

UNSUITABLE VACANCIES



Dr. Anant Raman

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DEDICATION

To my loving mother who taught me to walk, speak, write, laugh, cry, smile and feel good to be alive.

To my dear father who showed me the direction in life and helped me stand on my own legs.

To all my teachers who taught me the art of learning and the way to approach the unlimited and eternal source.

To my guru Sri Ramana Maharshi who has showered his blessings and guidance towards an inward journey that surpasses every other quest in life.

To my wife and friends who have stood by me all along in my journey of life and challenges.

To our two affectionate sons and two smart grand children who have taught me a lot of things which I couldn't have learned any other way.

And to all those people who make life worth living on this planet by working together for the common good of all living beings.

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Introduction:

In the course of a lifetime many of us end up doing things which we wouldn't have expected we would be doing, when we were in our youth. Life presents us with unexpected turns and unfulfilled dreams but in the final analysis what turns out in spite of our expectations, is what we are. Some may call it destiny and some others may term it God's will. In many cases it is so interesting that we wonder why we wanted to be another predetermined robot against all odds, than what it turned out to be.

I saw a nice graffiti which sums up this dilemma:

'I wish I were what I was, when I wished I was what I am'

Here are some unforeseen moments in the life of some of my friends and myself, including some strangers who came into my life and some whom I wish I had known much more than I did.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No book is complete without the inputs from a whole lot of people who provide the background interaction, spontaneous suggestions and silent support at the time of critical stopovers.

My gratitude to all those who helped me in different ways to make this work a reality.

I feel good that they will continue to play a part in my life and work, even without being named individually.

I thank them all with folded hands and a heart full of gratitude.

1 PARROT ASTROLOGER

Siva Nesan

Parrot Astrologer

At a friend's wedding in South India which I happened to attend, there was a village astrologer in his traditional attire of colorful turban, garlands made of *rudraksha* and semi-precious stones, and a generous application of the sacred ash on his forehead with a prominent dot of vermilion at the center of his forehead. He had a bright carpet with intricate floral motifs spread in front of him. He himself was seated strategically next to a pillar near the entrance to the venue.

On his left side there was a small portable bird cage with three partitions and a handle at the top to carry it. Two of the compartments had parrots in them with nice red beaks and lovely green feathers, looking through the bars of the cage and trying to assess the caliber of people around.

To his right was a bundle of folded cards with pictures of Hindu deities decorating each folder which was the size of our palm. Each card had a different deity. He spread them neatly on the carpet, just in front of him and adjacent to the parrot cage, perfectly laid out, with each card showing up at the edge of the next card all the way from one end to the last card on the other end.

I was curious to find out what was in store for me. I had not consulted an astrologer in a long time and could not resist the chance to do so at this location. There was no one with him and he was free to receive me. I thought it fit to be bold enough to let him start his business for the day with me as the first customer. I have to admit that I had the unique reputation of being a good 'Boni'*, as known to the street vendors in our neighborhood and therefore I may be of some help to him in his business for the day.

A couple of things need to be clarified at this juncture, up front, for the sake of people who have no familiarity with the typical rituals and terminology of South India. *'Boni' in local Tamil parlance is the term commonly used to refer to a person who makes the first purchase for the day and a person with a good hand is supposed to trigger a good business for a vendor, for that day.

Most people in India traditionally believe in astrology in some form or another. Considering the fact that we are looking at a population of over a billion people of all castes, colors, religious affiliations and expectations, there is no wonder that we have innumerable forms in which astrology is dispensed to interested customers to suit their tastes and circumstances.

Whether it is a regular astrologer who deals with charts of planetary positions, a palmist who can pinpoint your fortunes with just a cursory look at the indelible lines on your precious palm or a loud mouthed mobile soothsayer on the streets, there are always some people who are willing to go by what they predict, and design their life's moments according to these golden words.

Parrots play an important part in the astrology scene and they are equally popular with the urban as well as the rural population.

It is called 'Kili Josyam' in Tamil.

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To those from abroad or from distant corners of our own country visiting the southern region for the first time, this may sound funny, that people could be so dumb as to bet their future on the forecast from a petty or pretty parrot uncomfortably confined to a portable cage that was unfortunately deemed to be their unnatural home for their entire life.

But there is nothing to worry.

We have many more things which happen around here that are even weirder and not easily explainable.

In the recent past I have encountered a decent looking lad in crisp suit and matching tie who appeared well educated, trying his luck with a parrot astrologer. I couldn't resist asking him whether he really believed in the parrot's ability to foretell his destiny. He replied that he didn't.

I was surprised.

I then asked him, "Then why are you consulting this parrot astrology, when you don't believe in it?"

His reply floored me.

He said in a casual tone, "That is not a problem at all. Whether I believe in it or not, it works"

Wow!

That sure was some faith.

I automatically remembered this conversation whenever I came across a parrot astrologer.

There was no harm in trying.

If it sounded alright I would take it. Otherwise if it didn't make sense I had the fundamental option and inalienable right to ignore it and think that I had contributed a few bucks for feeding a parrot and also its owner.

He seemed happy to have me as his first customer, without having to wait for too long.

He asked me to sit down in front of him on the carpet, to put my hands together in front of my chest and to pray to my 'Ishta Devata' or personal deity of my choice.

I did.

He did too.

He loudly chanted some verses invoking 'Jakkamma', the traditional Goddess of astrologers and fortune tellers, and also paying obeisance to his own guru 'Kili Chamy', that occupied the next three minutes in a continuous flow of syllables which I could not easily comprehend.

Then he rolled his eyes upwards, mumbled another short invocation in slow pace and became silent for a while.

With a deep breath he came back to life from his brief trance and told me that I would be blessed by all Gods through his divine birds that get guided to pick the right card for me. He tapped on the right side of his multi-compartment cage complex and unlocked the door. He called 'Lakshmi' in a soft voice and requested Lakshmi to come out, take a look at me and pick the right card specially for me that contained the forecast into what was in store for me.

The parrot came out of the cage in a majestic style, looked at me without batting an eyelid, shifted its gaze to its keeper and walked around the cards without any hurry. It stopped a couple of times on its track as if to make a pick but decided against it and moved on.

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Finally it came back to the tail end of the long stack spread on the carpet, deftly picked a blue colored card with its deep red beak and handed it to its owner. He thanked Lakshmi and gave her a nut to take with her and munch at leisure in the comfort and privacy of her cage, as a reward for obliging his request.

He showed me the card folder and I was pleasantly surprised to see Lord Venkateswara on the cover. How did the parrot know Lord Venkateswara was my 'Ishta Devata' or personal deity? Do parrots have extra sensory perception to read our mind?

He was pleased to see my reaction and told me that both his parrots were divinely blessed and have always been spot on in picking the right card for a customer.

He pulled out a sheet of folded paper from inside the rectangular folder. The sheet looked soiled and worn out due to repeated use but the print was still clear and readable. He cleared his throat and started reading it with his fluent preambles, in his mother tongue Tamil:

“By the grace of Bagavathi Jakkamma and with the profound blessings of Guru Sri Kili Chamy, be it known that my divine parrot has this message picked for you.

“You are a kind hearted and God loving person who has lived righteously and earned the respect of your forefathers by your words and deeds.

“The Gods in heaven have determined that you will soon migrate to a completely unknown territory to take up a profession that is different from what you have studied and trained for. In a way it could turn out to be an 'unsuitable vocation' considering your academic background but you would become capable of handling it well and will undoubtedly earn a name by your ability to manage people from different countries. You will be rewarded with unexpected remuneration and a thousand fold increase in your wealth before you reach old age.

“The Gods in heaven say that you should remember to share a portion of the wealth so earned, with those in need and learn to be satisfied without becoming greedy for more and more.

“You are fortunate to be so blessed.

“So says Bagavathi Jakkamma and my guru Sri Kili Chamy.”

With these words of profound wisdom and guidance, he ended his reading, folded the paper carefully at its creases and packed it back into the folder before placing it at the same spot from where it was picked.

I watched his moves as if mesmerized by the whole sequence, still trying to digest what he said. He told me to come to him any time I liked, in future, to have further readings at times when I felt there was need for divine guidance for taking a decision on important issues that crop up. He gave me an address where I could get information about his location at any specific time, as he was traveling from place to place all the time.

I asked him how much I had to pay and he said there was no fixed charge for the reading and I could pay any amount that I considered reasonable for the reading. He mentioned that his guru had advised him never to charge exorbitant rates for the divine work that he had been chosen to carry out, and to take just whatever people could afford to give. I couldn't believe that there are still some people who are so considerate in their dealings, willing to work on simple terms. I gave him a hundred rupees and he took it gladly blessing me for my kindness.

Just as a gesture of appreciation I told him that I was amazed by his parrots' capacity to pick the right card and asked him innocently as to how he had trained them to perform such a technical skill. He laughed at my question and said such skills are God-given.

I asked him how he chose this profession. He looked at me silently for some time as if to make up his mind whether it was worth sharing such

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personal information with a stranger like me, with questionable intentions. I smiled and waited for his response as I was not in a hurry. He opened up and said that this was the first time that someone was asking him such a question. Usually people will leave as soon as their reading was done, making room for the next person to come in.

