

MANI

Torturous for anything that moved under the scorching forty-two degree sun at midday at Chennai, India. Horns from Ambassador cars, lorries laden with steel rods, motorbikes, Mercedes Benzes and family cars dampened the screaming bicycle bell from Mani who carefully maneuvered his milk canister carrying bicycle with its broken pedals and barely-functioning brakes, in between a bullock cart and a black puppy.

Mani, in his mid-forties, dressed in a pale blue short sleeve shirt, green checkered *lungi* and a red turban, set off from his Tajmahal as he fondly call the brick hut built from scratch for his beloved wife and him to live in, located at Pondicherry district. At five in the morning, he left to sell fresh milk every day in the metropolitan city. Chennai traffic demanded Mani to end his balancing act and stop at the traffic lights to allow vehicles ten times bigger than his rusty silver bicycle to commence on an unorganized stampede across the unleveled sandy roads. Wiping his dripping perspiration from the back of his neck, face and chest with the grease-stained red towel he had in a mustard yellow basket dangling on his right handle, Mani looked on at the descending numbers flashing above the caged digital green man walking inside the traffic signal.

A stray dog limped on three legs. Two customers stood by a roadside tea stall. One customer, with a hot glass of tea between his thumb and his middle finger, was waving the hot glass slowly to make the tea cooler while another was busy reading headlines on *The Hindu Times* that had India's prime minister Modi's pictures in colour. A chocolate brown cow, with its rib-cage showing prominently, urinated and chomped food on lime green banana leaves disposed inside an open garbage point by a roadside food shop. An impatient Brahmin priest in his scooter at the traffic, seeing the cow urinating, sulked. The priest's reaction surprised Mani as cows are considered sacred animals in Hindu religion by the priests for they sprinkle cow's urine to purify places and for religious purposes. The urine falling on the littered and sandy ground snaked its way to his scooter tires. Green light. Off he sped.

School children wearing blue shirts and grey skirts with matching blue ribbons on their ponytails crossed the busy traffic under the orchestra of the khaki-uniformed traffic policeman whose armpit sweat spread its way to just inches from his stomach. A barefoot woman in a sari pushed a vegetable cart with a thousand worries on her face. A man in a white shirt and black pants, with a sling bag across his chest was on his Yamaha TVS bike. Seated behind him was a woman, her arms tightly around the man's fat belly. Her face covered with her shawl, exposed only her eyes like a ninja to escape the severe road pollution. 'If only there was a mass campaign in the city that promotes the consumption of fresh cow milk, these people would rush to me now to get milk while waiting for this traffic to clear and I could easily get my nearly full milk canister decreasing' wished Mani as he looked around.

On the other side of the road was a family of four crammed onto a motorbike - a boy on the motorbike's tank, a balding man on his driver's seat, a small girl behind the man, and a whining woman in sari seated sideways, an unique arrangement seen only in India. And it would be a pity if the balding man were to pay a fine when he gets caught by the traffic police for riding without a helmet – a new law passed down by the new parliament, but highly overlooked by the people.

Pedaling forward, Mani thought since the time Gandhi and other leaders had fought for independence, India and Indians had changed. But they also remain unchanged. The poor were getting poorer and the rich richer. Mani hated the situation he was in as commercialization affected his milk sales terribly and he found it a struggle to sell his fresh milk easily as how he used to.

New dairy products get launched bi-weekly. Each brand had celebrity endorsements, mostly popular actors to endorse their products, though they don't have the slightest clue what they were selling. Modern young mothers opted to use milk powder instead of exercising the natural benefits of their motherhood. Avin and Arokia were household brands for milk packets highly consumed by the middle class and upper-class people. Most denounced consuming fresh cow milk after listening to baseless Western prescriptions on modern science and its findings. All these affected Mani's milk supply, as he and his fresh cow milk were needless than a few years ago. His last standing

customers, so he thought, were only the temple priests who would need buckets of fresh cow milk to anoint the statues at the start of every day in a year. Even they have resorted to using adulterated milk packets. The smiles on those statues were the same and never changed even when the milk changed.

But Mani did what he knew. Having barely completed his primary four education, Mani sold milk in a bicycle passed down for generations to him from his father. Everyone had a story to live by in Chennai, and their roles were fixed, along with their duties. Cycling back home to his brick hut to eat old yogurt rice with green raw chilli and onion after selling all his milk was Mani's duty for the day, just like it had been for the past eight months.

