, Journalism, books, anything. Unlike Ilango, Arulrasa was not all that interested in reading magazines, journals and literary writings. But, he liked to read books and journals related to Education, entrepreneurship, finance or anything business-related. They both agreed to spend some time there. Spending sometime inside the library would provide some relaxation and rest too. This was a common point of interest. During their walk, Ilango was thinking of his ligh-hearted

meeting with Tim Langine. On the other hand, the immigration officer that Arulrasa had to face was a grim and haughty fellow. He was terse and carefully chose his words while speaking in the usual authoritative manner. So, the dialogue between Arulrasa and the Immigration Officer was rather brief. He was an Italian-American. His name was Glad Mansini. The conversation that took place between the two was less amusing...

Glancing at the documents and official papers submitted by Arulrasa, the immigration officer named Glad Mansini began with a question, "How can I help you?"

"Sir, I have come here to enquire about securing a Social Security Card and the respective Number" - Arulrasa responded.

Glad Mansini said, "I can't do anything till the official response in your case is forwarded from our side. Till that time you have to wait. No other way to go."

Realizing that it was no use talking to him, Arulrasa thanked him and came out.

"He was a good-for-nothing monkey. Having not even an ounce of humanity in him. He had absolutely no patience to listen to my woeful story. You were lucky with that Tim fellow, Ilango."

"In what way? Tim Langine said the same thing. Your person uttered those words grimly and harshly. My person, with a piece of humour. That's all. The end result is the same."

Thus, they walked ahead, conversing. It was then that Ilango noticed the sky. The city-sky was turning darker all too suddenly. The wind too had begun to blow fiercely. In no time, the clouds seemed frenzied, a delirious dance of the lords of the wind and Rain is bound to follow. "Looks like, it is going to rain cats and dogs again," Arul observed.

"Ya, seems so. This weather would be perfect back home. Even the downpour would be exclusively beautiful there. Here, we can merely watch it as if seeing some movie. We can't enjoy the sight."

Thus, the conversation between the friends, once again, turned towards their crisis at hand.

"We need jobs, money."

"But we need the Social Insurance Numbers, wretched, wretched! We can't do anything."

"Arul, I have an idea..."

"What?"

"Why should we look for some job outside, working under someone else? Let's try starting some work on our own, shall we? In New York, so many people have done exactly that, you know, doing their own business. What do you say?"

"Well, it is fine. What you say sounds good, in one sense. But, we have no savings... In such a situation, how can we start a business of our own? Even if we can, what sort of an

enterprise we can start...?”

The darkness in the sky transformed into a deadlier sight. From the nearby buildings, several city pigeons flew away, fluttering their wings. Suddenly, Ilango remembered something.

“I have an idea, Arul”.

“What?”

“An opportunity has come our way to try our hands in doing a small business...”

“What is it? I don’t understand. Say what you mean.”

In a short while we would be having heavy downpour...”

“What has that go with our doing business?”

“Trying our hands at this business, we may not make money, but we can test our own abilities and potentials for venturing into business.”

“Oh, come on, don’t speak in riddles, damn you – Be straight. My head is already pounding!”

“Even after telling that there is a connection between rain and our proposed venture... Can you get at it, at least now?”.

“Look here Ilango, I am not an intellectual like you. So, just do some plain-speaking. The way you speak in riddles just confuses me. The mess we are in- do we need to talk in riddles in such a situation?” Arul sounded a little exasperated.

“How many dollars do you have Arul?”

“Why do you ask? Well, I have approximately fifty dollars”.

“That would suffice. And, I have some forty. And, we need not spend all that we have. We need to spend just 20 dollars each. For the business I have in mind, putting together both our investments, it would come up to forty dollars. That would suffice.”

Arul was still not seeing his point.

“You see Arul, soon, the rain would arrive. Before that we should commence our business. Yes, the business I have thought of is to sell umbrellas!”

Arul felt a little startled. He did not expect this.

“What? Doing business with umbrellas? Have you gone mad? Are you serious?”

“Of course, Arul, I am pretty serious. Let’s start our business of selling umbrellas. Why should we feel ashamed of it? Let’s give it a go.”

“But, I don’t like to be on the streets and selling things on them. If you have some other business in mind, please tell me.”

“Come on, Arul – look here. If we are to feel bad about doing this thing and that thing, we can’t do anything at all. Why do you feel ashamed? Of whom? The people here? If you starve tomorrow, are they going to feed you? Just, stop feeling ashamed. It’s unnecessary. We should only concentrate

on whether we can do it...Whether we can do it successfully. What do you say?"]

“Your words do sound fair and meaningful. If we are loaded with this sense of shame, we can’t do any business on our own. Let’s try our hand, in all seriousness. Tell me, what do you want us to do?”

“Let’s buy two dozens of umbrellas – one dozen for you and one dozen for me. You stand near Empire State Building and sell the umbrellas. I will stand in some other place and sell. Even if we manage to sell ten umbrellas each, for a price of five dollars per , there will be 30 dollars profit for each of us. And, there will also be two umbrellas left. If we can sell all the umbrellas, that would be real, solid achievement. What do you say?”

“Ilango, it all actually sounds interesting and very encouraging. But, do you really think that we can sell them? If we can really do so, it would be fantastic. Getting a profit of thirty dollars from an investment of twenty dollars is great indeed. And, we are not going to lose anything, trying this. Nothing at all to lose.”

The sky, which was being patient till then, began to drizzle. Observing this, Ilango said, “We should not wait any more. See whether there is some wholesale shop somewhere?”

Luckily, there was a warehouse shop on Broadway Street, just a little ways off from where they were standing. Both of them darted there and purchased two dozens of umbrellas. When they came out of the shop, holding those umbrellas, both the friends

were filled with some kind of indescribable joy. The thought that they were selling umbrellas in a world – famous city kind of surprised them. When the two some came to Empire State Building, the torrential downpour truly began. As if the sky was torn, it rained all too densely. The real heavy downpour was accompanied with lightening, thunder and stormy wind. The people of the city were caught so suddenly in the incessant rain, and were thoroughly bewildered. Some of them got into taxi’s and sped away. Several others who could not spend so much money or who did not like to spend so much, ran to seek shelter under the entrances of buildings. The attention of several others turned towards the umbrella-sellers. Ilango and Arulrasa commenced their ‘Umbrella Business.’

They began their sales pitch, “Umbrellas, solid umbrellas for just five dollars each – Buy this and save yourself from the rain!” Thinking that it was indeed thrilling to sell umbrellas thus, standing in the platform and shouting, Ilango went on shouting, “Umbrellas – strong and compact umbrellas, only a few at hand. First come –First served ... Don’t waste time! Come quick and buy and guard yourself from the rain!” Thus Ilango tried with all his might to lure the pedestrians to his side, and to some extent, he had succeeded! Thus, the umbrella business of the two friends started at a slow pace, but soon gained momentum, along with that of the downpour.

16

It was 10 AM the next day and Ilango was lying in bed. All the roommates had left for their respective jobs. Arulrasa too had gone on some errand. Ilango didn't feel like doing anything today. He wished to spend the whole day inside his cabin. For the past several weeks, they walked great distances, wandering ceaselessly. He felt tired. His back ached horribly as if it had split into two, if not smashed to pieces. His body and heart longed for some respite. Yet, there is something pleasant and soothing about lying on the bed and recollecting things... pondering over... His mind halted for a moment on their 'umbrella business.' He couldn't help but smile. Selling umbrellas in the streets of New York.... Indeed

an experience to remember! The umbrella business didn't bring any loss to their investments. Not at all. This was what made them immensely happy. He had managed to sell eight umbrellas for forty dollars. Arulrasa had sold seven umbrellas for thirty-five dollars. So there was some profit, with some extra umbrellas for personal use too. 'True, doing one's own business gives one happiness and fulfillment. Of course, not relying on anybody, not beseeching anybody with outstretched hands but determining the course of your own life all by yourself proves to be immensely satisfying.' Ilango was thoroughly convinced.

He could hear the footsteps of someone approaching. It was Mrs. Padma Ajith. There was a foreign envelope in her hand. Ilango arose to a sitting posture, on the bed. Mrs. Ajith gave the letter to Ilango, "This came in the mail for you."

"Thanks," said Ilango and received the envelope. It was from his mother back home!

Sitting on the bed, a little away from him, Mrs. Padma Ajith asked, "Ilango, how is your job-hunt going?"

"I am trying in all possible ways. But nothing concrete has come out of it, not yet at least."

"There is an advertisement in 'India Abroad' asking for Sales Representatives. 'Wanted immediately' – it said. The salary will be given on a daily basis, it seems. When I saw it, I inevitably thought of you. I have it with me. If you are interested, tell me and I will bring it."

Ilango remembered his umbrella business, once again. He felt like laughing.

“What is it Ilango, why are you laughing to yourself?”

“Nothing, I was reminded of our Umbrella business!”

“What is it – some new tale you are telling? Did you sell Umbrellas? Where?”

As Mrs. Padma Ajit inquired so eagerly, Ilango told her of how the pair went about, conducting an impromptu umbrella business. Listening to his recount of the story, Mrs. Padma Ajith laughed and laughed. Then, she said, “You will manage Ilango. You will survive. For, you have the guts – the grit and determination to fight against all odds and adversities. I could never try the way you have, you know.”

“So, you see, this umbrella business is also going to help me, in a way.”

“What? In what way?”

“For the Sales Representatives job that you have mentioned now, don’t you see that I have already acquired the experience for a Sales Representative job by engaging myself in the sale of Umbrellas. Seeing this work experience as my capital, I can go searching for and securing the next better job. Can’t I?”

“Well, each and every action of ours has a purpose. However small they are, they don’t go to waste. In some way, they will prove helpful to us, won’t they? You can only gain from

that umbrella experience now, including the gaining of work experience in the American land. Not bad. Anyway, let me bring the ‘ad’ and show it to you. Go through it. And, if you wish, try your luck there. Sometimes things work out perfectly, who knows!”

Within a few minutes, Mrs. Padma Ajith returned with the clipping of the advertisement in her hand. Ilango glanced at the advertisement. It briefly but precisely stated the following:

Urgently need two sales representatives. For each hour four dollars will be paid as salary. Interested candidates, please meet Haribabu at the junction where the West Fourth Street and America Avenue meet (in the North-West).

The advertisement sounded somewhat strange.

“This appears to be queer.... Something unusual!”

“Why do you say so Ilango?”

“This is an advertisement for Sales Representatives. But, they are asked to come to a street corner to meet the advertiser. Doesn’t it sound strange?”

Only then it struck Mrs. Padma. “Ah yes, what you say is correct. I didn’t give it a thought. Only after you have pointed it out, I have become aware of it. True indeed. It sounds very strange. Maybe... sometimes...”

“Maybe.... Sometimes...? What is it Madam?”

“Sometimes it could also be that he doesn’t want to disclose his dwelling place or work-spot to strangers”.

“True, what you say sounds reasonable. So, the first thing to do is to go and meet him. And ask him right away about the type of job that he is offering. That will be the best approach. Why let the imagination run amuck and turn restless and worried?”

Mrs. Padma Ajith got up and said, “Ilango, I repeat... what I suggest is... just as what you have said, go and meet this fellow, Haribabu.”

Ilango agreed and decided that he will do exactly that.

The beautiful damsel called Earth was bathing in the soft cool twilight of the evening sun. After wandering in the city the whole day, Arulrasa arrived late at last.

“Arul, do you know something?”

“What?”.

“Mrs.Padma Ajith gave me a copy for a position as a sales rep, but...”

“But...? What’s the problem, Ilango?”

“It appears to me that there is some discrepancy in the Ad.”

“You are always like this. Finding fault. Otherwise, you won’t get sleep and the day won’t dawn for you!”

“Then what... the ad says Sales Representatives wanted

urgently. But the interview is on a platform. How is it?”

“Ilango.... Please go through the ‘ad’ once again.... Sometimes, we will miss the obvious or overlook something important.”

“Ok, Arul, I got the point. Now, without beating around the bush, just tell me in plain words what I am supposed to do?”

“Let’s go, as stipulated in the advertisement, tomorrow morning and meet Haribabu in the place specified by him. We can get more details about the work he is offering by meeting him. If we want, we will take the jobs he is offering. Otherwise, let’s return. Nothing bad will happen. What do you say?”

Once again, Ilango found himself agreeing to such logical thinking. “Ok Arul, what you say is correct. Let’s spend the morning hours of tomorrow in the company of Haribabu.”

Thus, the friends dwelt on this issue for a long time that night, till sleep overcame them. Before plunging into sleep, Ilango read his mother’s letter.

It was a brief letter.

Dear Ilango, hope you are doing fine, there. We pray for your welfare. New place. Try to be alert and cautious. We are all doing well. Situation is not all that bright here. God knows everything. Parvathi paid a visit yesterday also. But for her timely help, you couldn’t have gone away. Poor girl, I am able to understand her plight too. So far you were kept inside. Only now, you were let out. Try to get work soon. And, if you send some amount now and then it would be of great help.