He told me that he was a graduate, with a Bachelor's degree in Sanskrit. However, he couldn't get a position as Sanskrit teacher in any school or college, even though he tried hard, as the number of such vacancies was limited. As he was a devotee of Lord Shiva he left it to Him to show him the way and started reciting Sanskrit slokas at the Shiva temple in his neighborhood every day in the morning and evening apart from continuing with his applications to the educational institutions and the employment exchange without giving up hope.

He continued:

“ On one such day of recitation I noticed an elderly person with a long beard and compassionate demeanor sitting in front of me listening to my verses. He waited for me to finish my rendering. As I was about to leave he called me and said that he was pleased with my rendering of the verses in such clear pronunciation and asked me where I was working. I told him that I was still looking for a suitable employment. When he came to know that I was a Sanskrit graduate he said I was blessed to be so well versed in that divine language and told me to follow him.

“ He was so magnanimous to take me as a disciple and introduced me to the field of *Nadi Josyam*, based on our ancient science of astrology written down in palm leaves that has been handed down from generation to generation for thousands of years. He also shared with me that of all the creatures he had come across, the parrot was one bird that was born with divine powers and could pick a prediction from several such palm leaf writings that could match a person in need of such a reading. I was amazed by what he showed me as I was with him in such sessions of '*Kili Josyam*'.

“He was fondly called ‘Kili Chamy’ by people around him.

“When he was satisfied that I had sincerely picked up what he taught me, he blessed me and told me that I could now take it up as a profession but on the condition that I should not charge any fee for such readings. I was to accept what the people gave me as per their wish and capacity. He guided me through the process of acquiring the parrots from the wild and preparing the cards as per *Agama Sastra* laid down by great gurus in this field.

“It is almost ten years since I started doing this parrot astrology even though it was not matching my qualification but I have no regrets as this has given me plenty of opportunities to meet a cross-section of common people in daily life to give them hope and divine guidance; And I have never gone broke. I had been provided adequate earnings for my family’s needs thanks to Lord Shiva and my guru *Kili Chami*. I felt so good that he chose me as his disciple and showed me a path when I was not sure as to how I should proceed. I have faithfully carried on with what he taught me without worrying about where my next meal will come from.”

I was dumbfounded. It took some time for me to regain my bearings.

I thanked him for sharing his personal experiences with me and wished him all the best.

He was indeed a remarkable person, contented and peaceful, doing what came to him in answer to his prayers, without questioning whether it was suitable to his qualification or mental makeup.

For the next few days my mind was occupied with the message that came from that parrot astrology. I was satisfied with my present job and didn’t intend to go to any unknown place or take up an ‘unsuitable mission’. These words seemed out of place and meaningless, in my present context. Also he had said that there was going to be a thousand fold increase in my wealth and that didn’t make sense either.

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I was at a loss to figure out how it was even possible, given my present modest income and my regular job as a maintenance engineer.

I never intended to become a politician to amass such levels of wealth, uncomfortably disproportionate to my known sources of income. And surely I had no unknown sources of income either.

Perhaps it was just a clever way to keep people hoping for better life and always stay in expectation of a better future.

After a few weeks I completely forgot about it altogether.

All of a sudden, after almost a year, a good friend of mine gave me a newspaper cutting that specified about some massive project in mid Africa and their recruitment drive to select technical personnel in all disciplines. He had already applied and urged me to do the same, as it would be a great opportunity to try our luck in a far off place unknown to us. He saw my hesitation and said there was nothing to lose. If we didn't get selected we would continue to do what we were doing.

Without much expectation I sent in my CV just to satisfy my friend who was very close to me.

We both received calls to attend an interview in the course of the next few weeks, got unbelievably lucrative offers. The position they offered me was new to me, a management position involving coordination of a large team of technical personnel of different disciplines.

It was too good to refuse. The challenge of rising to a new level and the size of the reward made me accept the offer.

Soon I was at a far off place called Mufulira in Zambia, somewhere in the middle of Africa. I had never heard of that place even in my dreams and had no idea what it was like. I was required to coordinate a team of professionals, including electronic and pneumatic instrumentation technicians, for operations in underground mining and processing, to excavate precious ores that contained valuable metals such as copper,

zinc and cobalt, apart from precious stones like malachite and moonstone that accompanied them, and to process the ores in smelters and concentrators that brought the copper to highest purity for use in various industrial products.

I did find it challenging, to work with a multi-discipline crew of technical personnel comprising of several nationalities including Filipinos, Indians, Irish, British and Zambians.

The sheer excitement of innovation and satisfaction in finding ways to work out something new as we progressed to each successive stage in facing unexpected problems and unforeseen situations in our engineering work, was unbeatable and unrepeatable.

I still wonder how a parrot could tell me something so precisely correct, through a system of pre-written cards with messages that seemed so specifically tailored to my situation although unknown at that time.

Can modern science with its limited resources and man-made tools find a way to explain the unexplainable that had a divine connection through Bagavathi Jakkamma and Kili Chamy?

2 WANDERER

Sam, the wanderer

Sam was an interesting guy I met accidentally, while waiting for the grocery store to open, to get my weekly supply of milk.

'Top shops' in Mufulira, Zambia, is a small junction of sorts, serving a cosmopolitan community of Zambians, Indians, British, Sri Lankans, Irish and a couple of Swazis who lived around that area. Being a resident of Quorn Avenue, just about five minutes' walk from the top shops, I preferred to combine my Sunday trip there, to meet some of my friends but on that day I did not find any of my usual friends and therefore ended up saying hello to Sam who was standing with me at the same location.

Sam introduced himself as a 'wanderer' and looked like one, if you could judge a person from his attire, moustache, long hair and a weathered bag that was hanging loosely from his left shoulder.

His pleasant manners and the broad smile found a suitable response from me and I greeted him warmly. I told him that I was also a wanderer of sorts.

I had worked in different locations in my home country, India and have now shifted to Mufulira in Zambia working for Zambia Copper Mines as their need for an Instrument engineer matched my expertise and their offer made it worth moving to a far off place more than six thousand kilometers from Chennai, my hometown in India.

Sam responded with a nod, approving my credentials and said that when we moved from one culture to another we got so enriched and our attitude to life changed so dramatically that we gained a broader outlook and new ways of looking at situations.

He was born in Kenya and his parents were in the business of distributing textile products, buying them from different countries and selling to traders in Kenya.

After schooling he was keen to join his father in the same family business but his father had other plans. He wanted him to specialize in textile machinery and set up a manufacturing unit to produce clothing indigenously so they could avoid imports and help local people get their clothing at affordable prices. This would also provide employment to several Kenyans.

There was no way to argue with his father and convince him that he was fed up with schooling and was unsuitable for such advanced technology as he didn't have any interest or aptitude to take up a mega project of that scale which no Kenyan had done before.

Nevertheless, he had to reluctantly agree to give it a chance as that was his father's dream.

He went to England, studied for four years learning about this intricate technology and also collected all the information to source the latest machinery and import them to Kenya.

His father used his skills to obtain the necessary clearances to import the machinery and start the manufacturing.

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He was so excited that his dream was going to materialize, that he was not ready for the rude shock that was waiting for him.

As Sam was narrating his interesting life story to me, the store was opened and people started going in. We had to break the conversation at that point as we had urgent business on hand which took priority. The milk was in short supply and we needed to be there in time to get our weekly requirement as otherwise we would go empty handed.

So I gave my card to Sam and invited him to call me so we could meet again later to continue our conversation. I wanted to know what happened to his textile machinery that resulted in his becoming a wanderer. He answered me that he would surely meet me again and gave me his phone number too.

I was lucky to get enough milk packets that day considering that I was late to the queue and had to wait at the tail end for my chance to get my quota.

I completely forgot about Sam until suddenly I received a call from him after a fortnight on a Sunday. He said he was free that Sunday and asked me whether I would be interested to meet him over a drink at the Garden Club that evening.

I was happy that he called but told him that I was a teetotaler and wouldn't be able to give him company. He said that was perfectly OK and I could choose any juice or even a plain glass of water and still enjoy the beauty of the garden which was so soulful and he loved to spend an evening in the midst of colorful flowers and magnificent trees that provided the serene atmosphere for contemplation and unwinding after several days of busy schedule.

The offer was irresistible and I agreed.

The garden club was a luxurious spot in the middle of a lush farm, just in the outskirts of our town, owned and maintained by an old couple who loved plants.

They also had some ponies, donkeys, Dalmatians and a couple of peacocks running around the farm, that made it very attractive for people to visit their farm and buy fresh farm produce when they came to the club for socializing. Unlike other clubs they didn't insist on membership and anyone could come and enjoy a drink at the club and meet friends for an evening of peace.

When I met Sam that evening he was already full of spirit and gave me a warm welcome with his typical broad smile that characterized his personality. I ordered a glass of pineapple juice to give him company as we sat in the open garden adjacent to the club premises, surrounded by chrysanthemums, dahlias, marigolds and geraniums that filled the air with a unique blend of sweet fragrance, so salubrious and soothing.

We sat in silence, soaking in the calm setting as there was no urgency to talk. We felt as if we had been friends for a long time and there seemed to be no need for any formality.