Mani saw a father lifting his five-year-old daughter who was sitting in front of him on a motorbike, then gently dropping her outside a convent school. She, with her school bag two times bigger than her, planted a sweet kiss on her father's sweaty cheeks. Beaming away, the dutiful father returned deeper kisses on both his daughter's dimpled cheeks. "Ta ta" she said, waving her delicate rosy hands and ran off inside the school upon hearing the school bell blaring away. Her father, still waving back like a child in long sleeve shirts and office pants, let out a deep sigh – a sigh of the big dreams he has planned out for her precious daughter. He drove off to re-join back into the rush hour.

Seeing the father made Mani sigh, for he too wanted to have a child. It was unfortunate that his wife's medical condition didn't allow her to be a mother. 'Thank god' he would often feel, for not having a child and seeing it suffer in poverty along with him and his wife. Unable to meet the demands of his child would make him feel worthless to be a father. And if the child was a daughter, she might see the end of him, as he had to slog like cows under the harsh whips from society for dowries for her marriage.

Traffic was favorable now for Mani to step on his cracked pedal and ride to his next destination. Just as he was about to move off, he spotted a flat-chested woman in dull green sari with light brown henna-dyed hair, limping with a weight on left arm and a copper plate on her right hand.

'Aiyaa...please give me some alms, you will be blessed,' she begged, moving from one car to another in the brutal traffic. A new voice cooed from her left arm. A baby with its tiny fingers half the size of matchsticks was gripping the cloth. The sun was not biased. It roasted the infant just like it did the beggar woman whose efforts to shield the baby's face from the scorching sun were challenged by the restless wind.

Under the constitution of India, begging is a crime. However, the number of beggars seems to be increasing every year. At least one beggar's hands reached inside an open car window in every India's traffic junction. Even being inside air-conditioned cars with tinted glasses would not stop the beggars of all ages from trying their luck in getting some money.

Mani was watching the beggar woman work her charms on the strangers by the roadsides and shops using the crying angel as her accomplice. The baby's cries increased. Mani's eyes were fixed on the beggar woman who did nothing to console the crying child except to give it a few nudges. She looked up and saw Mani looking at her.

Mani's silhouette appeared like someone who was sent by God as her saviour. Without any hesitation but hope, she limped towards Mani, with her crying responsibility in her arms and the cloth again covering its face.

'Brother, my child is very hungry. I can't breastfeed the child. Can I get some milk please?' asked the tanned beggar woman in a low voice, with her eyes squinting, not being able to look directly at Mani whose back was facing the sun. Mani, knowing where the conversation was leading, muttered his standard sale's offer in monotone.

'Minimum 100 ml for 10 Rps.'

'Sorry brother, I am just about to start begging. My child is having high fever too.'

'Then bring it to hospital first,' retorted Mani.

'No, brother. I don't have money for that. If you can fill up at least half this bottle, I would be grateful. Tell me where you will be. After collecting some money, I will come and give you the money for the milk. Before sunset, I promise.'

Mani's dark-brown stubbled face showed no signs of any emotion to the beggar woman's plea.

His eyes went from the beggar woman, to the child and back to her.

'Whose child is this?' snapped Mani, unable to hold back his patience.

'It's' started the woman but was interrupted with her gulp. 'It's mine' continued the beggar woman, swallowing her saliva. She should not have swallowed her saliva to quench the increasing thirst at *that* moment. Her stammering seemed like a hesitation in Mani's eyes.

'Stop lying! I have seen many like you. Renting someone's baby and intentionally starving it to make it cry and look weak. So that you can fool people at bus stands and traffic to give you money. Aren't you ashamed to earn a living using a child? What a disgusting creature you are!'

'No, brother. I am not that type of beggar. This is really my child. Just give me a little milk please...' she begged.

'I am not going to give you any milk. You beggars are such liars. Pretending to be so poor, innocent. Using these children. Get lost!'

Mani's thundering words caught the attention of a tea-stall owner in his mid-thirties by the dusty roadside who was busy pouring steaming tea from one cup to cup without spilling, to join him in hauling accusations at the beggar woman.

'Brother, these people are always like this. Last week also there was one beggar man. Son of a prostitute! He brought a blind boy with him, to beg at the traffic junctions. Think it was about 4pm. Suddenly there was loud screeching noise and the same boy was thrown right outside my shop. A car banged him. The car drove off as usual. But there was no one who came for the boy. He died on the spot. Wonder whose child is that! Don't pity these kinds of people. What are you looking at? Get lost, ill-fated woman! Don't stand in front of my shop,' shouted the tea-stall owner.