The whole night, Ilango's mind wondering who and what Haribabu was. He couldn't wait to meet this person the next day and ask about his work. Now and then, he couldn't help wondering whether the person would also be a puzzle just the way his advertisement was. Whatever the case may be, if they got a job and if it would be a permanent job, all would be good. His mother's letter also stressed on him getting a job. He was reminded of the golden proverb, which his grandmother used to always mutter, "Wherever the cursed went, there were pits and wasteland all over." It looked like as if the proverb had been coined just for his sake. Whenever, he would think of grandmother he would be filled with wonder and

awe. grandmother belonged to the bygone golden era. More than bookish education, she had the wisdom of worldly experience. She would look bright and happy always. He had never seen her lose her cool and shadow rage. "Oh, fare thee well, my boy – my blessings are always with you," grandma would wish them every time and hearing her words always left them feeling immensely happy. And, her cooking has no equal in the world! Her 'Mulaikeerai' and hot beverage and curd would prove eternally tasty, no matter how many times one had to eat it! A sturdy woman with a strong mind! Another especial quality of grandma was her mastery over words! She was indeed a maestro in handling language and its components. In the 70s, sporting Bell-bottoms and long hair, Ilango would be roaming around and if she happened to see him she would greet him, calling out, "Hey, come – you 'Peeththal Parangi'" Hearing her words of greeting, he would enter inside, with the bottom corners of his bell-bottom looking sticky and dirty with the oily residue residing inside the cycle-chain, smiling sheepishly.

That night, Ilango also informed Gosh about Haribabu and his advertisement. Gosh too felt a little surprised. "What, this Haribabu seems to be a queer fellow!" he noted, his voice clearly showing surprise. "His name sounds like that of a Maharashtrian. For what it is worth, pay him a visit tomorrow and come and tell us the tale afterwards. We are eager to hear that."

"Gosh, how do you say for sure that he is a Maharashtrian?"

For this, Gosh smiled a little. "I have read a novel written by one famous Maharashtrian writer by the name of Haribabu

Narayan. The name of the book was I. It was published by the Sahitya Academy of India. It is a quality piece of work, like Thakazhi's Enippadigal or Vasudhevan Nair's 'Kaalam'. That's why I suspected him to be a Maharashtrian. But, just go and meet him in person. Only then can we form a clear picture."

"If only this job comes my way, I should thank Mrs. Padma Ajith."

Gosh laughed at this. "Ilango, don't praise her too much. She does it all with purpose. If you get a job, she gets her rent. This is the reason behind her kind-heartedness. Understand? Nothing else."

"As far as I am concerned, it is not fair on our part to think of her in such a fashion. Yet, I respect your freedom of expression." Arulrasa agreed with Ilango on this matter.

One more time it dawned afresh. A new day a new job-hunt. As the first step, they began their journey towards the 'Fourth Street West' to meet Haribabu. When they reached the street, it was already past ten o'clock in the morning. At the point where Fourth Street West and Sixth Avenue met, on its North-Western side they came across the roadside shop of an Indian couple. The man looked a little old. But, the Indian woman looked pretty young. She resembled Manju Bhargavi of the movie Shankarabaranam. To tell the truth, even that man resembled the quality musician of the movie, looking a little old like the hero but looked strong and ruddy. With them, there was a White woman also, wearing jeans and tea-shirt.

Ilango approached the couple and began to introduce himself, "My name is Ilango." Before he could complete the man cut him short and said, "Oh, is that you? Very well. I am Haribabu, who gave the ad. You have come to the right place."

Thus speaking with his eyes intently looking at Ilango and Arulrasa, he then turned to the woman and said, "Indhira, let me go and talk to them for a short while. Just keep an eye on these, ok?" Then, looking at the young White woman Haribabu said, "Ingrid, please remain here with Indhira for a while. I will come back soon."

Ilango and Arulrasa paid their respect to the lady with folded hands and followed Haribabu. Haribabu took them to a tea-shop nearby. "I am glad to see you two responding to my ad and came here. Let us have a cup of tea. I will tell you everything, ok? If you like me and if I too like you, then we can join hands and work." Haribabu briefly spoke and listening to his words, the two went behind him. While walking with him, they knew that there would not be any trouble if they were to work with him.

And, the trio went and sat in one corner of the tea-shop. Haribabu went to the counter and got tea for three. Sipping the hot tea a little, Haribabu then began his explanation, "You must be aware now of how the place is like," said Haribabu. Ilango answered, "When we see the way things are going on here, we can get some idea about the nature of job. You have called for salesmen. Hence, it seems like that we would be appointed to help you in your sales and marketing."

Now, Haribabu spoke in a diligent manner, “What you say is true indeed. You are a clever young man. Now, let me come to the immediate requirement. This is it. Now, we three, my wife, myself and the white woman are doing business in this platform. There is another one. His name is Henry. He belongs to the Eskimo clan. And, he would be selling our products in the adjacent lane. We need to expand our business to one more street. Now, the business is very good. We should reap the most when it is the Harvest time, what do you say? And, that is our plan. For that, only we have given the advertisement. If you like it you can look after the proposed business, just the way Henry is doing. What do you think about my proposal? Do you like it? Do you think you can handle it all?”

Now Arulrasa posed another question. “Well, what are the products we have to sell?”

And, Haribabu responded, “Good question. First and foremost, you should sell many Indian goods, like the copper statues which we have plentiful in our shop. You should try to sell them on the roadsides. Along with that, ”

"Along with that...? Ilango spoke thus and paused.

"Along with that, we are also having lots of ear-rings, clothes and jewelry which are appropriate and suitable to the modern times. You should try selling those too. Both of you can be together, helping each other with the sales.”

“How long are the hours of work every day? When should we start the business? And, when should we close? How much we will be paid as salary?”

As Ilango shot these queries in quick succession, Haribabu smiled a little. Then, he said, “Suffice if you work from morning nine o’ clock till evening 5 o’ clock. If the business proves hectic, and if you feel like working for more hours, you can work overtime. You will be given wage on a daily basis. What do you think? Ha, I forgot... just as it was mentioned in the advertisement, four dollars will be paid per each hour. What do you say?”

Well, the pair was in a financial crisis, so they were in no position to say ‘no’ to any job. They didn’t have the heart to do so. For, who at all would kick away the goddess of luck who was coming to their side. Hence, both of them said in one voice, “We have no objection at all!”

Their response must have made him happy.

"Fine. I like both of you very much, somehow. Then, I should introduce you to Henry also. That would prove very useful to you. After finishing our cup of tea, let us go, meet Henry. He would feel happy. And also, both of you can remain with him for sometime and learn the processes and tricks of doing business successfully. What do you say? You can get extra tips about the job at hand.”

Their conversation continued, and after finishing their tea, Haribabu began to walk towards Henry’s place with Ilango and Arulrasa.

18

Henry was busy doing business along where Fourth Street West, Seventh Avenue and Christopher Street meet in a square, having his things spread on the platform. It was Haribabu who introduced Henry to the pair.

"He is Henry. The Henry I spoke about. Eskimo Henry." When he said that, it seemed to Ilango, that a thin ray of pride spread on his countenance. His voice too reflected that sense of pride in a very poignant manner. It could be that he might be feeling high in self-indulgence after having come all the way across the seas and having the ability to fare well in business. It could be that he was indirectly telling, 'Hello, see how I have done well, working hard

and using my intelligence and that too, myself a Maharashtrian having my errand man be a son of this soil and see the way I boss over him and faring well still.' Ilango couldn't help but think along these lines. At the same time, that Eskimo was of small stature, with short legs. Seeing him there, Ilango had no trouble to bring about his smile. With a friendly smile he asked, "You, are an Eskimo, no? Why have you come here? You have also migrated from the pole, is it so? Is it that the fever of modern life has caught hold of you too, right?"

Hearing those words, Henry and that Eskimo smiled a little to themselves. "How long can one remain in at the 'pole?' I am fed up with the chill and the snow. Birds themselves migrate from the polar regions every year, so what is wrong with a human being migrating? I came here for a change and Haribabu got hold of me – lock, stock and barrel!"

Ilango, still bewildered by it all, commented, "What Eskimo can become tired of the chilliness and snow? Surprising indeed."

"What is so surprising about it? There are many Eskimos, like me, who have invaded this city, you know!" said Henry, the Eskimo. Arulrasa intervened and asked the Eskimo, "As far as my knowledge goes, isn't it that the Eskimos' physical condition is such that they can't go and live in any other climate, away from the polar regions? That is the impression I was having so far. But, your appearance disproves this assumption. How is it?"

For this Henry's response was highly logical and intelligent, "When you, who is so used to living in the tropical region where the heat of the sun is quite high, can come and live in this cold region, why can't I do the same but the reverse in a

similar climate? Why do you think that I, who was born and bred in another part of this same continent, would find it hard to live in another part of this continent?”

Now, Haribabu cut them short, “Henry is a very bright and hardworking person. Be with him for several hours and see how he conducts his business. After that, if you too gain the confidence then you two can also conduct business independently like him on another platform from tomorrow onwards. I will find a place for you to get along with your work. What do you say?”

Haribabu turned towards Henry and instructed, “Henry, tell them briefly about our business. Not all can do business effectively from the roadside, can they?” Then, he took leave of them and returned to his place. Ilango and Arulrasa were now left alone with Henry.

Of the objects and articles that Henry sold, the first and foremost, were sculptures of all shapes sizes. They were made of brass; utensils used for performing pooja such as ‘kuthuvilakku,’. cooking vessels; tea-cups; and a lot more brass items. Apart from these, also had items of clothing for sale. Clothing for both the winter season and rainy season. Little trinkets, including ornaments made of beads, similar to those sold by the ‘kuravaa’ clan, were also for sale. The pedestrians approached his roadside shop and eyed the items with quite some interest. Some bargained with him and purchased some items. A stout White woman bought a chain made of beads and gifted it for her African-American lover saying that it would suit him the most by enhancing his handsomeness. He thanked her for the

gift, but didn’t looked too thrilled to be getting jewellery. But, after kissing her and thanking her for the gift, he grudgingly accepted the chain and wore it.

Henry was obviously deeply involved in his business, but managed to continue his dialogue with Ilango and Arulrasa. Ilango observed the way Henry was handling his business; he observed his postures, gestures, ways of talking, ways of promoting the sale of an item – everything. In particular, he observed the tricks used by Henry in luring the customers into buying various items.

During times, Ilango and Arulrasa were conversing with each other in Tamil. A doubt came into Arulrasa’s mind. “Ilango, do you honestly think you can sell these things?”

Ilango responded, “It doesn’t seem to be that difficult. If you ask me, I think we can give it a try. What do you say?”

Arulrasa could do nothing but agree to that and said, “I too feel that we can give it a try. I don’t think there would be any problem. Let us do so. Anyway, let us first talk to him and see whether we procure any more tips from the man.”

Henry, observing that they were having some dialogue between themselves asked, “What, are you apprehensive about selling in this fashion?”

“Oh, no, nothing of that sort,” Ilango hastily replied. “Well, but how did you get to know Haribabu?”

To this, Henry responded with a smile, giving a lengthy account

of their first meeting. A story that should be told...

“This village called Greenwich is well-known for its folklore artists and tourists. Further, The State University of New York is also situated here. During the summer evenings, the artists, stationed along the roadsides adjacent to the Washington Square, painted the sketches of pedestrians and passersby with immeasurable skill. As for myself, as soon as I arrived here, I started my business in this fashion.

It was in the ‘Macdugal Street’ near the Washington Square Park that I used to sell different kinds of clothing. It was then when I came across Haribabu. He had just started his business at the time. When he was canvassing the area to see who were involved with a roadside business, we met. Or, rather, he chanced to see me. He developed an instant liking towards me. Also, in this area, I was the sole competitor to him. I was the only one doing his kind of business, selling one of the items he was selling – a variety of dresses. So, he had this clever calculation of buying all the things that I had and also taking me under his tutelage as a sort of working partner. By doing so he could get a nice, skilled assistant while wiping away his competition, which would prove doubly beneficial to him. It’s like making two mangoes fall with one stone. And, this is how Henry the Eskimo has come to be. And, I lose nothing. I have got a nice job and all my products were also sold.”

"But Henry, if you do your own business you can earn more, isn't it so? Don't you have any worry or regret in this?" Ilango wondered.

To this query, Henry remained silent for a while and then looking at them, he spoke in a rather small voice, “If you promise not to tell anybody, particularly Haribabu, I will share the truth with you.”

The way he spoke was too tempting to resist. The two became very eager to learn the truth from him, by hook or crook. So, with their voices reflecting their eagerness both of them said in chorus, “Promise.”

Henry admitted, “You asked me whether I have no regret in not doing my own business.”

“Of course. For now you are working under somebody, aren't you?” Ilango was curious to find out what the Eskimo could possibly mean.

“Though it appears to be so, I am doing my own business too, you know! See there, the leather-bag full of things is mine and I sell them too, in between, to the customers. Isn't it clever of me?”

Ilango, who just previously thought of the pride of Henry's employer in selecting such an able hand and loyal assistant through his eyes, felt somewhat shocked to hear such a direct response from this man with a small stature. ‘How can he be disloyal to the person so casually and tell it so openly?’

As his face revealed his sense of surprise and shock Henry asked, “What, have I frightened you?”

“No, but, you say these things so openly. That's what jolts

me. Usually, people would prefer to conceal these things or they would talk about these things in an indirect, round-about manner. But, you are revealing it all so openly, having so much faith in us!”

“Oh, don’t give too much importance to such matters like proper and improper, good and bad, righteous and sinfull... here, my friend. If you are to ponder over such things you can’t do anything in this city. This is a world that dogs eat dogs, remember!” At that moment, some more customers had arrived and so Henry went to deal with them. When the two of them were alone, Arulrasa observed, “Oh, a real hard nut, this one is – capable of preparing beverage out of Yama, the god of death, Isn’t he?!”