The gentle breeze punctuated by the chorus of chirping birds trying to settle down in their respective trees for the night, provided the enchanting backdrop.

I waited for Sam to start the conversation at his own comfort. He did. He continued from where he had left off in our last conversation, without much of a preamble.

The machinery was shipped by sea from England on its long journey touching Kenya on its way to Cape Town. But it fell victim to the pirates of Somalia who captured the ship with its cargo. Months of waiting for negotiations with the pirates bore no results as the ship owners had insured it for a large sum and it didn't bother them much as it was already an old ship in its autumn years.

Sam continued:

“My father tried his best to find some Somalis in Kenya, who had a relative among the pirates but was sadly unsuccessful.

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He even offered to take the pirates as partners in the textile unit if they returned the machinery without damage but there seemed to be no one quite interested in his lucrative and irresistible offer of such unsuitable employment, although it was technically a partnership status and not an employee position.

“He hit a dead end.

“The only saving grace was that he had paid only a token advance of 25% of the bill amount, with the remaining sum payable on delivery, against documents through bank. He didn’t hear from the port or from the bank regarding the arrival of goods and thus saved 75% of the amount, which he would have otherwise lost if he had paid the whole amount up front.

“The machinery suppliers were not much affected either, as they had insured their goods too. When he approached them for the refund of the 25 % paid in advance or to send replacement machinery, they replied that the insurance claim would take a while to be settled and they would send a replacement as and when the settlement was received.

“My father waited for a long time but there was no sign of any further progress in that matter. He got fed up and asked me to move to the next step and set up a factory to manufacture the very same machinery, now that I have specialized in managing such machinery.

“I was completely taken back. How could I possibly manufacture such machinery with my rudimentary skills which were barely enough to run the machine?

“He suggested that I should look around and find technical people capable of such design and manufacture, from anywhere in Africa and hire them for whatever it takes to make it happen.

“Once again I had great faith in my father’s words of wisdom and did not want to throw cold water on his characteristic optimism.

“I started making extensive enquiries and soon came to the conclusion that there was no one in Kenya who could provide such skills needed for the project.

“The next step was to visit our neighboring countries and check out whether I could find an expert of that caliber who was willing to fabricate and assemble a simple basic structure without the frills of electronic controls and sophisticated automation, to manufacture textile products.

“I now know that Zimbabwe, Botswana, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda were the other African countries that share the unique distinction of not having a single expert in manufacture of textile machinery. What a shame!”

I laughed out loud, when Sam said this and took a break to fill his glass to prepare himself for the next chapter of the narrative.

I couldn't help laughing at the thought of his considering it a shame, as if it was at the top of the priorities list even above agricultural, medical and infrastructural facilities that were lacking in most of these countries struggling to cope with managing their meager resources left to them, after all the exploitation by the ruthless colonizers who plundered their economies for hundreds of years.

Sam said “Don't laugh; I am only sharing with you my actual findings. I am not really judging these countries.

“Anyway, my wanderings in search of a technical expert have now brought me to Zambia and I am camping here with the hope that I may find a solution to my current crisis as I understand that Zambians are very talented people and many of them had gone abroad for obtaining technical skills in appropriate technology that would benefit Zambia.

“I have a long list of people to contact and that would take the best part of my stay in this country. If you know someone yourself, please tell me so I could contact him and assess his suitability.”

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By now I had a clearer picture of why he became a self-styled wanderer, seeking exemplary skills to fill unsuitable vacancies resulting from his loving father's lofty dreams. It is amazing how destiny unfolds in people's lives.

I wanted to help him in whatever way I could and encourage him to keep at it until he succeeded.

I told him, "Sam, when I resort to brainstorming with whatever little brain I have still left in my skull, after all these years of wear and tear due to overuse or misuse, I find that there are indeed a couple of possibilities showing up.

"India has much to offer and you will surely find such technical experts you are desperately looking for, if you are willing to take the trouble and time.

"You will not come empty handed and you will definitely not regret it if you take the journey to India ... particularly South India.

"Kanchi in South India is world famous for its indigenous weaving technology. The master weavers in this town have produced unbelievable masterpieces in textile design, handed down over several generations of dedicated work. There are thousands of such looms and several thousand weavers who have earned a pride of place among weavers.

"Their main specialty is silk weaving but there are numerous weavers who work with cotton and synthetic yarns too. They do not need the machinery of the type used in the west for mass production. Theirs is far simpler and appropriate technology that benefits thousands of weavers and in that process produces unique designs and creative hybrids of different yarns like cotton and linen, synthetic yarns like polyester and natural fibers like banana bark fiber and jute, bamboo fiber and many others which have proved to be far superior on many counts compared to traditional fiber.

“The technicians who set up weaving units use natural materials available locally, to make it affordable and self-sustaining.

“You may also find it of interest that knitted materials make up a large proportion of what people buy and use in modern times. These are produced in Tiruppur, a small town in Southern India, considered to be the largest hosiery manufacturing cluster in India.

“There also you will find experts who can design machinery for your requirements.

“The extent of choice you get there is so overwhelming that you will wonder why you didn’t know about this place in the beginning of your search.”

Sam listened to me in utter disbelief.

He probably didn’t expect me to come up with so much of information in reply to his simple request. He had no idea that India was so developed in technology that it could offer expertise to any country in the world, at par with the best available in the so called developed countries, and sometimes even better in some areas.

I allowed him to take the time to digest the information provided by me and took leave of him as I had another engagement later that evening.

He did not call me after that evening. I didn’t hear from him for several months. I assumed that he had left Zambia without finding what he came for and perhaps he could be wandering in Nigeria or South Africa to explore and exhaust all possible resources before calling it quits. I called his number a couple of times just out of curiosity to find out what was happening. There was no response.

May be he gave up the search and settled for some other unsuitable vocation to keep himself busy.

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Suddenly I recollected that he had given his father's contact number during one of our meetings, telling me that I could contact him if I happened to visit Kenya and he would be much pleased to show me around his empire. I had kept it aside in my card file, not expecting to visit Kenya any time soon. Also I was not keen to see someone's empire in another country while I was busy working in Zambia which left me very little time for luxuries like travelling for the pleasure of seeing places.

Out of sheer curiosity and as a mark of unforgettable friendship I managed to extract his father's number from the file and called him. He was very enthusiastic to know that I was a friend of Sam and talked to me for a long time sharing about his vision and work, leading to overall benefit through sustainable technology for the people of Kenya.

He thanked me for the information provided to Sam which motivated him to visit Kanchipuram and Tiruppur in South India soon after he returned from Zambia and discussed it with him. His father provided full support to Sam for exploring the possibilities of tapping the brain power in southern India. Sam had spent several weeks there meeting entrepreneurs and signing contracts with experts for starting a textile machinery manufacturing unit in Kenya and it worked faster than they had imagined. Within a year the plant was put together and started production of several types of machines to cater to the ever increasing demand of knitted and woven fabrics to satisfy the taste of Kenyan households. Even at this time when I was talking to him he said Sam was on one of those innumerable trips to India again, to initiate the next stage of their expansion.

He gave me Sam's new international mobile number to check out what he was up to that kept him so busy with something that he loved to do.

Sam was indeed glad to receive my call after such a long time and thanked me profusely for giving him the right information at the right time.

He said he was stunned by the advanced technology that he saw when he visited the hosiery, spinning and weaving mills, dyeing units and handlooms in Kanchipuram and Tiruppur.

The people were so friendly and willingly offered their time and assistance in locating all the machinery manufacturers there to enable him to choose the right technology and equipment for his project. The rest was history. The units are running full swing in Mombasa, Kenya. He invited me to visit their project any time after a fortnight when he will be back to Kenya.

I was happy that a casual meeting with a friendly attitude between two strangers, at an even more casual setting like the Top-Shops in Mufulira could result in a whole lot of development that was beneficial to the people of Africa who are friendly, hardworking and simple in their attitude to life, the very same traits that keep my own people in India full of life and joyful interaction.

3 ZOO KEEPER

Jonathan Njovu

Zoo Keeper

There were times when we felt an irresistible need to visit the zoo and meet our four legged friends in order to keep in touch and show that we still cared for them.

Zoos may appear to be a very cruel way to treat animals which are created to be free just like us and enjoy their lives with the accompanying rewards and risks that characterize such freedom. But from another perspective they provide shelter to animals that are on the verge of extinction due to unscrupulous elements who hunt them for ivory, horn etc.

During one such visit to the local Zoo, I stuck a conversation with the zoo keeper, Mr. Jonathan Njovu, who was supervising the capture of a lioness from her enclosure into a portable cage that could be used to transport her to the vet's clinic in an adjacent building in the same campus.

I admired the dedication of the people who worked in the zoo, who were maintaining the areas so clean and healthy.

He thanked me for my observation and said that not many people appreciated their work, although they enjoyed the way the animals were presented for them to see. I asked him how he came in to this profession. He said it was a long story and invited me to his office so we could talk more.

He offered me a delicious cup of coffee and started telling me about his incredible initiation into animal-keeping:

“As a child I used to accompany my mother, who was the official supplier of tender bamboo shoots specially picked from the nearby forests, to feed the giant pandas in the zoo.