Gosh in love

19

That evening, when Ilango and Arulrasa returned home with thoughts revolving around the roadside business that they were going to start for Haribabu the next day. Spending several hours with Henry that day had given them a fairly good understanding of Henry’s roadside business.

They even felt that with a little extra effort, they could even increase the profit-margin. For a moment, Ilango couldn’t help walking down the memory lane and recollect all those incidents that had befallen them since the beginning of this new journey, since they came out of the detention camp. Each day since dawned with a hoard of new experiences, but with nothing to help them build a firm financial

background for their life and for stabilizing their future. This harsh reality hit him hard. And, he shared his apprehension with Arulrasa. “Arul! So far nothing has taken place to provide us the hope and opportunity to build a stable future for ourselves. I wonder if this new venture will prove to be fruitful!”

“What is this Ilango, you are again not being positive – you are usually the positive one, and you have already gone through a few bouts of depression! When you say things like these, what am I to say... as you always observe, let’s consider all our experiences and adversities as stepping-stones for future successes, can’t we? What is the use of having such negative attitudes and speaking with such despair, tell me?”

Once again, Arul’s words were soothing to Ilango. At the same time, the way his friend countered him with his own oft-repeated words made him feel proud somehow. His heart, which was somewhat dejected, leapt up in renewed hope and energy! And, he said, “What you say is indeed true Arul! This opportunity that we have got with Haribabu seems to be a real good one indeed! This is a golden opportunity for us to try to refine our prowess in the art of selling – so we should take it up and get along with life...and, that is in fact the truth, isn’t it? Let’s try with all our might to remain with Haribabu.... Let’s try...”

Gosh soon returned to the house and greeted them both, “Hi friends! What happened? Success or not?”

Ilango was happy to see him back, “Fruit indeed! We are going to begin our work with him straight from tomorrow onwards.

Today, we spent some time with his salesman, Henry, and learned some tricks of the trade.” Ilango went on to explain the entire situation to Gosh, including the items being sold and the fact that Henry was an Eskimo man.

Gosh interfering at this stage surprising asked, “What? a Maharashtra businessman has an Eskimo as his salesman! Must be a real cunning person, I say!”

Arulrasa piped in, “In a way, what you say is true. He seems to be a thoroughly cunning person! But, only after getting acquainted with him further, and gathering more information about him, we can then get to know him better and assess what sort of a person he really is! Anyway, let’s work with him for what it is worth. After all, there is nothing wrong in trying, isn’t it so?” Arulrasa turned towards Ilango.

Hearing him speak, Ilango was proud to say, “You have said this very genuinely Arul! Instead of arriving at hasty decisions and regret later we should learn to think calmly and with patience and then arrive at conclusions. And, we have a wonderful opportunity here, so let’s take it.”

At this juncture Gosh couldn’t hold back with what he wanted to say, “My friends! I like you very much. No matter how many times you fail in your efforts, even when all the initiatives do not bring in the desired results, without losing heart you keep on trying with the best of your ability. I like your spirits! You will survive and come up in life, I’m sure! Suppose this time also...”

Both Arulrasa and Ilango asked in one voice: “What? You intend to say in case this attempt also proves wrong, then what? Isn’t it that what you imply?”

Gosh responded, “Oh, no, I just wanted to tell you not to worry if this too goes wrong. For, I will surely talk with our factory people and get you job – what do you say?”

Hearing his encouraging words, Ilango said, “Oh, thank you Gosh! Such soothing words you utter and prove a source of great hope and inspiration to us. We will never forget you. Your words have given us the encouragement and energy to do our work in the best possible manner, you know! And they have given us the hope that even if we are to lose this job we would get another with your help and support. And, this hope is so inspiring that we are doubly energized to get into this job and prove our mettle!”

“Good, this is what we want. If you succeed in this, then nobody would beat you. Hope you would remember this poor Gosh even after you taste sky-high success!”

Ilango replied in sing-song, “Of course, who else can we think of except Gosh!”

Gosh felt very happy to hear this. “Then, why not arrange for a party to celebrate!”

“Why not ! Let’s have it!” Ilango replied.

The entire night was spent in revelry and merry-making, with drinks and talk and what not! They discussed various things

and shared their dreams and aspirations and also worries and apprehensions. They walked down memory lane and remembered their life in days past and present. Eventually, their conversation turned towards that of Love. It was Gosh who steered the conversation this way. “Ilango, all too frequently you get letters from your home town... ten to twenty a day, shall we say! Are they all sweet-nothings!”

Arulrasa responded to this in a slightly mocking tone, “Oh, don’t ask that! It is the result of falling in love without even looking at our friend’s face, you know!” Hearing that, Gosh asked in a somewhat surprised voice, “What, love that has sprouted without even the two concerned meeting? How can love sprout in this fashion?!”

“Don’t ask ‘ how can’ for it has indeed sprouted in this fashion in his case!” said Arulrasa.

Ilango intervened and said, “Oh, that is a long story. Let me tell you some other time please. Now, let us forget everything else, at least for a short while and enjoy, shall we?”

At this point, Gosh turned a little sad. His face turned dull. “Ilango, you are a lucky fellow. See my fate. For a long time I had been nurturing a one-sided love on her but she laughed at me and is now leading a happy life with another fellow. But my heart keeps languishing still, not being able to forget her...”

The love-story of Gosh amused and surprised Ilango and Arulrasa. Ilango asked, “What, pining after a woman who didn’t love you? If your love is reciprocal then at least we can understand your pain and sorrow... but, it is just one-sided

love... how can you remain pining for it all these days...?”

These observations of Ilango and Arulrasa caused a little anger in Gosh. How easily they have placed judgement over his pure love! He has been nourishing and preserving his love for more than fifteen years and these two have evaluated it just like that, in a flicker of a second. Gosh turned morose, with memories of Sumithra overflowing within. She was the one who planted love in his heart and then destroyed it as a wild boar. Was it her fault...’

Unable to bear the pain and anguish caused by the recollection of his beloved Sumithra, he took another swig of Johnny Walker. His eyes soon became bloodshot. Ilango and Arulrasa became all the more eager to listen to his love-tale. At this point Ajith, the house-owner, had also decided to join them. Half-listening to their conversation while coming towards them, he asked, “What, I hear words like love and things like that! What is the matter?”

Arulrasa took note of Ajith’s interest and asked, “See uncle, is it fair on the part of anybody to waste one’s life for an unrequited love?”

As Arulrasa spoke in a somewhat mocking tone, Gosh became enraged once again. “Look here, if you are going to humiliate me again and again, I will leave at once, not taking part in your gala meeting.”

Realizing that what started as fun was getting serious, Ilango tried to pacify Gosh by saying, “Oh, don’t take his words seriously, Gosh. We believe in the intensity of your love, don’t

we uncle?” Ajith all too readily nodded. “That is his viewpoint Arul. Whether one-sided or mutual, the very fact that one is prepared to sacrifice even his very life for the sake of love—that is clear proof of the sincerity and intensity of his love, isn’t it so? I knew a lady who loved a person in this fashion, so dearly. But, the man she loved, not knowing the feelings of this lady, fell in love with the friend of this lady and married her. The lady who loved him so much, no matter whether it was reciprocated or not, remained single her whole life. She is contented with living with the memories of the person who is so close to her heart. She is still living with her deep love for the person. What do you say to this?”

Now, Arulrasa once again joined the conversation. “Gosh, please forgive me. I didn’t intend to hurt you or insult you. As far as I am concerned all such lovey-dovey stuff are unnecessary. They are all the result of hormonal influence and nothing else. That’s why I opined thus. Yet, each time I come across such people steeped in love and live for the sake of it, I can’t help feeling astonished. Maybe, I am incapable of understanding the significance of these feelings and sensations... I don’t know”.

Now Gosh responded in a friendly manner, “Friend, it is alright. Forget it. I too went a little overboard in expressing my feelings. Please don’t take it to heart, ok? Maybe, what you say has some truth in it. Am I wasting away my life in cherishing these feelings? I wonder...”

Ilango added, “Gosh, you said that you were deeply in love with a woman. How long?”

“For fifteen long years. I had been loving her, Sumithra, in

the depth of my heart. Without telling her anything about it, without expressing my feelings to her I was going on, loving her, for fifteen years.”

The others were all greatly surprised and they couldn't help exclaiming their thoughts. “What! Fifteen years! All these years didn't you express or rather try to express your love to her? Unbelievable! Is such a thing possible at all?!” Ilango let out.

“Men, that remains beyond my comprehension. Why did I remain so, like a tortoise with its head ducked deep into its shell? I don't know why. But, one thing... in those fifteen years, there was not even a single day without thinking about Sumithra. Every day, every moment I had thought of her. I had dreamt of her... And, in all those moments when I would be thinking of her, pining for her my heart would go melting with lust and passion for her. I thought that it was because of the fact that the whole of my heart was overflowing with her. And, somehow I had a firm belief that if we keep on thinking of someone, loving someone from the depth of my heart, in course of time, the person concerned will come to love us. It was a kind of psychological belief in me. Therefore, I lived with the hope of winning her love one day. I have spent fifteen long years with this hope. It was only afterwards that I could get the courage to approach her and confess my love to her. But, before that she became the wife of someone else. Yet, I told her. As I felt that if I didn't reveal my love to her, that would weigh heavy on me and that my head would split into two. When I got the chance, I confessed my love to her so as to ease my heart and let go of the burden. Also, by disclosing it to her, though my love had

not succeeded, I could at least get the satisfaction of letting her know of my deep love for her thereby turning my one-sided love into kind of two-sided one – so I thought. And, indeed I could feel somewhat relieved after disclosing my love to her.”

Uncle Ajith was fascinated by all this and asked, “Gosh, when you disclosed your love what did she say? How did she react? Was she enraged? Or, sympathize with you?”

“At first, I too expected such reactions from her. But, she took it casually. I did ask her whether she felt offended at my disclosure and whether she was angry at me or was thinking ill of me. But, she said neither and instead said that she respected me. From that moment onwards, I too had bundled all my thoughts of her and kept it one corner of my heart. Yet, the impact of fifteen years of love couldn't be wiped off so easily. No other feelings cause you that much pain and anguish like those of the feelings of unrequited love, you know.”

As Gosh shared his love-tale and the feelings therein the others too started narrating their own. First it was uncle Ajith, who began narrating his love-tale in a brief manner. “If you listen to my tale of love, you would feel like laughing, I am sure. I too fell in love with a woman. And, the person whom I used as the messenger to take my love letters and deposit into her hands safely, it is this woman who is now in my house, as my wife! The one I loved, who accepted all those love-letters of mine, eventually married the boy chosen by her parents, better-off than me in education as well as status and did not have the guts to disobey them. Unable to bear the pain and humiliation of it all, I suffered so much then and unable to see my sufferings

Padma accepted me as her husband. Today, I can't think of a life without Padma. Life is such. We think something, but something entirely different happens. They say 'Man proposes; God disposes...' Hence, we should learn to adapt ourselves to the changing world."

Hearing it all, Ilango too was undoubtedly reminded of his love-tale. And, he felt like laughing too. It was just once that he ever wrote a love-letter. It was adolescent love. Love at the age of sixteen. Her swerving curly hair and her eyes looking downwards, her razor-sharp, crystal-clear eyes used to make him feel terribly restive and excited as a result of which he dared to pen a letter and give it straight to her. In it, he had asked her to come adorning her hair with jasmine flowers in case she too loved him and that if she didn't reciprocate his love, to forget the letter as a bad dream and not to disclose it to anyone else. But, she, instead of doing what he wanted her to and had requested her to do, did all that he had requested her not to do. As a result, he became a thing to be mocked at and ridiculed at for her friends. Whenever they chanced to cross each other, the girl's friends made it a point to giggle and make fun of him. As for him, feeling resigned to the fact that he was not blessed with that boon in life, he moved on to the next stage of his existence on earth. After that, never again, not even once he had met her. It was all infatuation – typical of that age. Of course, it was because of such infatuations that particular period in life is full of blossoms and fragrance. How many of those who were drawn towards each other in that age actually become man and wife in real life?

The rest of the night was spent gulping down rejuvenating

drinks and many trips along the memory lane...musing over their feelings of love.

20

The next three weeks for Ilango and Arulrasa were spent in the company of Henry. Haribabu kept his word and arranged a roadside shop for them at the junction of Christopher street and Fourth Street West. Haribabu, his wife and Henry were all looking after their business, as usual

The nickname given by the pair to Haribabu was 'Nadutharu Narayanan!' meaning 'Lord of the Road!'

This Lord of the Road had in fact come from the shop to the street. His shop had all his commodities for sale. This Lord of the Road was indeed an expert hand, knowing all the twists and turns of roadside business and knowing the tips and

strategies to make it work like the back of his hand. At times, he revealed his exceptional skills in escaping from the ever-vigilant eyes of the New York Police. Indeed, there was a lot to be learnt from him. This was the impression Ilango could gain about Haribabu. Sometimes, during weekends when there were closures of several city streets, they would allow the roadside shopkeepers to have their sales there. During such times, in order to get a coveted spot there and do business, the traders had to shell out huge sums of money to the Corporation. At these times, the action-plan of 'Nadutharu Narayanan' would be as follows: Say Street A is running east-west. And, say another street B cuts across A and stretches. Further, have it that Street A is closed that day and it is allowed by the Corporation to conduct trade and business in the said street. It is to sell your products in that street that the traders have to pay a huge sum as fee to the Corporation. It is not to do business in Street B. But, whenever Haribabu gets such an opportunity he would be all too joyous. For, during such times he would make it a point to spread his shop somewhere near the meeting point of Street A and Street B. All this was done in hopes of having at least a few of those who come to buy things on Street A would glance at his shop on Street B and buy some things. He's done well to think this plan would work; it does. He felt satisfied knowing that he did not lose and could only pretty much gain.