“The zoo director was particularly thankful to my mom, since it was not easy to get bamboo shoots in the neighborhood and the pandas were such rare animals that they would not eat anything else. He was a giant of a man, with a great smile and friendly eyes that made you feel comfortable in his immediate presence.

“He would greet us gladly whenever we visited the zoo, come to me, shake hands with me and lift me up above his head, throw me in the air and catch me in midair, to enjoy my giggle and experience profound happiness in that simple act of friendship with me.

“He would walk with me and my mom as she was delivering the bamboo shoots packages, holding my hand gently and sometimes he would lift me and seat me on his shoulders so I could get a better view of the animals from that strategic position rather than from the ground level as most visitors are required to view from.

“Over the years I took a special liking to him and the visit to the zoo was something I eagerly looked forward to, every Sunday, with my mom.

“I came to know from my mother that my father used to collect herbs from the forest as he had some knowledge in treating illness, being from a family of traditional medicine men of several generations.

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“He would treat poor people without charging for his services as he got the herbs for free and his own master had instructed him to make his services easily and freely available to those in need. He would even treat farm animals and birds and so he became popular as the lifesaver of that region. The zoo director had utilized his services on several occasions in the past when they couldn’t get medicines needed, through the regular channels. As he knew that my father was familiar with the forest plants, he thought it fit to ask him to help the zoo in finding bamboo shoots for the pandas if possible. That was the starting point for my father’s association with the zoo. He managed to pick enough bamboo shoots every week to feed the pandas and supply the bundle to the zoo on Sundays. Sometimes he took my mother with him in to the deep jungles to experience the beauty and serenity of the forest and also to familiarize her with the plants that grew only in the forest beds. He was a simple soul who was happy with whatever he was blessed with and never complained about his lot in life to anybody.

“It was during one such trip to the forest that he accidentally came very close to a black adder and before he could realize his mistake he was bitten by the deadly snake. He tried to look for some herbs which could nullify the poison but unfortunately there were none in that area. My mom who was with him tied a knot on his leg just above the snake bite area with a piece of cloth and supported him on her shoulder all the way from there to the road from where she got help to take him to the nearest hospital. The doctors tried their best to save him but it was too late. He could not survive the fatal bite.

“My mother said she was pregnant with me at that time and when I was born she had to manage to raise me all by herself. Being a brave woman with a sense of pride in her ability to manage her life the way she liked, she instilled the same values of freedom, self-respect and expression of kindness to all living beings, in me. I never felt the absence of my father as my mother took care of me with all her love and undivided affection.

“Even at school I was not afraid of any teacher and never gave any chance for them to find me lacking in my studies.

“I had a handful of friends who were quite close to me, and that was my world, apart from my mom.

“But the zoo director changed all that.

“With his special treatment to me, he made me feel at home even at the zoo and encouraged me to be present when they fed the animals or treated the ones that fell ill. In the course of time when I graduated from school, he invited me to join as a part of the zoo management staff, to get trained as a zoo keeper which would provide me with sufficient earnings and an assured job. I did not think I would be suitable for such a job although I had no dislike for the same. But then it would make me earn enough to support my mother and she would not be required to work so hard any longer. That thought was appealing to me.

“He talked to my mother about the offer, once he found that I had no objection to it. He told her that such opportunities are rare to come by as the jobs available were much less compared to the need of the population which was growing day by day.

“My mother told me that the zoo director was a great human being with a heart full of kindness to all and to be trained by such a person was indeed a rare privilege. However she left it to me to decide what I wanted and did not press me to accept the offer.

“It didn’t take long for me to accept the offer and join the zoo keepers. It provided me with new insights day by day while learning the habits and behavior patterns of different animals.

“The elephants were by far the most intelligent of all animals in the zoo. They learned to carry out many tasks and quickly adjust to the life in the zoo.

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“From just a pair of elephants we now had a whole herd and it was a great pleasure to see the baby elephants playing in abandon in the shallow waters in the lake that was part of the zoo’s campus, under the watchful eyes of their parents standing by the side gracefully collecting palm leaves with their trunks and chewing them at leisure.

“The giraffes were next in line, in terms of intelligence and ability to live with other animals in harmony. They moved with such grace and managed to drink water from the lake with unbelievable ease although it was hard to imagine how they could bend their long necks to reach such low levels. It was a delightful sight to see them spread their front legs bit by bit to enable them to lower their heads and sip the water in slow motion.

“Rhinos were kept in confined spaces but they had enough room to move around and relax in the afternoon sun. They were safe in the surroundings of the zoo and there was no danger of poachers trying to kill them for their horns. They normally mind their own business, which mostly consists of eating the grass. But if they sense any danger to their babies by their side, they would turn violent and defend their kids with all their might.

“The baby rhino is a beauty to look at. The folds on their back are still so delicate and it would take several years before they toughen to look like steel plates assembled to such precision.

“Hippos are vegetarian too. They could turn the whole pond into a dirty muddle when they come together in the mood to play but otherwise they float merrily to cool off and periodically emit a jet of water through their nostrils with a loud splash that helps to awaken the rest of the flock. It is really a wonder to see them carry almost a ton of flesh in healthy pink bodies, loosely held together like a bean bag when they emerge from their wet abode and start sprinting on the grass, chasing small birds and butterflies, with their cute kids tailing them.

“Lions, tigers, bears, deers, buffaloes, camels, cheetahs and leopards were all interesting animals in their own right, with marked differences in their habits and behavior patterns that helped them survive in the wild.

“I learned much about their ways by direct experience on the job and through the sharing from other zookeepers apart from the ubiquitous director who was always at our side to offer a helping hand.

“I started liking my job so much that I have already spent the best part of my life here at the zoo. You may even say that I am an integral part of this animal kingdom.

“My mom enjoyed my full attention all these years and I was not interested in marriage for the simple reason that I preferred to be available to my mother to look after her and support her in her old age. Another reason was that I was already married to the zoo.

“But there have been some difficult days too. Sometimes the animals get affected by some unknown virus or bird flu brought by migratory birds and it plays havoc, putting us on our toes, racing against time to find suitable cures.

“When many animals die, it invariably creates an impression that the zoo management is not doing its job properly and the animals are uncared for. However much we try to explain the situation it doesn't carry any weight.

“As someone had famously said, “At the end if everything turns out alright, no explanation is needed. However, if the end is disastrous, all explanations are futile.”

“That explains our position precisely.

“The job of a zoo keeper is not an easy one. Equally, the veterinarian's job is a tough one too. The difference between a regular doctor and a veterinary doctor is quite distinct.

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“The animals are not capable of expressing their pains and feelings. And therefore, to diagnose their illness without knowing the symptoms is a great skill.

“In spite of all this, I love what I do.

“I had occasionally felt in the early days that I had unwittingly accepted an unsuitable job for which I was neither fit nor qualified.

“But now I feel much satisfied that I accepted this position. The guidance I received from my mentor and motivator is immeasurable.”

I did not interrupt him during his sharing, which came as a smooth and gentle flow of reminiscences triggered by the expression of my genuine interest in his work.

He, in his own time, has trained quite a few people in the art and science of managing animals in zoos.

4 AUTO-RIKSHAW DRIVER

Abimanyu

Unexpected Auto-Rickshaw Driver

Every city and town in India has the ubiquitous presence of these half yellow half black smoke emitting three wheelers that transport people who need to go places but don't have their own vehicles at their disposal for some reason or other. Auto rickshaws are an integral part of India's daily life in metros, so unique to the middle class portability and short distance commute.

Almost every street corner is decorated with an auto stand in Chennai city where I live at present. These are put up by a group of auto drivers who come together to form an association for uninterrupted exploitation of the unsuspecting local public. A display board is prominently erected by them by pooling together enough funds to buy a digital banner showing a mega star or a political symbol along with a set of names depicted as the self-appointed office bearers of the fan club.

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In actual fact these boards serve the purpose of establishing their right to illegally occupy the corner and use it for squatting and reading newspapers, discussing politics, cinema and the like apart from conducting other activities that cause nuisance and inconvenience to the general public.

They quote exorbitant fares and will not allow any other autos to pick up customers from their self-declared turf. Neither would they agree to ply by the meter.

To be fair, there are a handful of auto drivers who are an exception but their numbers are low and they are hard to find at the time of need.

To check out the real life situations of these people who form the auto mafia I donned their uniform for a couple of months and drove an auto rickshaw borrowed from an auto service outlet. Although I had a valid driving license to drive a car or 'light motor vehicle' in their jargon as described in the official RTO Driver's License book, I was required to get specific permit to drive an auto, as if it was more sophisticated than a car and more complicated to drive. As I refused to pay a bribe to get it in a short time, I was made to wait endlessly. When I indicated my intention to go public about the delays and tell my plight on a TV show where the host was known to me, the RTO got fed up with my stand and gave me the permit.

Hurray! I was now officially authorized to drive an auto- rickshaw.

To keep my identity anonymous I assumed a different name for this temporary experiment and called myself Abimanyu.

Day 1 was not so bad.

I managed to get customers on the road and there was no need to park my auto in any designated stand. I even surprised a housewife by taking her to go by the meter and not charging even a single rupee extra. She praised me for my honesty.