Sometimes, however, times were not good.

There were actually several occasions when there were tickets issued to him by the Police for illegally making roadside sales. During those three weeks, on a Sunday, Haribabu who spread his roadside shop according to the aforementioned scheme, sought the help of Ilango. Since it was a Sunday afternoon,

Arulrasa didn't feel like working so Ilango had agreed to go solo for Haribabu. Since "Nadutheru Narayanan" had some other important work to be done on that day too, Ilango and Haribabu's wife, Indira, were given the responsibility of looking after the business for the day. Ilango felt a bit apprehensive in conducting such an illegal sales operation and Indira proved to be a pitiable sight. He even felt a little enraged at Haribabu for leaving her like this, to fend for herself. He asked her, "Don't you feel afraid of standing here on the roadside?"

She smiled and answered, "In the beginning I was afraid only. But, as days passed the fear is absolutely gone. As we become more and more familiar with something we feel more and more at ease with it, isn't it so? It is all the same."

"Do you honestly mean that? Suppose a policeman comes here and asks for the documents permitting you to sell your products here... what would you do?"

"For that, too, he has taught me a good strategy."

"And, what is that?"

"If someone comes and asks me, I will tell that I have nothing to do with it."

"How can that be possible? Standing right here how can you say so?"

"That's also quite easy. I will tell them that I have come here to buy things and that I am searching for the shopkeeper. And, henceforth this is your responsibility – so I would say and slip

away from this spot."

Her answer surprised Ilango.

"You are indeed some woman. For, I can't utter such a blatant lie so coolly. Well, if you say so and can slip away, what will happen to these products of yours?"

Indira once again answered with such cool tones, which further increased his astonishment. She said, "They will bundle everything and take them away. That is all."

Sometimes, in the evening hours, Nadutheru Narayanan would spread his shop in 'Canal' street near China Town in a similar fashion. During these occasions, his mind would function in a different manner. For instance, let's have it that a very famous business house along that street closes by six o' clock. Only after the business house is closed, with its iron doors tightly shut and safely locked, will our Nadutheru Narayanan open up his roadside shop. If someone asks of his permits, he would say something regarding a "private contract" with the business house allowing him to do business during the off hours. Sometimes his trick would bear fruits. And, if not, he would have to lose his capital. That is all.

Wondering how Nadutheru Narayanan would be making profit in doing business in this fashion and without his voice revealing his suspicion, Ilango asked her the following question, "How is he able to do business in this fashion, losing the capital every now and then and yet continue to be in the field?"

"That's the reason why my man, who had the capacity to have

a shop and do business, can do this job. When he brought me from India, he had already set up his business on the roadside.” When Indira finished this, Ilango could sense an obvious sad note in it.

“Did you know him before coming here?” As Ilango spent more time looking after their roadside business with Indira, they learnt more things about each other so that they were able to engage in a friendly dialogue.

So much of a good companionship among the two was tangible that Indira even said, “I consider you as my own brother when I say this. I feel that it is not right on my part to discuss these things with you. Yet, I am not able to keep quiet as I feel the need to share it with somebody. Here, I have become very much isolated and lonely. I have no one to talk to. No relatives, nor friends. Seeing his ‘wanted bride’ advertisement in a local Daily wherein he had declared himself as a businessman, I was instantly caught in the trap. This is the price I had to pay for my greed, it seems. And, when it comes to him, I am really afflicted with doubts that ceaselessly nag me.”

Ilango felt sad for her. Could it be that Haribabu, at a time when his business was sinking, wantonly deceived her into believing him to be a prosperous businessman in order to rope in a huge sum of ‘seedhanam’ (dowry) from her side or was it only after bringing her here as his wife that his business slumped due to unexpected reasons? “What? Are you doubting his integrity? But, he doesn’t seem to be a scheming person.”

Hearing these words, she remained silent for a while, deep in thought, and then said, “Brother! If only you would promise

that you wouldn’t disclose it to anybody, I’ll share a few things with you. I don’t know why, but somehow I feel like trusting you. I sincerely feel that if I can talk to you for a while, I can at least ease my mind off the unbearable burden that keeps gnawing at me, day and night.”

Ilango was taken aback by her trust and vowed, “You can trust me for sure. Please consider me as one of your trustworthy brothers. And, I will not betray your trust in me.”

Indira remained silent for a few moments and then said, “Seeing the way he behaves, I really feel apprehensive about his sanity and sensitivity. I can’t help wondering whether his mind is really a normal one. Otherwise how is he able to indulge in all sorts of malpractices so casually, without any sense of integrity and responsibility? Is he really an ordinary sane person, I wonder...”

As Indira finished those words, Nadutharu Narayanan was returning after finishing the day’s work. Indira threw a quick glance towards Ilango, beseeching him to try to appear normal.

21

"What my boy! How were the sales? Thanks for helping me today. If you had not come, it would have been very difficult for me!" Haribabu then turned towards his wife and said, "For a while, look after the business by yourself. I need to discuss important business matters with Ilango. Alone."

Ilango felt surprised. He was completely shocked by what Haribabu had uttered. Remembering what his wife had said about his mental state just a while ago, a soft smile sprouted on his face. Observing that Haribabu asked, "Why are you laughing? Do you think that I am saying it in a light-hearted vein? Not at all. I really have to discuss something very important with you. I have

been thinking of talking about this to you for the past few days, you know... come, let us go to the tea-shop there and talk over a cup of tea." As he spoke this, Ilango followed him wondering what weighed heavily upon his mind...

Haribabu went to the counter and bought two cups of tea for them. Sitting next to Ilango, he began the conversation. "Ilango, I should thank you both – yourself and Arulrasa. I would never forget the help you provided to us so far." Ilango sat there in silence, listening to Haribabu. Haribabu continued, "My business had started declining once again. I don't have many commodities to sell... thanks to you two, we have somehow sold all those brass sculptures and ornaments, which had been there with us for long. Now, I think that we don't need any helping hands to sell what little we have. Myself and my wife are enough now. Further, my wife is also going to work in a factory in a few weeks from now. And, Henry is going to start his own business again."

Ilango could understand what was to come. So, once again he has to start his familiar hunt of jobs. For, here, too, his work was not to continue. The days of sweat and toil in search of some means of livelihood would start all over. He had to try hard, harder, hardest.... As long as he has strong hands and strong legs and a strong heart and as long as the sky exists above the earth, what is there to be afraid of? In this battle for our very existence, we have to fight till the end and see how we fare... yes indeed..

In the end, Haribabu observed, "You can come to work tomorrow, but you only. Your friend need not come. After tomorrow, even you need not come. But, keep in touch, won't

you? If I ever need your assistance again, I would call you. And, if you would be available then you can come and help me. Ok?”

Ilango graciously replied, “Certainly. We will always be ready to help you. We will never forget your timely help in one of the most crucial periods of our lives. Though we could work with you only for a short period, your timely help is worth a million and more. In our literature there is a poignant verse on this, you know. ‘Though a small one, timely help is invaluable,’ says our poet parexcellence, Thiruvalluvar.

The way Ilango expressed his gratitude in such a profound manner touched Haribabu’s heart a little. And, he said, “Your situation makes me feel so concerned. I will always pray for your welfare and for your country to get back to normalcy so that you can go back and live with your relatives once again. Though you thank me so magnanimously, in truth, what your poet had said proves to be more apt to your timely help to me. The way both of you have helped me in times of need - I will never forget it.” Then, he paused for a moment.

“Please continue Haribabu”, said Ilango and waited for his response. Haribabu continued, “If you want, you can stay in our shop free of cost, till you get a job. I have no objection at all. There are just those products for sale. That’s all. But...”

“But?”

“But, there is no bathroom facility there. Just a toilet ... you can wash your face. If you want to take bath you can come to my place and have one. What do you say?”

Ilango liked the suggestion made by Haribabu but reported, “At present, we don’t have a boarding and lodging problem. But, everything depends on getting a job. Still, I will discuss with Arulrasa and give you my reply. Your words reveal your good-heartedness. Thank you Haribabu. Though taking baths would be a problem, offering your place for baths is very kind. Thank you.”

That evening, when Ilango was returning home after thanking Haribabu and his wife Indira, his attention was drawn towards a textile shop of an Italian selling leather clothes along Christopher Street. To be more precise, it was the advertisement stuck on the glass window that caught his attention. It read, ‘We need sales representatives to distribute our advertisement – pamphlets and things like that in the surrounding areas for at least three hours a day. Interested persons may apply immediately.’ No wonder, it gave Ilango immense joy to read those words. He went inside without haste. The owner of the shop, the Italian who was watching him reading the advertisement, approached him asking, “Can I help you, my friend?”

“Yes,” said Ilango and asked, “Are you the owner of this shop?”

“Ah, yes-you got it correctly, my friend,” said the Italian and continued, “ I am the owner of this shop. My name is Carlo. Why do you blink so? Carlo is indeed my name. Well, what is your name?”

Ilango felt quite surprised to hear the way the Italian spoke. He didn’t know why, but he couldn’t help remembering Haribabu at that moment.

“My name is Ilango. I am also searching for a part-time or full-time job. In fact, we are searching.”

Carlo was understandably confused. “We... we means, who is the other one?”

“He is my friend. Both of us are on the look out for some suitable job. You have mentioned in this advertisement that you need sales representative to distribute your advertisements, pamphlets and all. I would like to know more about this job.”

“Well, do you have previous experience in the field?”

“No, but, I assure you that I will give my maximum and give the best results.”

His reply and the way he so genuinely spoke, with hope, confidence and eagerness impressed the Italian. Therefore, the words which came out of him next, proved to be positive. “To tell you the truth, I need such sincere and enterprising employees like you. For a period of minimum three weeks, I would be in need of your help and assistance in this. If you and your friend are willing, you can help me in this. In the two lanes that we choose for you, each of you can distribute our advertisements, each in one lane, for a minimum of three hours from Monday till Saturday. That’s all. We will give you four dollars per hour. If you wish to take up this job, you and your friend can start doing the work from tomorrow onwards. There is no need to give me a reply right now. Go home and discuss it with your friend. If you both agree to do this, come by tomorrow to start, ok?”

Ilango felt that the saying ‘If one door closes another one

opens’ was indeed so profoundly true. He couldn’t believe his luck. 72 dollars per week. Enough for rent and enough food. It appeared that they could live on for some more time, by the grace of this Italian.

22

When Ilango told Arulrasa that their work with Haribabu had come to an end, the latter was not surprised at all. “I have expected this for a while. But, he has kept us with him all these days and paid us too, for which we should applaud him and be grateful to him,” he admitted. When Ilango told him about the job that he got them in Carlo’s textile shop – that of distributing the advertisement pamphlets Arulrasa observed, “In a way, this is also good.”

“How do you say so?”

“Our work with Carlo will be for a few hours in the evening only, no? That means we will have a lot of free time in a day, for searching for a good job. And also, we can have

time to do our immigration work also. What do you say?”

Those were good points. “In a way, what you say is true. Everything is for good – let’s hope so. We should go searching for jobs during the day time.. shouldn’t waste away our free time, gulping whisky and rolling on the bed. In this matter, you should have a firm control over yourself. Understand?”

“Of course, can’t afford to waste time. We should somehow find a permanent job.”

“Otherwise, we can’t hope to save even a penny. See now, everyday is spent in our struggle to make both ends meet... no entertainment, relaxation – nothing. Occasionally we have some kind of party where we have drinks. That’s all...”

“What to do Ilango – my friend? Everything is because of these immigration fellows and their rules and regulations and what not...”

If only they had issued us the ‘Social Insurance Card,’ our employment problem would have been solved by now...our Time is such...”

That night, after all the others had plunged into sleep, Ilango couldn’t doze off. And, just as what he would always do at times like these, he picked up his diary and Bharathiar’s poem-collection, taking care not to disturb those who were deep in sleep. Without making any noise, he went to the dining hall. For a while he concentrated on reading several poignant verses of Bharathiar. For him, all through his life, whenever he was feeling low and anxious, he would find solace in books.

Especially when he reads the touching poems of Bharathiar, he would become doubly re-energized and filled with hope and confidence, vanquishing all the dull and gloom! The heaviness of his heart lessened with each line. His heart began to experience the fluttering of bright and joyous feelings, turning stronger and more resolute. Then, picking up his diary, he began to write. His diary had been of great help to him in many ways. It had a complete understanding of his mind, his anxieties and aspirations. Acting as a ‘sumaitangi’ where he could unload himself, it was also a powerful resource for planning his future, an all-time companion to share his most intimate feelings and moments of life. Before penning anything down, he spent some time perusing through previous thoughts. And then, he began to write.

“Six months ago today, we left our home in Sri Lanka. The first three months on this land were spent inside the detention camp. The next three months were being spent in a constant struggle for survival, like a dry leaf swirling, thrown away into the wind, unable to choose its own direction or destination. No time at all to stop and stare. No mood nor inclination to enjoy the sight of the splendid sky, the queen of night – Moon, the glow of the Sun, the myriad of hues and shades and their magical permutations and combinations of the twilight horizon. Nothing at all to observe and appreciate; enjoy and get enriched. So pressing is our struggle for survival. Somehow, I should put an end to this sort of suffocation. I shouldn’t allow my life to drift along in this useless and meaningless manner. Let bygones be bygones. Henceforth, within the next six months, I should found my life on some stable ground. And, I am taking the vow to do that, here and now. My dear Diary! You stand witness to this pledge

of mine. My people at home do not know all the hardships I face here. Even if I explain these things to them, they wouldn’t be able to understand what has transpired. In this moment, I am able to fully realize the everyday sufferings of the peasants who are on our soil, spending their time with their children and family. Compared to their sufferings, with absolutely no hope for a future, my situation is far better, I should say. But, I can’t expect my people to realize all these things so objectively. As far as they are concerned, their son is living in a paradise on earth. You should see their faces when they say with all smiles, “Our boy is working in America.” Only if they get the chance to come here and see for themselves the sufferings of their boy, only then, will they be able to see what this paradise is.

Ilango’s thoughts soon became immersed in his future plans for the next six months. While writing about them, his heart became more and more hopeful.

“Exactly within six months time from today, I should have my feet firmly planted in this soil. In order to achieve that, I should go and meet the immigration officers and talk to them, calmly explaining my situation to them, and requesting them to help me get my social insurance number. If nothing seems to be working in these six months, it would become unbearable to continue living here. I can’t even imagine such a situation. Without having any legal documents at all, I don’t know what I could do. I can’t even open a bank account! For everything I wish to do, I must seek the help of somebody else; I have to rely on somebody. I should put an end to this miserable condition somehow, as soon as possible. Without any rewards to be seen, it’d be useless to work. Hence, for six months I will be doing

things without expecting the fruits. But, afterwards I will start expecting the rewards. Till then, I would be patiently doing my duty without expecting any results. But, if no fruit comes my way, even after six months, I would never again be working on this soil. That is for sure.

If the dream that became possible for Abraham Lincoln who studied under the street lights and cutting down the trees for firewood for his survival, is to become possible for me too, first and foremost I should have a place here, just as he had, to stand and stay, at least temporarily. This government should provide that to me. Will it give me one for at least in the next six months? Only now, I am able to understand why the Goddess of Freedom, Sudhandhiradevi, who welcomes her citizens, immigrants and refugees who come here running, as the last resort, stands still, unmoved. A separate law for the sons of the soil and a different one for those who come and settle in your soil. Even among these settlers, there haven been different laws based on race and ethnicity. For those refugees who come, beseeching you to help them, you have different laws upon the water and different ones upon the land. Caught in the web of so many stringent laws, you feel helpless, not being able to help those who come to you for help and guidance, not being able to welcome them with wide-opened hands and guide them with the beacon light of freedom – maybe this helplessness had turned you into a statue....

”Oh, the goddess of Freedom! They say that you preach the pride and glory of Liberty and impart knowledge about cherishing it to the entire world! But, take my case. Think of those many refugees who were denied the fruits of freedom,

liberty and equality and have come seeking asylum here from different directions of the world. Those who are languishing in these detention camps, day after day, with unfulfilled dreams and aspirations, despairs and disappointments, longing to be free and to lead a life of dignity... Before you begin to preach Freedom and Liberty to the entire world, please ponder over this query... why should those who have come seeking shelter here, be subjected to such a pitiable state of affairs? As far as I am concerned, I am not one who has stealthily or illegally entered into your territory. I am one who was heading towards another land with proper documents but sadly, as the plane lands here, forcing us out, we had to contend with these new regulations. Now we languish here on this soil. And, ignoring the fact that I am one who had entered into your territory with legally permissible and proper documents, I was detained here as an illegal immigrant and confined in the detention camp. This had taken place under your nose, in this very same soil where you stand there, preaching the pride and glory of Freedom and Liberty...Oh, my goddess of Liberty...!

Thus, Ilango poured out all the things weighing heavily in his heart into the pages of his diary, which always proved to be a good pal. Only afterwards did some hope sprout in his mind, and so he wrote:

“Oh, Goddess of Liberty! Though the freedom and liberty which you preach and claim to stand for are denied for people like me, yet I hail you and praise your glory. For, I know the value of Freedom and Liberty. Therefore I hail you! Throughout the day – morning and night, in sun and in rain, you stand here all alone, highlighting the significance of Freedom and Liberty

to the entire world – I salute you for this great sacrifice! I can understand what you are trying to say: “Don’t lose heart, whatever sorrows and sufferings afflict you and try to overpower you still fight for Freedom and Liberty! Fight for your Liberty as well as that of the entire world!” I can understand it! Oh, the Goddess of Freedom and Liberty! Hail thee!”

What a sense of hope! Relishing in that feeling, Ilango opened the poem-collection of Bharathiar:

No Fear, No Fear, No, no fear at all!

Though the entire world is against you _

No Fear, No Fear, No, no fear at all!

Though they think of you as insignificant and abuse us

No Fear, No Fear, No, no fear at all!

Though we have to lead a life of begging

No Fear, No Fear, No, no fear at all!

Though all our belongings close to our heart are lost

No Fear, No Fear, No, no fear at all!

Even if the sky is crashing down on our head

No Fear, No Fear, No, no fear at all!

After that, he came back to the room where his friends were still deep in sleep and slowly stretched himself onto his bed. He was soon embraced by Nithraadevi, the angel of sleep. Before seeking shelter in her warm embrace, he pledged to himself the following: “Just for another six months only. If nothing

takes off by then, I should leave this soil, undertaking another travel.” As he lay there feeling light because of the new resolve, the angel of sleep hugged him whole-heartedly.

23

Distributing the advertisement pamphlets for Carlo in the evenings gave them yet another new experience. At the intersection between Fourth Street West and Sixth Avenue, Ilango began his work of distributing the advertisement pamphlets. Arulrasa worked at the junction where Christopher Road, Seventh Avenue and Fourth Street West met. They had no real stress in distribution. The initial feeling of hesitation and embarrassment were all gone with the wind in just a few minutes. “Two for one ...two for one...” “Buy one; get one free!” Such phrases were the slogans for Carlo’s “throwaway price” sales. And, soon it became easier for them to shout the slogan words and distribute them to the

passersby. A few people stopped to inquire about the sales and asked for advertisement pamphlets as well. They had to distribute at least one thousand pamphlets, each. Carlo said if one thousand were distributed, at least one hundred would pay a visit to his shop. Of them, at least ten or fifteen would buy something and go. As they continued with their distributions, more and more the pedestrians stopped and inquired, thereby making the whole process easier with time.

Pedestrians were all of different ages, different nationalities and different races, speaking different languages and belonging to different religions. Many of them stopped to have brief conversations with the two foreigners. Some asked what their background was; some others posed questions in order to reveal their geographical knowledge regarding the hometown of these two, as if some sort of guessing game.

For Ilango, distributing flyers served as a gateway for meeting new acquaintances. He easily got along with some and earned the friendship of several persons. Of them, one was Ingrid, who belonged to the Hare Krishna! Hare Rama Movement. Wearing a sari she looked every inch an Indian woman. When crossed Ilango’s path for the first time, Ingrid who was also distributing pamphlets of Hare Rama! Hare Krishna! Movement on the opposite pathway, came over and introduced herself. “Hi, My name is Ingrid. I am working as a volunteer for Hare Rama, Hare Krishna Movement. For whom you are working? What is that? What is that you are distributing?”

Inquisitive, she was. Ilango answered, “We are distributing the advertisement pamphlets for Carlo’s garment/textile shop.

Now, there is a grand sale going on... “Buy one and get one free.” If you wish, why don’t you go there once and see for yourself?” He gave her two more pamphlets. She read them for a short while and then opined, “Indeed a useful discount sales. I should visit the store one day, after work.” She was even more curious of his situation and was willing to listen to Ilango’s journeys on the American soil thus far.

Taking pity on both Ilango and Arul, Ingrid gave him a valuable suggestion, which would prove beneficial. “If you come to our place of worship, you would get real good meals, try to come there now and then. You can get food and also some rest from this high-strung city life that makes you all tense.” With that, one day, she took them both to the Hare Rama, Hare Krishna shrine.

And so, with experiences like these, the days passed on. One day, a New York lawyer, Anisman, had asked the two of them to come visit him. His office was on the thirty-fourth floor of the tall structure called the Empire State building in Manhattan, which was splendidly grand back in the day, well now too. He had asked them to come and meet him without delay. He also expressed his wish to have a dialogue with them regarding their appeal for refugee status and applying for temporary admission certificates in order to get some decent job.

When they set foot on the floor of the world famous structure, the Empire State Building, Arulrasa said, “Just a few years ago, I could only ever dream of visiting this world-famous site. Amazing.”

Ilango wanted to reply in such a way that sounded just as

genuine as his friend’s words. “In a way, what you say is very true. I had never visualized all these things even in my wildest dreams.”

Ilango and Arulrasa continued their conversation when Ilango started wondering why Anisman had finally called for them. “Arul, we must have a detailed conversation with him regarding how to get the permission letters for securing jobs here and refugee status. But, I can’t help feeling surprised by his sudden call.”

Arulrasa said, laughing, “Ilango, after all we are going to meet him in a short while! Why don’t you ask him then! What is the hurry?”

As Arulrasa spoke this, with a wide grin, Ilango blushed a little. Trying his best to cover it, “Expecting to get a thing done from this New York Immigration Office is like peeling the skin of a stone. Let us see how efficient Anisman proves to be in doing exactly that, right now.”

“The Jewish have always been so clever and intelligent. Look at Karl Marx! Look at Einstein! Freud! And, today’s Chomsky! It is these Jews who shine in every field, you see! It is they who take a deep plunge into the field of Trade and Business and retain substantial savings. And, it is these same people who taught the revolutionary ideology of Socialism, doing away with Capitalism! Isn’t it surprising?”

Till then, Ilango had never thought of things in that perspective. Only when Arulrasa observed this, he started comparing and contrasting things to the best of his abilities. Surprising indeed!

With such thoughts, they entered Anisman's office.

Anisman's advice and suggestion

24

“Welcome my dear friends! Good morning! There is a very important reason why I wanted to meet you today. But, before that I would like to know about your life. How is life? Is there any urgent need which I could address at once?” With these words of concern, the lawyer, Anisman, welcomed them.

Arulrasa looked at Ilango and signaled to him to reply. Understanding his signal, Ilango began to narrate in a slightly detailed manner. “Good morning. Let the day be good to you, dear Mr. Anisman. We thank you for your kind inquiry. We have come here because you have wanted to meet us urgently. Yet, we have been thinking of meeting you of

late... but, before we could we received you call, which is very much appreciated...”

Anisman kept on looking at Ilango, showing him that he wanted him to continue. And so he did, “The main issue that is confronting us now is acquiring a Social Insurance Card. Without this card, we cannot do anything. Even our visas are now with the immigration officers, who snatched them away from us back in Boston. Without these official cards, we are not in any position to secure any legally permissible job, you know. We cannot open bank accounts either. We request you to help us in this matter somehow. We are unable to get into any permanent job. Each day proves to be a terrible uncertainty.... We keep struggling to make ends meet...”

The lawyer Anisman attentively listened to his words and said, “I can understand your situation quite well. Definitely, I will do whatever I can to help you get the required documents. Further, if you can get a letter from some business man outlining your work for them, we can use it by showing it to them and by explaining your present situation to them so that we can so apply for the Permission Letter and obtain it from the Immigration Office, which would enable you to acquire some kind of permanent job.”

Arulrasa still had his concerns, however. “Yes Sir, we would somehow get such a letter that you have mentioned. But, what guarantee is there that we would be able to get the Social Insurance Card, even if we are to bring the letter?”

“Of course, nothing has a one hundred percent guarantee...”

But, there is nothing wrong in giving it a try, is there? If you have such an official letter – it would prove to be very useful for your situation.”

Hearing his words, both Ilango and Arulrja agreed. Ilango voiced their consent, “True, what you say is indeed correct. We would somehow get such a letter and bring it to you as soon as possible.” After that, their conversation changed course and focused on the applications for refugee status. Anisman informed them that there would be a communication informing them of the date on which their application would be taken into consideration and when an inquiry would be conducted on their requisition. But, prior to that, he would meet them one more time, he said, to get the full details of their requisition for granting refugee-status to them. He pointed out that their main problem was securing the social insurance number. And, it definitely was an important issue. Thus, discussing the pros and cons of all related issues, Anisman arrived upon the point that he wished to discuss with them all day.

“This has got something to do with your situation here.”

Arulrasa was anxious to know of what he spoke, “We don’t understand Sir, please explain.”

“As for you, you have not come into this land in an illegal manner. Your aim was to go to Montreal in Canada.”

“Of course Yes! Yes! What you are saying is true!” Ilango excitedly confirmed. He went on to explain, “That was our only intention. That is why we were on the planes; we never had any intention of entering into America as illegal immigrants.

Our bad luck, the Delta Air Services, which was to fly us to Canada, refused to have us on board. That's the reason why we are languishing here. That is the one and only reason for our being here. What you are saying is indeed true."