I continued to offer the same service to an elderly couple who were carrying heavy shopping bags on their hands and again to a lady with a huge dog struggling to walk with her, to take the dog to a vet for treatment.

There was uniform disbelief written on their face when they saw me stick to my word and not charge even a single rupee extra. The lady with the dog appreciated my gesture and wished I would be available every day to save her from the hurdles of finding an auto that would not expect a ransom for a short journey.

The following days were a mixed bag.

I was chased by a couple of auto stands. They threatened me with dire consequences if I plied my auto by the meter, as it was bad for their business and I was setting a bad precedent. I had to move away from them as I was not trained in Karate, Kungfu, Kalaripayattu or any other form of self-defense.

I resolved then and there to get trained by a stunt master who coached our movie heroes to single handedly dispatch dozens of villains to save a damsel in distress. I drove straight to Kodambakkam, the Kollywood town where such stunt masters lived and made their mark.

I was not disappointed. There were a couple of masters who were willing to accept me and train me in self-defense for a reasonable fee. I chose the elder of the two, hoping that he would be more experienced in his field and less likely to turn me off later, citing my under-developed skeletal structure and unenviable physical condition that looked prone to unwarranted breakdown under stressful training.

In a couple of months I managed to learn quite a few tricks of the trade. The master was so pleased with my progress and regular attendance in spite of sustaining a series of bruises, a twisted neck and sprained left ankle.

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He gave me a certificate of successful completion of training and pronounced me fit to face any miscreants and beat the hell out of them, to make sure that they would never mess with me again in their entire life.

More than anything else, it boosted my self-esteem and confidence levels.

I could now drive around without the nagging fear of being at the receiving end of bullying by fellow autowalas and unfair intimidation for doing the right thing. I could handle any bunch of irresponsible guys who had no regard for honesty in public life.

There were times when I got fed up, like when I had to wait in long queues for refilling gas and curse the government for the mess they have created in the distribution system which was so unfriendly to the consumers. What a sheer waste of human energy, to stand in the queue for so long, just to fill some fuel.

But I console myself with the counter thought that I could still manage to make enough money each day to provide for my family and have a bit of savings too, for the rainy day. Also I was a self-certified patriotic citizen of India and therefore like to consider the fact that I was fortunate to be born in India as it was still managing itself well without fuel shortages that plagued many other countries due to poor planning and lack of resources. Waiting in the queue is a small price to pay and I know that it was a temporary phase which was bound to change with the advent of electric autos that are already making their presence felt.

I had another advantage that made my work easier:

There was no need to argue with the commuters and that was a great relief. People who were regular as my customers preferred to wait for me rather than deal with other unscrupulous autos. That made me feel good.

It was almost three months since I started driving the auto rickshaw and the city had accepted me as a regular road runner. Some residents have even offered me a daily fare, asking me to drop a child at the school or deliver food for elderly inmates at a senior citizens care home.

How to free myself from these newly acquired responsibilities, giving the excuse that I was only conducting an experiment and this was unsuitable to me in the long run?

The only way I could think of was to employ an unemployed youth sending him to driving school and getting him a driver's license with the undertaking that he would drive my auto in lieu of me and share the earnings equally with me, without breaking the code of conduct that I had followed in this profession. I ended up training several youngsters including some girls who were able to see the possibility that one could earn an honest living by being fair in their profession.

We even opened a web based App to book any of our honest autos and introduced GPS for the safety of our customers.

So far it has worked well.

When the intentions are good, we usually get divine support and everything clicks into place.

Now I don't think of it as an unsuitable job anymore.

5 DOG TRAINER

Bairavan

Dog Trainer

Those who have owned a dog know the pleasures and pains of having a pet.

All dogs are not made equal. Some are so friendly and smart that they capture our heart by their eager looks and enthusiastic barks to gain our attention, apart from their characteristic tail-wagging and soft growls. They like to be treated with love and compassion and become part of our life within a few days of association with them and our life changes in no small measure.

All our outdoor activities become subject to prior planning to make sure that the dog is taken into account. If we can't take the dog with us, our mind keeps reminding us that the dog is waiting at home and we somehow manage to extricate ourselves from extended stay and come back soon enough to see our pets.

The moment we are at the drive way they sense our arrival and get ready to show their affection by jumping on us with friendly barks and unstoppable growls.

I used to wonder as to how they train some dogs to be so ferocious just for the sake of having them as protection from intruders in homes or farm houses.

On the other hand I equally appreciate the magnificent ways dogs are trained to perform tasks such as being a guide for the blind or be there to protect a child from straying into dangerous surroundings.

Dogs have the uncanny ability to sense dangerous situations and caution their owners to become aware and be protected. Their keen sense of smell is well known as they are trained to sniff baggage at airports and detect drugs even if hidden deep. They can sense the sound of their owner's car or bike from quite far away.

As a dog trainer, Bairavan has helped many people to get their pets to follow instructions and commands and carry out specific tasks in a family setup or as detective animals helping the police or investigative organizations. They are so clever and full of attention to learn what they are taught. No other animal can be equal to them in this trait of trainability. Once they learn a task they don't easily forget the skill even if they are not exposed to situations on a regular basis to exercise their newly acquired skills.

I met Bairavan at a friend's place when he was helping the family to learn the skills of managing their newly acquired dachshund from a dog shelter, which had been left there by some kind dog lover who found it on his driveway, apparently abandoned by someone or just lost its way.

I was amazed to see the dachshund respond to his commands, sit or move when instructed and looking at him with rapt attention even though he was not the owner. There seemed to be an invisible bond that Bairavan had instinctively extended to this lovable dog, named Sheba.

After instructing my friend and his family as to how they should be firm and also kind at the same time, so as not to cause any ill feelings, he told them that Sheba was an intelligent breed and would be a pleasure

to have her around in their home.

I struck a conversation with him extending my appreciation for the rare skill he exhibited towards the canine species. He was happy to accept my compliments and said that he himself didn't know that he had that skill until he came across a ferocious dog in his neighborhood as a youngster working in a bakery. He used to travel by his bicycle to the bakery early in the morning and would be cycling back home only by late evening, working the whole day making breads, buns and biscuits.

One day when he was returning home after a day of hard work, he was suddenly chased by a street dog that kept barking while running behind his bicycle trying to bite his left leg. He shouted at the top of his voice to chase it away but there was no use. Suddenly in that moment of unforeseen attack he remembered in a flash what his father had told him once, when he was a kid: a dog that barks and chases you, will stop in its tracks and retreat if you face is squarely looking in its eyes and say softly 'go away' taking a few slow steps towards it. He got down from the bicycle, turned the front wheel towards the dog and looked at the dog squarely asking it to go away and get lost. As he moved the wheel slowly forward towards the dog it wound its tail between its legs and ran away with a grumble scarcely audible. Ever since that spontaneous encounter he understood that the power to tame a dog was not difficult to master.

He learned more about dogs from various sources and started offering help to people who had difficulty in training them, as a spare time activity during weekends. In the course of time he had become a well-known dog trainer even though it was not something he had chosen as a profession to earn a living. He has even published a book on this subject for the benefit of all dog lovers and even dog haters too, who could learn to understand the dog psychology for self-protection, to escape from dog attacks.

He said some dogs are affected by thunderstorms or the seismic activity that takes place immediately before an earthquake.

The telltale signs of their distress will be evident when they try to hide behind some furniture or under a bed.

They are capable of hearing the activity much before we can, as their hearing covers extended frequencies beyond the human hearing. A typical example of this is the dog whistle.

Most dogs are basically fun loving and enjoy being included in much of human activity both outdoors as well as indoors.

It is not true that dogs have to be fed only dog food as supplied by popular brands. He said he had come across thousands of dogs which are raised on common foods that the families eat. There are many vegetarians who feed their dogs vegetarian food and they adopt very easily without any significant deficiency or adverse effect to their general wellbeing.

I could relate to what he was saying.

I knew a kind lady who started providing shelter to stray dogs abandoned on the streets in her neighborhood. She used to provide mostly cooked parboiled rice mixed with boiled vegetables such as potatoes and pumpkins that she would get from the wholesale vegetable market when they discard the damaged ones or those which are not of saleable size.

The number of dogs kept increasing as more and more people started giving her the dogs they found on the streets and soon she had to build an extra enclosure in her farm to house them all, numbering over a hundred. It was indeed a pleasure to watch her feeding them. All the dogs of different breeds and crossbreeds, young and old, large and tiny would come together around her and share the food placed in large plates and drink the water kept in giant bowls.

The babies and young ones would be accommodated by the other older dogs and they never muscle their way to have preferential access to food before others, a rare trait that caught my attention time and again

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whenever I visited her animal shelter to help her or hand in a distressed or abandoned dog that I came across, for want of a suitable home to take care of them.

Her dog sanctuary has become so well-known, popularized by word of mouth that there were always some visitors with children who come to see the diverse variety of dogs and usually donate whatever they can as a mark of appreciation for her noble work and to help her meet the financial requirements of maintaining such a large facility for stray animals.

Unlike cats which do not show much loyalty to their owners, dogs have a unique capacity for bonding with people or even with other animals.

On occasions when they are left alone inside a locked house or left with some neighbors or friends for temporary care until the owner returns late in the day, they can be seen full of longing and once they see their owners when they come back to collect them they shower them with the display of much gratitude with growls and tail wags, licks and tear filled eyes.

It is hard to take it when they suffer pain caused by injury or disease and the inability to exercise their limbs due to old age. We become helpless and sympathetic to their suffering, almost as deeply as when it happens to a family member.

Anytime I see a dog being abused or mistreated with cruelty I feel very sad and even express my grief to the people who are so heartless. Just because they have some problem in their own life they take it on their pets and vent their emotions with utter disregard for the fractured feelings of the hapless victim. Time and again I see such cruelty not only to pet dogs but even to children who can't understand why their loving parents turn so violent and become hostile for no fault of theirs.

Treating animals with compassion and love is the least we can do as their co-habitants. This should be taught right from childhood as an integral part of the school curriculum, much as the Japanese teach their

young children in the first three years of schooling, the basic values in life such as respecting the laws, helping fellow beings, obeying traffic rules and learning to live in harmony with nature.

One may argue that animals belong in the forest and it is cruel to keep them as pets, isolating them from their natural habitats just for the simple reason that humans feel lonely and need the comfort of other living beings near them. People seem to prefer dogs because they don't react with hostility even when they are not treated properly and tend to take all the abuse and still show loyalty.

There is a lot of truth in these arguments and views. One has to use discretion and look at it in totality before dismissing the validity of such perceptions and personal opinions based on individual experiences.

Thanks to Bairavan, the dog trainer, I have acquired an enhanced sense of empathy for our canine friends and they in turn seem to automatically like me when I am in their presence. Dogs do have some extra sensory perception to know who is a friend and who is not.

6 FARMING ENGINEER

Basavappa

Farming Engineer

During long journeys by road, we invariably come across beautiful stretches of yellow green paddy fields, sunflower fields and yellow mustard fields that invite us to stop and take a break, to take a closer look at their divine glory and inhale fresh air filled with the typical fragrance of the surroundings. Often we get rejuvenated by the mere inhalation of the energy filled air just for a few minutes, before we proceed.

Sometimes the people who work in the fields greet us warmly and offer us some fruits or buttermilk to quench the thirst, asking us where we were coming from or where we were going. As we interact with them we get surrounded by children of different ages who ask more questions from different directions and in different tones and voices. We give a broad smile and wave our hands as we drive off.

Sometimes there are stretches of jasmine fields or marigolds, with patches of roses and amaranths, tuberose and cockscombs, with their sweet fragrances gently sweeping the air.

These are the rewards of traveling by the road, in our own vehicle. We could stop anywhere at will and take our time to explore.

The farmers do a commendable job of raising seasonal crops that keeping the economy alive.

Whenever they raise a crop they run the risk of facing the vagaries of nature and therefore it is really tough for them to make a decision, as nobody could predict the turn of events. In spite of such uncertainties they continue with their traditional cultivation of food grains, as that is the only profession known to them.

Those who go for short term crops such as vegetables seem to be able to storm the weather better.

There are a few who have shifted to fruit farming by planting mango trees, guava, papaya, custard apples and the like. These trees are long lasting and give multiple and repeated yields year after year with minimal maintenance which is less strenuous and give them fairly good returns.

A recent game changer for the coconut farmers is the cocoa crop. Cocoa plants can be integrated along with coconut trees in the interspace and they provide a regular supplementary income from the third or fourth year, as cocoa is much in demand for the chocolate industry and confectionaries. Coconuts give good returns too, as they command high prices quite favorable to the coconut farmer.

On the whole, the paddy farmers seem to be the most affected lot among all agricultural professionals, as they face uncertain rains or irregular release of water from captive sources. Underground water resources may provide relief to some, but with the electric power supplies being so erratic, there is a big question mark on that too.

Farming is increasingly becoming unviable for small farmers and can be termed 'unsuitable vocation' except for those in corporate sector, willing to risk an entry and make it work in the long run.

Basavappa, whom I met in one such road trip, was an engineer by profession and had an interesting story to tell, about how he landed into farming which was unsuitable for his qualification.

When I saw a roadside billboard proclaiming that there was a 'Green Heaven' ahead within ten kilometers distance on the national highway from Mysore to Bangalore I couldn't resist my temptation to check it out as I was a supporter of 'Go green to save the Earth'.

I kept watching for further indication of a possible turnoff that could lead to a non-descript heaven, not so easy to visualize and true to that billboard I did find a thick wooden pole by the side of the road with a large colorfully painted display on it, telling me to slow down and take the next right turn to enter the 'Green Heaven'.

I did.

And I did.

Suddenly I found myself in the midst of a thick forest, after driving for several hours on this national highway which was dry except for some occasional trees and small tea shops that acted as indicators of some human life still persisting despite all odds.

The dramatic change of scene took me by surprise, even though I was mentally preparing myself to see something out of the ordinary.

Tall trees of various shades of green with fruits hanging from their branches bent down due to their weight, bamboo clusters and the sweet smell of wild fragrances that filled the air greeted me.

As I approached the main entrance with a short honk to announce my arrival, a smiling young lad waved me to come in and opened the gates for me to drive in and park my car. He wished me in the local language and asked me what I wanted. I told him that I wished to see around the 'Green Heaven' and meet the owner.

He said he was the owner and I was taken aback... such a young guy who would be in his twenties in casual attire fit for a farm hand?

He smiled at my inner thoughts and asked me to follow him. We reached a wooden cabin which served as the reception cum office. He asked me to be seated comfortably and enjoy the beauty of the trees around while he made coffee for us.

Soon he appeared with a tray full of homemade biscuits and spicy nuts along with two cups of coffee.

His unassuming style and welcoming smile made me like him instantly and I accepted the hot cup of coffee with much delight, waiting for him to tell me about the place.

Basavappa said this was no ordinary farm and he was no ordinary farmer! He was actually an engineer by profession who was the only son of his parents who were devotees of Shiva and had built a temple in their land for the benefit of people around that area to come together and help each other in growing what they needed for their living and sharing their devotion to Shiva and Shakti, the universal energy source that kept the universe moving in the cosmic dance. This temple brought all the people of the village together during festivals and their gates were open to all at those times to pray together and share their joy.

He had been abroad soon after his graduation, to specialize in designing farm equipment and machinery suitable for small holdings at affordable cost. After he returned from his special training he set up an engineering workshop and started making simple machines for use by local farmers to till the land without the need to use bulls for the laborious job, to plant paddy by an attachment that could be driven by a motorbike or even a tricycle that the farms usually had, to remove weeds, to collect vegetables and fruits from plants and trees, to distribute water to the plants and trees in the most economical and sustainable way and to help his family members to use simple

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equipment for processing the farm produce such as tomatoes and mangoes to make jams, sauces, condiments and the like to add value and earn a decent return on perishable items that could go waste if not sold in time.

The idea was to make these affordable to poor farmers and also train them in better ways to augment conventional organic farming.

It was hard to convince the people to use even simple machines as they were wary of getting bitten by the unknown. Most farmers were hesitant to invest in unknown equipment that they have not seen being used extensively in small farms. They preferred to stick to their traditional ways even if it yielded only limited harvest. How can he make them understand that unless some of them came forward to go ahead and use these farm equipment, it is not possible to assess the immense benefits that they could gain?

The best way that was open to him was to use the machines he had designed and put them to work in his father's land to show how it was beneficial in improving the return on investment in farming. That was how he got into the 'unsuitable' occupation. Soon he started liking what he did and with all the help from his parents he decided to make his farm a unique model farm that could include vegetables growing in greenhouses, with fruit trees such as mangoes, pomegranates, coconuts, guavas, litchis, figs and apples providing repeated harvests from initial investment, forming the green heaven of his dream.

Seeing the success of his ventures he boldly introduced revolutionary methods that were completely new to the local farmers, such as drip farming and hydroponics. Every step of the way his parents supported him without any reservations, glad that although he was groomed to be an engineer he did prove to an engineer of different sorts - an agricultural engineer, much to their delight. Added to that he was staying on the farm and living with them. They counted it as a blessing from Shiva in the form of Nataraja, the cosmic dancer, who worked his miracles in unexpected ways to help his devotees.

He paused to let me get the picture while adding more fresh coffee to my cup and cookies to go with it. He seemed unhurried and full of enthusiasm to share what was happening there: a silent revolution of sustainable organic farming.

What a blessed family! These are the people who contributed to the future of this country, silently doing what they did best. Unsung heroes of India. I was happy that I stopped on my way to take a look into this Green Heaven.

He took me around the farm and showed the unique special purpose equipment that he had designed for simplifying and enhancing the work of a farmer. The canopy of greens and the fruits that were ready to be harvested stood testimony to his dreams transformed into reality through hard work.

His innovative designs started attracting attention from unexpected quarters like the government agricultural departments who saw the benefits and went on to recommend the same to other farmers around. They also arranged for subsidies to initiate those who were still hesitant and also others who were short of funds to buy them and try them.

He had introduced plants that one would find only in colder climates such as apple trees and litchis through hybrids that could survive and thrive in tropical climate. The painstaking research and collaboration with people who are stalwarts in this field has yielded him handsome returns by way of a prestigious orchard that showcased his work and has enabled a lot of neighbors to emulate his model.