Anisman understood his need to say what he said, but intervened and continued, "True indeed. It is indeed sad that you who had no intention to enter this country illegally but you must now languish in this fashion. As a citizen of this country, I feel really ashamed. This dire turn of events has been a nuisance to both you and I. And, that is the reason why I explored various possibilities of atoning the situation for you and I found something that could help you with this. That's why I sought for a meeting with you."

Ilango couldn't help but show his gratefulness, "Thank you for your magnanimity. We feel very proud to see what a noble-hearted person you are. In what way do you think you can help us in getting justice, please tell us."

"In fact, I do sincerely feel that in your case, human rights have been grossly violated. For, in your case, you had proper permission to remain in this soil for eight hours. It is also important to note the issue with the visas and your misfortune of having the Air Service refusing you to fly you to Montreal. So, when it was decided that you were to be sent back, you needed to prevent it by applying for political asylum here. And, you had sought political asylum when you were staying here legally. But, when the eight hours had gone by, you had lost that legal status. At that juncture, you had the chance to come out on bail. But, instead of giving that to you, the immigration

officer, who had mistakenly regarded you as illegal immigrants, confined you inside the detention camp. The period when you were confined in the detention camp is the period where you were denied your human rights. And I strongly feel that you have every reason to seek compensation from the American Government for this gross injustice meted out to you. Hence, if you wish, I am ready to file a suit and argue your case in the court of law. And, I am prepared to get my fees for this service after we succeed in this lawsuit, from the compensation amount that comes your way. What do you feel about my proposal?"

As the lawyer spoke so, both of them were taken aback and were dumbstruck. Anisman picked up his conversation, "Both of you should have a detailed discussion about this and then let me know of your decision. Further, if you file a case against the government in this manner, the possibility of the government better considering your request for refugee status might become much stronger."

Anisman then left the pair alone to discuss their plans. Ilango immediately asked Arul, "What Arul, what do you think of his proposal? Do you think that we can believe this fellow in this?"

"What he says does make sense, I feel. And, if we do win the case, it would be a jackpot. Who would let go of the lottery winning that comes his way ... whatever we get, it would be a profit, wouldn't it? As for me, I think that it wouldn't cost us anything to give it a try, what do you say? Maybe, it could prove to be helpful to us in our request for granting refugee-status as well. It could give us some bargaining power in that,

I think... Basically, I think we should try it.”

An intense discussion followed and they ultimately agreed to give it a try. When the lawyer returned, he asked, “Yes, my friends, what have you decided?”

“Sir, both of us had discussed the pros and cons of your proposal, and we feel that it is valid. So, we agree to it,” stated Arulrasa.

This brightened Anisman’s countenance, and a wide smile erupted across his face. “Good, you have made an excellent decision. Come again tomorrow. By that time I would have all the relevant documents ready. And, you must sign them.”

A clever agent called pablo

25

From Ilango’s diary...

Life goes on, as usual. Sometimes physical and psychological fatigue take the upper hand with hope depleting. At such times, in order to not be afflicted and paralyzed with any kind of negative thoughts, I would keep on wandering all over the city, it doesn’t matter what the hour may be. Even Arul would find it difficult to cope with all my wanderings around the city and would decide to stay in our room. During these walks, I would think about the city and the people, the prevailing environment and the social life, in order to gain more knowledge about them. Occasionally, I would visit the main library in the city. Sometimes, I would visit those friends who were detained in that

Brooklyn detention camp and spend some time with them, trying to encourage and console them in any way I could.

Since our last meeting with Anisman the lawyer, we managed to obtain some sort of an appointment order, from a Gujurathi couple running a grocery store in Manhattan. With that, we applied for the official letter of approval from the immigration office. And, as advised by Anisman the lawyer, we simultaneously submitted an appeal seeking redress from the American Government for the way we were kept in the detention camp and the gross violatiuon of basic human rights that ensued.

Many days had passed since that meeting. But, nothing happened. Like usual, we resumed our job-hunt during the day. Days passed by in this fashion. However, one day, in the early afternoon, I came across Mahendran. He worked aboard a Greek ship for many years, but when it made a stop to New York City, he stayed back for some reason. Now, just like us, he still searches for a job. One day, after wandering the whole day as usual, I took a resting break, sitting on a bus stop bench along Forty-Second Road. He came to me on his own and introduced himself. He told e that he was to visit his agent, one who specializes in finding jobs for people like “us.” Mahendran invited me to come with him, if I wished to do so. The optimism in his words, along with his bubbling enthusiasm, proved to be the consoling that I needed for my desperate heart. To be more accurate, there was one particular thing that he had said, which caught my attention. He said that, from what he had gathered, this agent would send those who went to him for jobs would often be immediately sent to work. “That was his specialty,”

announced Mahendran. He really appeared to be “god-like” to the illegal immigrants living on American soil, especially those living in New York city. Mahendran went on with such acclamations about the agent that I couldn’t help asking him, “Where did you learn of all these details?” He responded by saying that a Spanish man, whom he had never met, gave him all this information, giving him a magazine with a copy of the advertisement (representing the agent). Mahendran made sure to make a special note of the next fact: the agent was such a skilled person in finding immediate placement to whomever called for him. I too was impressed and I too developed some sort of good opinion about this agent. As a result, I agreed to go with Mahendran and meet this man. After all, it is in our incessant endeavours that the very success of life lies, isn’t it so? Try and try till you succeed.. even our good old Avvai had said thousand of years ago that we should never lose our spirit and become lethargic and desperate...

Pablo was a Spanish agent. He had a very handsome face and physique and a fabulous voice, with an incredibly mesmerizing effect. He owned a small business in a small office that stood next to the main bus terminus of the city. He was his own master. When both of us went to meet him, he was not all that busy. There were just one or two people waiting to have a consultation with him. Soon enough, the two were called up to meet with him. He listened to our woeful tale with concern and compassion. Then, he said, “Just like you, I too had come here from South America with many dreams. I can understand your feelings and I am able to empathize with you. It was due to those horrible, heart-rending experiences that I had to undergo then that I have created this Employment Bureau to help people

like you, people like me. The fees I get for this service are not high. It is very nominal, you know. It is just fifty dollars.”

After that, he gave us the application form for finding a suitable job and asked us to fill it up. He said that he was going to send us to a nice factory and that the form should be filled up with relevant details for the proposed jobs. He also offered us some more pieces of advice. The moment we each paid fifty dollars, he talked to someone over the phone regarding the types of jobs available for us. He assured the person at the other end that he would send us right away. Then, turning towards us, he said, “Well, my friends! Wonder whose face you saw first on waking up this morn! For, you are lucky indeed! I am going to send you to a reputed ‘Mailing’ factory in the city. The work won’t be too difficult, you know. Your main work would be processing the mails. Apart from that, there will be several other usual chores that one has to do in a factory. If you do your work properly, there will be a bright future awaiting you! Mark my words, you would then be regarding me as your guardian angel, if not God himself!” Pablo preached. Pablo gave us the address of a factory located near the Queenseal Stainway Metro Rail Station and asked us go meet the manager, whose name was Tony. Then, he wished us both luck and bade goodbye.

Mahendran was brimming with joy due to this. “See, what we have heard about him is one hundred percent true. He is indeed a person with great potential, don’t you think so?” My heart was also brimming with joy. ARUL? I decided to disclose it after the job is mine came, surprising him in the process. Further, I came up with an additional plan: I want to take him with me and introduce him to Pablo. With such dreams and future plans,

the two of us proceeded towards the factory and reached it. We went to the reception counter and told the female official there that we had come to meet the manager named Tony. At that time, a middle-aged European man came that way and he said, “I am the Tony. Are you those sent by Pablo?” When we nodded in the affirmative, he took us at once to the dining hall close by. And then, he revealed, “To tell you the truth, I don’t even know who this Pablo is. Really! Of late, learning my name somehow, he has been sending many like you to come here to work for me.” Both of us were obviously shocked to hear this. We didn’t expect this at all. Tony continued, asking us, “Who is this Pablo? An employment agent?” We nodded and he asked, “Have you given him any money?” For this too we had to nod miserably. Tony seemed to take pity on us and said, “In this matter, I can suggest you just one thing. Go to the police station here and file a complaint against Tony. Otherwise, he would go on, cheating many more like you. And, I am prepared to come and give evidence, if you call me to do that.”

While he was speaking, I looked over at Mahendran’s face. He stood there, acutely embarrassed to look at me. When we came out, both of us didn’t say anything for a while. I remembered Tony’s advice. But, how to do that? We ourselves are so-called illegal immigrants, hunting for job. How can we go and tell the Police that we had given money to work illegally? Oh, how many out there are on the prowl acting individually or in groups, to swindle people like us, exploiting our pitiable state of affairs to their advantage?

At that point, I was reminded of what Mahendran had said about Pablo – that he was such a talented agent and that he

would send those who went to him seeking jobs, straightaway to some suitable work- spot... that was his specialty... He was like a guardian angel, if not God himself, who would always be there to help those in crisis... and I couldn't help but smile a little...

"Why do you laugh?" asked Mahendran

"I just thought of what you had said about him. You said that he was such a talented person endowed with the special skill for sending you straightaway to some nice job or other, didn't you? I recollected those words of yours and I couldn't help smiling. Your observation is, of course, true in a way. For he did send us straight to the workplace, didn't he? And, he has advertised himself truthfully – that he is an extremely talented person who would send those who come to him seeking jobs, straight to the work-spot. And, he has not said that he was talented in securing you a job, right? And, he did send us to the work-spot after all..."

On hearing it the way, Mahendran's face turned pale and twisted

That night when I returned to my room Arulrasa asked, "Was there any haul?" It was his way of asking whether my trip was successful or not. He would always use that specific word, haul. But, how to tell him that Pablo is nothing but a snake with a vicious bite.

26

Midway

After that bitter experience with the Spanish employment agent Pablo, Ilango imposed a temporary break onto his job-hunting with the help of any agents. And, he began going around on his own, directly approaching the prospective employers, seeing, firsthand, where all the employment opportunities were. In a place where there are millions of illegal immigrants, searching and finding a job for an individual proved indeed to be a Herculean task; he was about to lose all hope. Yet, he made sure not every go there, not allowing him to lose heart and render him weak. It was during this time that he accidentally came across Jayarathnam strolling on one of the Manhattan streets. He hailed from an important Vanni district in Eelam – Vavunia (Jaffna). He was

working in an Italian restaurant situated on 46th Street. Seeing that Ilango was struggling to make ends meet, he gave him the following proposal,

“Look here Ilango, if you wish, there is a job, which would take a few hours everyday during the daytime. I can get you that, but, I don’t know whether you would be able to do it.”

As Jayarathnam left the sentence incomplete, Ilango persisted, “Come on Jeyam, please tell. If I can, let me do it.”

In response, Jayarathnam said, “The job is not that difficult. The work is to deliver our different varieties of dishes to the houses and offices that placed their orders with us. For the orders that we receive from eleven o’clock till two o’clock, you should go around and deliver the items. And, this delivery job would sometimes be within the restaurant, and sometimes you need to climb up fifty to sixty floors in skyscrapers, climbing up and down. It is not incredibly good pay. It would be less than minimum wage, so to say. But, those who place their orders would give us solid tips, you know. It will be all yours. Then...”

”What is it, please tell.” Ilango was tired of these cliffhangers.

“They would give you free meals in the afternoon. And, you can eat anything you want from our restaurant. It is good food. And a satisfactory job, till you get another good job. If you do this work for several hours a day, it would prove to be a good experience for you, I believe. Think about it carefully and let me know tomorrow. If you wish to do it, come to our restaurant tomorrow at about ten o’clock in the morning. And,

I will introduce you to our owner.”

Ilango agreed to mull it over. When he was returning to his room, throughout his journey in the underground Metro train, he was pondering over the prospect of taking up the work. In a way, what Jeyarathnam had said made sense. Just three hours of work during the daytime. They would pay him three dollars per hour. If he worked for five days he would be getting forty-five dollars per week. That would be enough to pay the room rent and for a bottle of drinks. Jeyam also mentioned that Ilango could easily make 10 to 20 additional daily dollars in tips. If there would be an average of fifteen dollars, he could get almost 75 dollars a week. Seventy plus forty-five – altogether he could get one hundred-and-twenty five dollars as his weekly income. And, he would be getting afternoon lunches for free. That way, we can consider this job as fetching one hundred and seventy dollars on a weekly basis. Ilango decided that there would be nothing wrong in trying this job and getting a feel for it first. Let it also be another one of the experiences of New York. After this, I should ask Gosh to try to swing for a suitable job for us at his workplace. And, that should be the last such illegal job he would do on American soil. If that too goes wrong, then there is no other alternative but to say goodbye to this land. And, he should somehow go to that land that he had original planned to venture – Canada. In this great grand city called New York, which is the hall-mark of the country called America, which is hailed as the Heaven on Earth... Oh all the jobs he had to do! Had tried playing guitar in a restaurant (*italics, needed?*). Tried selling umbrellas for protection against the downpour. Tried his hand at a roadside business. Tried distributing advertisement pamphlets. Henceforth, let’s try

delivering lunch and other food-items during the noon hours. If that too doesn't prove good, let's try to get some job in the company where Gosh works. By chance, if something good comes out of the complaint signed and handed over to lawyer Anisman, a solid amount would also come his way... then he could remain here forever. Thus, Ilango's thoughts went round and round, travelling in all directions, like an overflowing river. He was so deeply immersed in contemplation.

After wandering all over the city the whole day, when at last he returned to his room, it was well past 10 p.m.

But before arriving home, while traveling in the subway, he was lost in thoughts when a voice called out to him and jerked him into the wakeful world.

"If you don't mind, may I have a few words with you?"

It was the voice of a woman sitting opposite him. Just like the pop singer "Cyndi Lauper" in her famous "Time After Time" video, this young woman was sporting multi-coloured clothing and hair to match. Cyndi Lauper was a singer whom he came to know during his stay in the detention camp. He used to listen to her famous song "Time After Time" and watched the video with great awe. He always loved to listen to her emotionally charged voice. At midnight, lying in his bed and listening to the 'tik-tik-tik' of the clock, immersed in the haunting memories of her lover and feeling terribly anguished and restive, the singer would render the song in a wonderful voice, emoting so poignantly. This was a song that created a real lasting stir in the eighties.

If you're lost you can look and you will find me

Time after time.

If you fall I will catch you Ill be waiting

Time after time.

After my picture fades and darkness has

Turned to gray

Watching through windows you're wondering

If I'm ok

Secrets stolen from deep inside

The drum beats out of time

While singing these lines she would sing soulfully, with her voice melting with her emotions. And, these lines have always been his most favourite ones. Wondering what this Cyndi Lauper doppelgänger would say to Ilango, he eagerly agreed, "I have no objection at all. You can say whatever you want."

"I have been watching you for a long time. What is it that makes you think so deeply, keeping you oblivious of your surroundings?" she suddenly asked.

Ilango responded that this was one of his favourite pastimes, thinking. "I would always let go of myself while thinking of anything, everything."

Hearing that, she said, opening her eyes wide in surprise, "What,

thinking is your pastime? Surprising indeed! I have heard of so many pastimes, but, this is the first time I heard an answer like that!” she said, amused and even a bit astonished.

But for this, what other pastime can be there in the life of one who is steeped in the struggle for survival ? Except dreams and aspirations and future plans – except this array of thoughts and musings while also retrieving one’s past glory and happiness, this becomes a favourite pastime. In the world of his, this was the only pastime he could have, suiting his financial condition and the like...

So Ilango verbalized, “This a pastime that costs you nothing and it has no parallel, I feel.”

“You are right, for sure,” she whole-heartedly agreed.

“I will tell you one thing, hope you won’t mistake me.”

“No, surely I won’t. You are free to speak your mind too, of course!”

“Well, have you heard the song of Cyndi Lauper’s that starts with the line ‘Time After Time’ which she would sing, going down the memory lane and feeling nostalgic?”

She was greatly surprised and pleased to hear this, and asked, “Do you know her? Cindi is my favourite singer! And I love that song! Do you like it too?”

“Of course, it’s one of my favourites. But, the thing I wanted to say_”

“Oh, sorry, you were about to say something but I intervened and stopped you. Tell me, what did you want to say?”

“You look exactly like her! And, your hair-style too has a striking resemblance to that of the singer. You have applied different hues, exactly like her... And also the clothing you wear! Particularly, your big eyes and round face and even your smile remind me of her, you know.”

Upon hearing his observations, she laughed aloud. Then, she said with her eyes full of smiles, “Oh, is that what you were about to say? Oh, thank you very much! My friends too would say the same thing. And I too dress like her and have my hair-style made after her. I feel very happy to hear your comments, that I look like one of my most favorite singers. I am indeed honoured, you know. I feel very proud. Thanks again. Thank you.”

Thus their conversation continued, touching various subjects and issues.

“I feel happy to have met you and this friendly and meaningful conversation between us gives me immense pleasure. I will never forget this night in my life. If you like, I have no objection in spending this night with you. Let us go to some pub or restaurant, what do you say?”

Her open invitation surprised him. At the same time, the way she extended her invitation so genuinely revealed her good heart and nature to him.

Ilango was flattered, but had to explain, “Thanks for your invite.

But, now I have to meet a person on an important errand. So, please excuse me. And, I thank you for making my journey an incredibly pleasant one. And I too would remember this night and this pleasant meeting always. Henceforth, every time I hear the voice of Cyndi Lauper, I will invariably think about you.”

And, he mused within: “The rat sees no way out she is asking me to hold aloft the broomstick. At a time when even a square meal a day proves to be a mirage she is inviting me to a club... I DON'T GET IT’

When it was her stop, her face lost a bit of her glow, and immediately withdrew a small piece of paper, scribbling down her telephone number. She gave it to him, saying, “If you feel like meeting me again sometime, please call me. I thank this night for giving me this opportunity of meeting you. And, I thank you too for being such good company to me in this journey.” As she exited, she sang the song she said to love, ‘Time After Time.’

You're lost you can look and you will find me Time after time;
If you fall I will catch you I'll be waiting Time after time', and then, winking at him, she was gone.

And, his lonely journey continued into the well of night.

27

1

The next day, it will be exactly one year since the day he set foot on American soil. Time goes by too quickly, a realization that never ceases to astonish Ilango. It was similar to the period of some nine years of his boyhood, which sped past like one year, so smoothly and peacefully. How nice those days were when he had absolutely no worry nor responsibility and was like a free bird, being safe and secure under the loving care of his parents! There was always time to stop and stare and relish the beauty and splendour of the millions of stars, which would keep shining throughout the night, scattered all over the sky. The marvelous full moon, the wide-eyed owl,

squirrels, snails, the crows that draw straight lines in the sky as they fly, birds of different varieties such as ‘kukkurupaan’, kondaok-kuruvi, maambazhathik-kuruvi, aatkaatti, oorulaathi, paarot, mainaa, manippuraa – he had lots of time to watch them and revel in their beauty and swiftness. But now... caught in the intense struggle for survival, having to shoulder the burden of all those complexities and the chaos of life, he could find no time at all to stop and stare... Time still went by, dragging him along... In this one year, despite all hurdles and struggles, he was able to read at least a few meaningful books and he could contemplate on various issues. In this one year, had there ever been any fruits that came his way? Except that collection of experiences that he gained on the financial front, had there been any that he gained on the existential front? No significant progress, so to say... but, one thing... these experiences proved very useful indeed. It was those experiences that helped him to face the adversities with a strong mind. They instilled in them the hope that there would be a better tomorrow. They gave him the courage to keep going... Made him more resilient ... “No fear – nothing to feel ashamed of... nothing to fear at all... will not go into hiding... will not turn be paralyzed due to fear or despair... let the sea surge and leap forward, menacingly... I won’t be cowed down... I will fear none; nothing, never... the sky is there... the rain, the sun, the air, the fire, the moon, the fish, this body, intelligence, life – everything is there as free but precious gifts bestowed on us.. And his mind has turned stronger and clearer with the help of such experiences and the collecting of wisdom.

He worked in the restaurant run by his Vavunia friend, Jayarathnam, as a helping hand. He served the dishes during

noontimes for a while. After that, he worked as a labourer in the factory run by his Bengali friend Gosh. It also lasted for one or two months only. After that, the struggle for existence began in full swing once again. As he had already resolved, it proved unthinkable for him to continue his life there, on the American soil. With no legal document whatsoever, it proved impossible to improve his social and financial status, which were the things needed to achieve a stable life, with feet firmly planted into the soil.

So, the day after tomorrow, it would be exactly one year since the time he had set foot on this soil. On the first day of the second year, he couldn’t remain even for a second in this land. The night after tomorrow, the next phase of his life, should commence. Back to the pavilion, so to say, and starting all over again, from Square No. 1. From the bottom, with hopes, dreams, and aspirations. He must keep feeling energetic and enterprising the journey for his existence should begin. And, the only way to move on... is to proceed towards that soil of his original intent in Aavani(a Tamil month), following the ethnic riots that exploded in Eelam, where half-way his journey was disrupted and halted in this land.... He should proceed towards Canadian grounds, once again, starting it all over again with courage and confidence and hope. With the two hundred dollars in his pocket, he should commence his new journey. Once he resolved to do so, he thought that he should spend his final hours on American land happily with his friends before telling them his future plans, and saying goodbye.

Gosh didn’t support his decision. He wanted Ilango to stay for some more time and keep trying for a stable means of

livelihood. Arulrasa planned to do exactly that, and had decided to remain there for a bit longer and try for a permanent job, though he didn't want to say 'No' to Ilango's plans. When they were thus conversing Gosh came forth with another question, "Remember that lawyer you visited, you had filed a suit for the violation of human rights committed in your case, remember? What happened?"

Arulrasa was all too quick to respond, "When we met our lawyer recently, we had asked him about this too."

"What did he say to that?"

"His reply was highly puzzling. He said that if we were to continue with the suit, our relatives on American soil would be in trouble. So, he said that it would be better to leave it as it was. I just couldn't understand his contention at all. If so, why did he in the first place instigate us to file a suit?"

Gosh freely discussed his thoughts, "If you ask me, I am not able to believe him in this matter.... I think... "

As Gosh paused a little, Ilango too got into the conversation: "Gosh, I too have some doubt, like you. First, let us hear yours."

"I think that he must have come to an understanding with the Immigration authorities of the American Government. There must have been some intense pressure exerted on him or even some substantial amount given to him to leave your case as it is, not picking it up Who knows? You are illegal immigrants. Suppose he proceeds with your suit and succeeds, then there

would be every possibility of those many others, who are like you, to start seeking redress through legal means. And, we can't deny that such a situation might cause serious repercussions in the political and economic fronts of America. When you take these facts into consideration I feel that money must have spoken a great deal beneath the table, expediting a natural death for the case itself."

Arul assured, "As far as I am concerned, I don't worry about it. He started it himself. And, he himself had closed it."

Ilango agreed, "I am also of the same view. It was something, which we didn't initiate. When the time comes, some day in future we would try to get at the truth of this episode. That's all we can do."

Gosh still wanted to get his points in and mentioned, "Yet, your lawyer is some brainy chap indeed. His purpose is served. If money is to come his way, then his worry would be over."

With that they put an end to their dialogue of Anisman the lawyer and turned their attention towards various other issues. Before continuing in conversation, Mrs. Padma Ajith came to their room to collect the weekly rent for their stay there. And, she too joined in their conversation, "What, you all seem to be engaged in some sort of serious conversation?"

Gosh was amused and replied, "Of course you are right. And, it is you who would be incurring a heavy loss in this."

Hearing his words, Mrs. Ajith was startled, looking a bit puzzled, "What, am I to suffer a heavy loss? What is it you are

saying? I am not able to understand the head or tail of it.”

And, Gosh said, “Then what! Searching for and finding such a nice person as your tenant in this soil – oh, how difficult it is, as you know very well, don’t you?”

Only then Mrs. Ajith could realize what their conversation was all about. Turning towards Ilango she asked, “What Ilango? Is he speaking the truth? Are you planning to leave this place and go somewhere else?”

Arulrasa answered first, “Not just this place, but he is planning to leave this soil itself. We were discussing that when you came in.”

Mrs. Ajith focused her conversation on Ilango, “Well, where do you propose to go?”

Addressing her as Mrs. Padma Ajith, Ilango continued with his rationale, “It has been a year since I have set foot on this soil. So far, I have made no progress, none at all really, in getting citizenship or achieving a real stable job. In such a situation, I can’t go on living here. That’s why I have decided to leave for Canada.”

Mrs. Ajith made an attempt for attack, “Okay, that’s fine, but, you are an illegal immigrant. You don’t possess any legal documents with you. When this is the case, how will you enter Canada? Suppose the worst situation, perhaps more serious problems will encounter you there?”

Gosh agreed, “This is what I am also pondering over. There

is truth in what Mrs. Padma Ajith is saying, and I feel we need to take it into account. Ilango, have you thought of it in this angle?”

Ilango came to his own defense, “What you say is of course true, in one sense. But, to my knowledge, Canada is a country that has a highly flexible approach in matters of refugees and related issues. I know of many people from here who have successfully made a life over there. And, for many of them, the rights for permanent stay have also been granted, you know. If only I could enter that soil, then everything would be fine. But...”

“But?” Gosh insisted.

“While crossing the borders, suppose my name resembles that of another person on some sort of special list of names that is in the computer system of the immigration officer, and that someone has committed heinous crimes and is in the list as one of the ‘most wanted’ and is being searched for by the international police force, such as the Interpol, for instance - I will be doomed then. They would even detain me and put me behind bars forever. But, the probability of me getting into such an unenviable situation is of course not that high...”

Mrs. Padma Ajith let out a sigh, “Ilango, if you reach there without any problems or hurdles and start leading a peaceful and prosperous life, that would be enough for me. If you choose to leave this place, please don’t forget us. Whenever you get time, talk to us and enquire after our welfare, will you?”

Arulrasa agreed and asked, “Ilango, you are first to go and after

seeing how you fare I will also come, okay?”

Gosh chirped in, “Ilango, it seems like you have decided to go. My best wishes to you for a bright future. If you are leaving, when do you plan to leave?”

Ilango made no delay and responded that he planned to leave the next night.

Gosh admitted, “Ilango, you are really an unusual personality. Once you have decided something, it means that you would never wait for a day. Is that so?”

Ilango didn’t want to agree with that, because he felt it untrue, “Not like that. That I should not live here for more than a year is something that I had firmly decided in the beginning of my stay. Now, one year has come and gone. This being the case, it would be very difficult for me to continue to remain here.”