Here was an example of how an unsuitable position can become a satisfying and cherishable profession if given unrelenting attention with unwavering persistence to succeed.

I thanked him for sharing his life's work with me and also for being a role model for people around.

UNSUITABLE VACANCIES

As an engineer myself, I could see how much of hard work has gone into this dreamland.

I bought a few boxes of the organic fruits and vegetables grown there, for our own consumption and to share with friends as well.

These are the unsung heroes of our land who should be brought to limelight and given pride of place by the media and the public, instead of wasting time in glorifying movie actors and actresses, and shamelessly supporting greedy politicians who are only interested in accumulating disproportionate wealth.

May his tribes grow to make our nation free of hunger, greed and exploitation.

7 VILLAGE GUY

One village guy

Mukundan

Most of us routinely subject ourselves to 12 years of rigorous schooling at primary and secondary levels, spend another four or five years in professional education followed by a few more years of internship or training to qualify for a technical job to run our life on predetermined paths.

With all this specialization, when it comes to doing something that needs to be done at home, such as fixing a leaky tap or trimming a tree in the garden we feel pathetically helpless and have to be at the mercy of a plumber or handyman to do the job for us.

Even such work is so technical that they have to undergo training before they could confidently handle sophisticated machinery designed for such purposes. Naturally it costs a fortune to hire experts but everybody cannot afford to hire experts, particularly if they are themselves experts in some such profession.

UNSUITABLE VACANCIES

A plumber may need an electrician to carry out replacement of a circuit breaker which had burnt due to over current or a circuit fault, as he is not trained to do it himself.

Welcome to the world of specialization and throw-away gadgets.

When I got up this morning my 40 year old alarm clock failed to wake me up, as it has been doing loyally all these years, at the appointed time without fail. I found that I was already late for my work and started worrying what I will do without a working alarm clock. But suddenly I remembered that my smart phone had an alarm function and although I had not figured out how to set it I decided that I would take some time after coming back from work and try to understand the science behind this device so that I could bid farewell to my old mechanical alarm clock that had given up the ghost.

But there were other surprises in store for me.

My scooter refused to start too. I tried hard to repeatedly engage the self-starter but it could only produce the starting sound without starting the engine. Since the sound of the starting motor was healthy even after repeated attempts I concluded that the battery was OK and the fault could be with the spark plugs or the petrol filter which could have choked with all the sediments that accompany the present day fuel that is liberally contaminated with cheap kerosene and other such stuff that can't be identified with the naked eye. I didn't want to waste any more time trying to figure out how to start the scooter as I was getting late. I decided to go for a share-taxi. Just as if it was reading my mind a share-auto showed up in front of my gate. I simply ran to catch it after closing the gate of my abode.

For those who are not familiar with our new generation autos unique to India, a '*share-auto*' is a vehicle that operates almost like a taxi but picks passengers on fixed routes for a fixed charge to disembark anywhere on the route. Just ten rupees and no bargain.

The share auto driver seemed known to me but I couldn't recall his name. I just got in and got dropped at the metro station for my onward journey that usually took an hour before I could reach my work.

However, even the metro train was struggling hard to make it to the destination. Seemed like a bad day for me.

The train suddenly stopped a couple of stations ahead of my destination and would not move any further. I hurried again to see if I could catch another auto to cover the rest of the distance. There were a couple of autos waiting but the drivers didn't seem interested in moving from their restful position on the back seat and were totally unmindful of all the people looking for a lift. I managed to catch one that was cruising on the road and told the driver to hurry to my destination. He demanded a hefty fare and there was no other way than pay the devil that never runs by the meter in spite of the law that they could be prosecuted for not charging the normal fare by the meter. Chennai autos are a different species who were above the law and there is nothing that could be done to rein them in. With all the competition of Ola, Uber and share-taxis in the run to grab their customer base, they were still not willing to learn their lesson. They would rather remain idle than go by the meter.

I finally reached my office just about an hour late and barely settled in my seat when my boss called me to his office. I was mentally getting prepared to give a long explanation for coming late to work as I entered his office but to my surprise he didn't raise the issue at all. He himself was late that day which I came to know later. He had called me to put me on an urgent project that had to be completed that day and I had to put my entire team to get it through. I was used to this kind of sudden loads and my team was ready to face it too. Once we got immersed into the work all my woes for the day vanished like thin air. We finished the assignment faster than expected and took a break for a cup of coffee and some snacks as the boss came in to check the progress. He was always good to us. He joined us with a cup of coffee as I went ahead to brief him about the completion of the task in hand.

He was pleased.

On my way back from work, I was again trying to figure out what could have gone wrong with my scooter, as I took the bus this time, to save myself the tension of bargaining with the auto guys.

When I reached home, just out of instinct I tried to start my scooter and it started in one go. I couldn't believe it. I switched off and tried again and it still started smooth and soft. Now I was in a paradox whether to go the scooter mechanic to find out why it behaved the way it did earlier in the day, or leave it and try my luck again next morning hoping for the best. As usual I took the easy path as I was tired and not in a mood to go to the mechanic and wait there for my turn as he was usually busy with a lot of vehicles lined up for his expert diagnosis and efficient treatment.

I usually preferred to take my scooter to this mechanic, Mukundan, as he was more reliable and could be trusted to do the job without brainwashing me to change parts that really didn't need changing. He became friendly to me after I took the time, a few months back, to sit with him and ask him how he learned the skill of handling so many different models of scooters and different brands too. He was pleased that someone cared about him instead of merely treating him as a routine stop to get the vehicle fixed and get going, as most of the customers do due to scarcity of time and pressures of their own work.

He started narrating his story:

He was a simple youth from a distant village in South India who came to Chennai city looking for work as he found it difficult to pass the school final exams even after repeated attempts and his father was getting frustrated that he was not paying enough attention to his academic pursuits even though he bought him a nice bicycle as an incentive to help him go to his school that was in the adjacent town about 5 kilometers away and walking all the way was exhausting even for a youngster going with his friends to school, all from this village.

He told his parents that he would prefer to find employment than keep trying to pass the 12th grade exam that kept eluding him in spite of his repeated efforts. At first they were against the idea and said that nobody would give employment for a school dropout from a remote village. He had no chance and it was better for him to study seriously and clear his final exam before trying for a technician training course which will equip him for a decent job.

With all his powers to convince them he managed to get their consent to go to Chennai but on the condition that he would contact his uncle who was already established there and may do whatever was necessary to put him into contact with the right guys to make it work. He agreed.

Chennai welcomed him with open arms but understanding the harsh realities of the sudden change of scene from a simple village life with close friends to a city of million unknown faces in quite a few unethical settings made it difficult for him to know whom to trust and to pick the good from the bad.

His uncle was of great help as he himself had faced the same harsh settings albeit to a lower magnitude as the population was much less in his time. He cautioned him about places to avoid and also introduced a couple of good friends who were willing to give him a chance. He chose the one who had set up a bike repair shop and joined him as an apprentice. Initially he had to do all the menial jobs in the workshop before he was allowed to work as a helpmate to a mechanic, after almost an year, which seemed like eternity. By this time he had adjusted to the settings and the people around him. He knew that the more he trusted his ability to capitalize on the hands-on training, more skilled he would become and his dream of setting up his own workshop was not far off.

Just as he was helped by so many people to stand on his own legs, he too had trained quite a few who came looking for an opening.

UNSUITABLE VACANCIES

To top it all he also offered to train people from his own village to set up shop in the village to offer specific services that were not available in the village and for which people had to go to the neighboring town. He was so eager to see this happen that he even offered to bear the initial expenses of procuring the basic materials and tools to get it going, as a gratitude to his native place and to his parents who had supported his initiative to try what was completely unknown to him and considered by most as unsuitable for a high school dropout.

One of the first such set up funded by him was for assembling solar-powered lights and solar pump units with indigenous technology that the government was promoting with substantial subsidy to make it affordable. He soon found several takers for this venture and his village became the first to become self-sufficient in the use of solar power in the entire state. How happy he was to receive an award from the President of India for his selfless initiative and for working tirelessly for putting his village on the world map for its unparalleled achievement. Now he was working on making it the cleanest village that was also most hygienic by encouraging construction of Sulabh toilet units at every lane and corner of the village, at the bus station, post office and the famous Friday market where villagers from other surrounding neighborhoods came to buy or sell their cattle and handicrafts, keeping an age old tradition alive.

He was able to do all this simply by motivating others as a catalyst, by taking a couple of weeks off from his work now and then, to go to his village for being there for those who had no idea as to how to go about it and by pulling in other like-minded philanthropists who wanted to support these initiatives to make it work.

He was grateful to Chennai for letting him succeed in his quest and for making it possible to earn a honest living and for helping him at every step in his mission to make his village develop through a silent revolution.

Not everybody was so lucky as some who came to the city fell into bad hands and got initiated into petty crimes to make a living or were drawn to gangs that preyed on newcomers who came with innocent hearts and sky high dreams.

It took me some time to see the magnitude of his one man mission that was nothing short of a miracle for his village from a lad who was considered unsuitable for any employment with his unenviable credentials as a high school dropout.