As expected, Mr.Ajith decided to come join in the aftermath. Learning that Ilango was going to leave for Canada, he too became a little worried. And he said, “Friends, why don’t we have a small get-together and have ourselves a small farewell party?”

Mrs.Padma Ajith unconditionally agreed, “Today’s meals will be solely my responsibility. I am going to prepare nice hot chicken biriyani, what do you say?”

Oh, how long it had been since they had relished the food prepared by the delicate, bangled hands of Mrs.Padma Ajith.

No one was crazy enough to refuse.

2.

That night was spent in the company of their room-mates and the friendly couple Mr and Mrs, Ajith. The Biriyani prepared by Mrs.Padma Ajith bore testimony to her skills and expertise in cooking. After that, they all gave their best wishes to Ilango and then retired to their rooms for the night. For a while, Ilango and Arulrasa remain awoke. As they didn’t want to disturb those sleeping inside, they thought it would be ideal to sit outside in the yard and spend some time, chatting.

There was joy overflowing in Ilango’s heart. It was the joy born of the knowledge that the prevailing climate of his life would be soon coming to an end. He is going to begin his struggle for survival, all over again. He didn’t worry or feel tired about starting it all over again. He is one who would always face life bravely and enthusiastically. It is always better to start anew than languishing in a life of uncertainty with no progress at all.

Arulrasa, however, was still a little worried about Ilango’s trip to Canada. The fact that he was going alone was the cause of his concern. Yet, he didn’t worry about the decision itself. For he never had the courage that Ilango had in taking risks, making decisions, and sticking to them, whatever the results may be. His visa lay in the Immigration Office of America. Ilango had resolved to tell the truth and seek entry into Canada.

While entering, if they tell him, “You have already applied for refugee status in America. First, get a reply to that and then come here,” and so deport him, what to do? But, Ilango had thought of that too. And, he had a firm answer to that also. Firstly, for the last one year he had no official document to find an employment in the American soil. With no support of any sort from the government, he finds it impossible to work somewhere in a legally admissible manner and earn his daily bread. Secondly, even after obtaining the employment order and applying for the relevant legal documents through their lawyer, no response was ever received. So far, he had managed to somehow survive, against all odds. But, he couldn’t go on like this and he couldn’t continue to be in a situation which proved to be simply unbearable, to say the least. This was his response. If they send him back, what to do? In that case he should come back and languish as before. No other alternative. But, assuming all such prospects, he couldn’t and shouldn’t remain idle – without trying at all.

Arulrasa praised his friend, “Ilango,! I don’t have the courage that you possess. After reaching there, please inform me of all the prevailing conditions there. Only after learning things from you I will be able to arrive at a decision.”

Ilango would be always willing to help his friend, “I will enquire about everything and collect all the details and let you know . After that you can come peacefully. No hurry.”

Hearing these words, Arulrasa responded saying, “Everything is for our good only. If only we had received that Social Insurance Card, we could have stayed back for what it is worth.

Let’s see, whether I am able to get it some time soon. If only it comes to my hands, I would remain here till the end, till I get some response for our submission for refugee-status.”

They continued with various topics before heading off to bed. Arulrasa began to sleep soon after. But, sleep eluded Ilango, as usual. He tried going to sleep, but he couldn’t. He went to the dining hall and leafed through the pages of Bharathiar’s poem-collection. Then, he leafed through the pages of his diary for a while. As he expected, the fiery poems of Bharathi and his diary rejuvenated his sagging spirits. (the sky is seen here on earth, won’t it come into our hands?/Thinking incessantly and striving ceaselessly, oh should we despair in the end?)

Opening his diary he began to pour down the surging feelings and emotions of his heart on that night.

3.

From Ilango’s diary...

Oh, how fast the one long year has gone- as if in a flash! My experiences on this soil have made me realize so many truths about life. It is due to these experiences of mine that I have been able to see the other side, the darker, realer side of this so-called paradise on Earth. On this soil, which acts as the great calling of individual freedom and liberty, there are thousands of individuals languishing in the detention camps! Caught in the vicious grip of poverty, oh how many more thousands have been suffering incessantly... On one side, many opportunities

exist for living well. But, alas, on the other side, a huge mass of people are denied of their basic rights to live and lead a life of dignity and so they rot and perish... no one hesitates to live in making the illegal immigrants toil hard, sweat and stress... Those who hesitate so and are unwilling to grant such recognition can as well send them all out of their country.. why not they do it..?

But, that is not possible? For, if they do so, with no manual labourers and daily wagers to work for hours together, toil hard for a meager income the restaurants, pubs and factories would have to remain closed, not being able to fill up the too wide a gap.

This soil roots the detention camps, paralyzing those refugees who come here unable to bear suppressions and oppressions unleashed in their motherland. Thus turning them into illegal immigrants. But aren't most of these sons of the soil the descendents of Europeans who had wiped out the original sons of the soil,, invading the land in an unfair and improper manner so as to swindle the soil of its enormous wealth and natural resources? Seeing it in this way, what right do these neo-Americans have to turn people like us, who come here in large numbers due to various political and economic reasons, into illegal immigrants and humiliate us to no end? For their own interests of national safety, they can play various games all over the world, politically, using the force of their army... but then, why should they hesitate to accept those people affected by their political and other games in the international arena and who come here seeking asylum?

Don't mistake my words, however. There are many good aspects to this land. Most importantly, there is significant Scientific and technological advancements and the people here work really hard, having a clear vision for the future. On one side, the whole world is burning, thanks to the National Defense Policy and the Developmental Policy of the American government. The natural resources are being swindled and the balance of all kinds are constantly sabotaged. On the other side, thanks to the people of this soil, there are long-term visions and missions. The activities and initiatives of the government invite widespread condemnation from all quarters. At the same time, real good initiatives are undertaken all the time for safeguarding Environment and for making the third world prosper and progress. America. It is endowed with a bright, hope-instilling and highly skilled side. At the same time it has a dark side too. Filled with despair, selfishness and pessimism. It has the positive side with all those scientific and technological advancement and hard work, progressive trends in Arts and Literature, significant growth in Economy , there also exists a darker, negative side with the merciless wars that it keeps waging against under-developed countries (killing innocent babies, hapless women, senior citizens, patients, the vulnerable people) it devours day in and day out, its numerous sick-minded anti-social elements that keep roaming around freely. The various forums that are steeped in racial fundamentalism, its detention camps where refugees are detained... all these run rampant...

This is how Ilango had poured down his heart in his diary that night. As he went on writing, his heart would heal itself, becoming clearer ... and also more at peace. This renewed

vigour and joy in him, causing him to want to write more.

'Why should people, who are living in a small blue-hued planet called Earth get entangled in all kinds of divisions and partitions and so lead a life of enmity and misery? What hinders them from turning wise and mature? What hinders them from a life of peace and harmony based on the ideology – Yaadhum Oorae; Yaavarum Kelir , Everything is our place and everyone is our kin. Why is this world so full of discriminations and disparities? This is a planet that travels at a great speed through the universe. Its speed proves beyond comprehension. In this vast universe, its petty, narrow-minded dealings remain hidden and incomprehensible. Yet, people who are at various levels of intelligences, fight with each other. With wars and disparities, this beautiful planet is turning from bad to worse with each moment. Oh, how many lives are being targeted, hit and wounded and driven along the violent current of the river of blood...oh, how many techniques and strategies are there to annihilate and wipe away fellow human beings... Wars and all kinds of destructions have become mere visuals on small and big screens today... Who would realize the bloody rivers that lie frozen behind those destructions and annihilations and the feelings of unbearable anguish and sorrow? If only they could realize that, feel that pain, then can anyone feel inclined towards causing such senseless killings? As the landmine goes off and when the tender limbs of a child are torn apart and scattered all around, just imagine how intense the pain would be to the parents watching it happen. Even otherwise, can we become immune to the pain and horror of it all, regarding it as an unknown child of some unknown people? Oh, thousands of wars – all due to man-made religious, racial and ethnic divisions

and disparities... how many more would be there- no one knows... what a terrible bloodshed we have so far witnessed... still witnessing... oh, what a wonderful place this small planet is! What all wonders it has in store for us... and, where is the need to sabotage and destroy it, without realizing its wonderful state? Why are we not able to live along the poignant line ' meaning 'your job here is to love, you know!''

Thus, he went on penning till sleep overpowered him. At one stage the embrace of Nithradevi turned tighter, weighing heavy on him and hence he lost himself in her!

4.

The next day was his last on American soil. Ilango kept on wandering all over Manhattan. He went to all the streets and places where he had been going around for the past one year and took a good last look at all those spots. He went and met Haribabu, his wife Indira, and Henry and bid them farewell. That night, he left for the bus station, accompanied by Arulrasa Gosh, Mr and Mrs. Ajith and all the other friends he had met, all wishing to see him off. Ilango didn't expect this at all. But, what was more surprising was the fact that Haribabu and Indira had also come to the bus station to bid him farewell. Everyone wished him a bright and prosperous future. The exact moment of his departure arrived. Leaving all the sad, but understanding, faces behind, Ilango got into the bus. He chose to sit in a corner seat. At that hour of midnight, the bus began its onward journey towards the city of Toronto.

In the night sky, the sweet little winking, starry ladies were grinning at the commencement of his new journey. “Oh, you beautiful ladies called stars! Are you grinning at me? Making fun of me, perhaps? Go ahead... have a good laugh. Please do laugh to your heart’s content. I will not lose heart because of all this, because of all such mockery and sarcasm. But, I get a thoroughly different meaning in all such smiles and all the laughter you bring. The long-distance travel to faraway lands, of all those light rays that you send, piercing through the vast empty spaces that lie in a trance with no sound nor stir, astonish me. Piercing through the empty spaces, how bravely they commence their journey from various periods of time. Compared to their journeys, with no fear nor apprehension regarding all sorts of loneliness, all kinds of distances, can there be any meaning at all to my travel? I wonder...

The bus ride started at midnight, and reached Canada at dawn. The morning star had already graced the skies. “Oh, in the twilight zones of dawn, you lie there in deep meditation at the horizon! In your dim ray of light that comes through the thick blanket of snow, you would remain there, as a weak ray of light, helpless and vulnerable like the hapless people of our Mother Land. Those who pen poetry would go ga-ga over it, calling it the symbol of a bright new day. But, I am able to realize your acute loneliness and gloom in that short span of time. When I see the gloom and sorrow in your glance, I am reminded of the sorrow and anguish widespread in the ever damp eyes of our land, our people who are undergoing untold sufferings, being in the dark, dense forest, having no one to help them and nowhere to go... Oh you, the starry lass who foretells the arrival of dawn – please show us the way... please

lead us from darkness to light!

Ilango has commenced his new journey with hope and courage. Oh, You, Mother Nature! Give me the heart that never turns greedy... Oh, mother! Mother Nature! Kneeling before you, falling at your feet, all I ask is this: Oh, this alone... please take off me the tendency to feel resigned regarding my sufferings as destiny but, help me overcome this so-called fate with a strong and fearless mind! Oh, give me the strength and increase it multifold!

Please nurture my life to the smooth, systematic order just as the way the planets and stars carry on! Oh, beloved Mother! Oh, Mother Nature! All that I ask you, kneeling before you and falling at your feet is this and this alone.

By the time Ilango had reached the border of Canada, he had obtained the wisdom and maturity to accept whatever came his way. As long as the widespread sky and earth are there, all the species here are caught in an intense and incessant struggle for survival, fighting ceaselessly against the environment in which they have to remain... It is in this very struggle for survival that the continuation of each and every species remains deep-rooted. The experiences that came his way during his stay in America have strengthened his resilience and resolve to face any situation or adapt to any kind of adverse climate. He can move on with undaunted hope and courage. With that, he steps into his new life. A hope-filled life welcomes him with warm embrace.

Everywhere around the globe, due to wars, oppressions and suppressions, a huge number of people are turned into hapless

refugees and are forced to leave their homeland and the near and dear ones. This world is forever engaged in an intense struggle for survival. With unrealized dreams and aspirations about their Mother Land, these people continue their journey, scattered everywhere. The horrible currents, the raging wars that take them away from their beloved, precious Mother Land and prevent them from coming anywhere near her ever again... Oh, the misery of it all... In the new abode, each and every moment, the struggle for survival continues as a raging fire... Not there, nor here... the life that hangs suspended with hope as its only connecting link...

Life that goes round and round, in great haste and at a terrible pace inside an air-bubble! Caught in the hands of those who never realize this transient and vulnerable state of affairs, this bubble is prone to burst at any moment... wonder when... how soon... not realizing the temporal and vulnerable state of life, those belonging to the species called Humans keep reveling and rejoicing from within the bubble... seems like they are intent on bursting it.

Yet, his journey starts afresh with hope and vigour!

This is a hope-filled journey that proclaims, “ [what’s in quotation?] All that is bad will be wiped off, never again surface!’ And, armed with this hope, this is a journey that never falls into the terrible abyss of worry and despair! This is a journey that thrives on the positive though that ‘I am born anew today’. I live on, nourished with this thought, eating well and toiling hard, never losing heart, seeking happiness and finding it, being fun-loving and playful, thus proceeding

ahead, aided by love and hope! The bus is speeding towards the frontier, piercing through the darkness. Yes, this is a journey that continues with the hope that there would surely be a bright dawn after this gloom!

(END)