He impressed me as a representative of resurgent India which had a remarkable capacity to kindle the spark in its children to silently realize their enormous potential to serve the nation without even realizing the stupendous contribution they were making while earning their living at whatever level they were placed by destiny.

No wonder that I could place my trust on this mechanic to deliver the best service possible at the most reasonable cost.

8 MLM TRAP

MLM Victim

Amudhan

If people run away from you when they see you, you are most likely to be either an insurance agent or a peddler of multi-level marketing.

Despite the bad publicity, these two professions are still thriving as never before, mainly because of the financial rewards that come as a package with all associated sufferings, to both the self and all others who happen to become victims either by their own stupidity or by default.

Ninety percent of the people do not require life insurance as they live without any problem. They pay for the other ten percent who do need the cover, as they indulge in life threatening activities and habits that endanger them from living their life fully.

The irony is, there is a very thin line dividing the two, mostly invisible to the naked eye of the unmindful victim. So the insurance peddler is able to successfully sell an insurance policy by invoking the fear factor and insecurity theory.

It is more or less like wearing the helmet on a bike or wearing the seat belt while driving the car. Just because a handful of people get involved in accidents, all drivers have to go through the suffering of being caged in to a stinky helmet or bound to the car seat. There are countries where people are not forced to use helmets or car belt seats and the fatality ratio in these countries do not show any significant increase compared to the countries where it is enforced by law. As a matter of fact they have even lesser accidents and fatalities in comparison.

This doesn't imply that there is no point in having such regulations. It should be more like a choice left to individuals to decide what is good for them as in the case of real life situations like abortions and gay rights. I know that a lot of people will disagree with my point of view but I still feel there is a lot of merit in what I am saying.

Individual freedom is more sacrosanct than politically correct but practically unpopular measures that try to hurdle all masses into one set of common shackles much like the blinkers on horses.

Multi-level marketing is another deplorable enterprise that is parasitic in nature, sucking the money from common people who are not so good at keeping themselves protected from such predators.

It capitalizes on the weakness of the common people in falling prey to schemes that appeal to their desire for owning things that they really do not need, with the lure of a quick buck that the schemes promise, in return for hooking other gullible people to fall in line as well.

One of my friends who was an Insurance Agent called me recently, to attend a 'very interesting and life enhancing' introductory presentation for a consumer product. He was not willing to disclose the name of the product as he was not allowed to do so. I therefore politely refused to be drawn into something unknown to me as I had my own doubts about the veracity of 'very interesting and life enhancing' adjective accompanying this unknown gadget or alien product.

UNSUITABLE VACANCIES

He said there was nothing to worry as I was not required to buy anything or commit myself to any scheme. I asked whether it was another MLM and he was visibly offended by the genuine suggestion. However he couldn't tell me whether it was so, as he was sworn to secrecy regarding that information.

I was reluctant to go with him as I have read enough about such MLMs and how they enroll people after brainwashing them with pep talk, through a powerful speaker.

He pleaded with me and said that he would never invite me again in to any such introductory seminar and to honor it this one time. If I found it offensive or uncomfortable I could walk out at any time.

He had already committed to bring one guest and I was the only available scapegoat.

That was the way it worked with MLM schemes.

I finally agreed to go with him as a favor to him and categorically affirmed that I will surely walk out if it proved unbearable or if there was any attempt to pressure me to sign for anything.

It was arranged in a posh seminar hall, with coffee and crackers to welcome the potential sacrificial lambs. We managed to get seated at the last row and refused to move forward even when the organizers insisted that it was not comfortable to the guest speaker if there were vacant seats in the front rows.

I said my eyes were too sensitive to stage lighting and my ears start painig if I was too close to the speakers. There was no way I would sit in the front. Many people loyally moved forward to fill the front seats but we managed to escape the first hurdle.

One of the tactics they employ is to call volunteers from front rows to participate on stage and I was not inclined to be dragged on stage for any such brainwash.

There was a brief introduction by the promoter about the main speaker after which the main speaker took over. It was a lady in dazzling jewelry that decorated all the visible parts of her body that was already dressed up in expensive silk.

She spoke at length about how poor she was before she came across this product which transformed her life in the course of a couple of years.

I was still waiting to know the product they were peddling but she was still keeping it a secret. She kept ranting about how she was rewarded with a beautiful red car in the first year after her successful enrolment of just five persons to buy the product after her own purchase, and each one of those five agreeing to enroll five more in turn in a follow up chain.

Each such enrolment resulted in a twenty percent commission directly credited to her account as soon as such a purchase was through and it didn't stop there.

At the next level she was credited ten percent of the purchase value and if all the 25 managed to go to their next level she was sure to get five percent each from the third level and all subsequent levels thereafter, as long as the chain kept moving and was not broken.

I stood up and asked what was the product she was promoting, and why there was such secrecy to it.

She laughed and said that was a good question and she was waiting for someone to ask.

She signaled to her assistants to switch on the projector and the product was there on the screen in all grand colors, to delight us.

UNSUITABLE VACANCIES

You will not be able to guess it even in your wildest dreams, even if I tell you that it would help you have wildest dreams if you go for it.

It was an unbelievable beauty of unparalleled engineering, the magnificent brainchild of a highly acclaimed Sleep-Research-Specialist and an authority on the science of nocturnal dimensions.

It was a magnetic bed in double size with two sets of linen to go with it absolutely free.

Wow!

That was precisely the product I was waiting for all my life!

Until that day I had not heard of a magnetic bed and I used to think that beds were made of cotton or silk cotton except for the rare ones which were gigantic in proportion because of a bunch of steel springs and paddings of synthetic foam to help the rich and famous to try and catch some sleep even after paying through their nose for such a monster.

Magnets in bed?

Why would anyone put magnets in bed?

Is it to keep the sleeper attracted and stuck to the bed for being so naïve as to buy it?

Are we made of steel?

I have read that the human body contains many minerals, one of them being iron which is essential for the health of red blood cells that circulate in our veins. But that is in such micro quantities to make any significant impact on their magnetic bed.

The original inventor of the magnetic bed was on screen soon enough to explain that there were seventy two magnets embedded in to the bet at strategic points from head to toe. Just by sleeping on their unique creation for forty five days in a row, one could cure himself or herself of

any ailments known to man and he listed about sixty four ailments that broadly covered every ill that has been discovered up to that day.

If more diseases happen to get discovered in future that would also be automatically cured by this magnetic bed, without any additional charge.

What a great invention!

I started feeling sorry for the doctors who would lose their jobs if this bed was bought by all people. Doctor free society?

How much did it cost?

The original inventor was able to read my mind. He was again on the screen telling us that we could live completely healthy for the rest of our lives for just nine hundred and ninety nine dollars only, which boiled down to INR 69,990 at the current exchange rate. He felt that it was not expensive at all as there were beds in the market that cost even double or triple that amount and therefore it was really a bargain.

And as if that was not enough, each purchaser was automatically enrolled in to the scheme and will get commission from the next level of purchasers as a bonus that will soon make everyone Richie rich, all by merely sleeping on the magnetic bed for just forty five days.

If by any chance, after forty five days we were not completely satisfied or if the illness still refused to go, we had the option to try it for another forty five days to be sure.

In the unlikely event of its being still unresponsive to your specific illness, which is rarest of the rare, you could sell your bed at a discount to any one you choose, without any obligation to the inventor, as you would have already recovered the cost of it many times over, by way of commissions on the subsequent purchases by other gullible victims like you. So the scheme can't disappoint you either way.

UNSUITABLE VACANCIES

Those who took the limited period offer and bought it within twenty four hours would get a dream lotion for free, delivered along with the bed, at your doorstep.

If you still had reservations about this irresistible offer, one of the volunteers would be glad to talk to you and allay all doubts to your satisfaction.

The presentation finally ended and I told my friend that I would prefer to go and get a couple of aspirins to cure my headache. He didn't need much convincing, as he too had a similar headache.

We walked out of the hall, politely refusing the offer of more cups of coffee, this time with fat chocolate cakes , shaped like the magnetic bed.

What a pity that such schemes are continuing to do business and keep cheating dumb and gullible people, if only because of the basic greed in humans that drives them to try such unethical and unsuitable engagements without even considering the potentially disastrous consequences of getting themselves caught in a vicious trap, apart from subjecting their friends too, to this MLM brainwash.

I am now tempted to write a book on 'DIY- Magnetic Beds for Dummies' and hopefully offer it at a discount to people who have not bought the magnetic bed in spite of the brainwash but would still like to check out the science behind that unique and exotic technology.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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In the course of a lifetime many of us end up doing things which we wouldn't have expected we would be doing, when we were in our youth. Life presents us with unexpected turns and unfulfilled dreams but in the final analysis what turns out in spite of our expectations, is what we are. Some may call it destiny and some others may term it God's will. In many cases it is so interesting that we wonder why we wanted to be another predetermined robot against all odds, than what it turned out to be.

I saw a nice graffiti which sums up this dilemma:

'I wish I were what I was, when I wished I was what I am'

Here are some unforeseen and unforgettable moments, cherished for their sheer humanity and spontaneity, that make me feel good.