'That's enough brother,' interjected Mani, sensing the tea-stall owner was going overboard.

The beggar woman, patting her infant's chest, slunk away in helplessness. From a vivid image, both the beggar woman and the infant became blur to Mani as they crossed the traffic. Mani,

stepped on his pedal harder in regret for venting his own frustrations on the beggar and pedaled away to his next destination.

As Mani made a left turn at another junction, three college students ran towards the bicycle. Wondering if a new student strike had broke out to protest against some rights, Mani slowed down to turn around.

‘Brother, do you still have milk in your canister? Need it urgently,’ gasped one man.

‘Brother, do you have? Tell us quickly! Please.’ rushed the second man.

‘Yes I have milk. How much you want?’ asked Mani getting out off his bicycle and looking at the three panting young men. They all strangely wore the same red shirts and black jeans, with sideburns in the shape of a thunderbolt. A strip of silver hair dye partitioned their scalps. ‘Must be some college concert,’ Mani thought.

‘How much do you have brother?’ asked the third man.

Mani open the milk canister’s lid to show the three men how much was left.

‘Super, dude,’ exclaimed the first man and jumped in joy when he saw the white milk greeting him. The canister was $\frac{3}{4}$ full.

‘Brother, we will buy all the milk. With the canister. How much is it?’ asked the third man.

‘Canister not for sale. Only milk.’

‘Please brother. Very urgent. Time is running out. We will pay you even double. Or triple the amount for everything. Please brother.’ Mani unclipped the canister.

Standing by the roadside, as a new crowd paced fast towards the Sathyam Theatre, Mani counted all ten of his 100 Rps notes. At first, they gave him two 500 Rps, but Mani declined, knowing those denominations are banned by the Central Bank of India. The implementation of this measure was in accordance to India government’s effort to contain the rising incidence of fake notes and black money. Mani was already making a list of things to do with the 1000 Rps weighing on his palm. Getting a new colourful cotton sari for his dear wife was first on his list. Followed by buying a new milk canister, repairing his bicycle pedals and brakes and groceries for two weeks.

Mani's train of thoughts was disrupted when he finally heard a commotion he had been dismissing which suddenly escalated to a level of a riot. He slowly walked over the junction and saw the whole road blocked with eccentric people.

It was the release of 'ROBO.2', a Tamil movie sequel starring south Indian's *Super Star* Rajinikanth. Mani should have known that it was going to be a traffic jam. He could never avoid them if he was passing by Sathyam Theatre. Realizing that he would not be able to cross till this commotion ended, he decided to witness the crazy affair. Time too for his beedi break.

Mani took out a stack of beedi from the left side of his turban and lit one up. He inhaled deeply the nicotine from the tobacco flakes wrapped beneath the temburni leaf and let out a sigh in satisfaction, over his quick profit.

A forty-storey giant billboard of the 65-year old superstar painted in a red shirt, with thunderbolt sideburns and a strip of silver hair dye, stood tall and mighty, putting other skyscrapers to shame.

Predominantly young men with cat-like whiskers in jeans and bright-coloured checkered shirts burst with energy to pour milk on the giant, painted cut out of Rajinikanth. Fans screamed in a trance over their superstar whom they regarded as God, which explained the gallons of milk that was about to be poured on the giant cut out. Anointing movie-star cut outs with milk on the first day of a favourite star's new release had been a practice amongst fanatic cinemagoers in India for the past few decades.

Time was two thirty p.m. The first show was to begin at three p.m. 'It's time! Pour it.' A moustached man shouted into the loud hailer. The team waited at the head portion as if waiting for the auspicious omen to come – another overly-practiced custom before commencing on anything to get good luck. The crowd started their screams of ecstasy, shouting 'this is for you, leader!' in Tamil.

Mani, taking precious puffs from the beedi, looked up at the top of the cut out with his left hand shielding him from the blinding sun. He spotted the three boys in red shirts tilting his milk canister in a combined effort. They screamed 'Thalaiva' which meant a *leader* in Tamil.

The sight of white milk, rich in calcium, pouring out of the canister onto the colourful giant cut out looked like Nigara Falls. ‘So much of nutrition going to waste,’ thought Mani with frustration in his eyes. Fresh cow milk was doing its duty in covering the super star’s face in the love the fans poured. The milk made its way down to the bottom. Other fans at the bottom bit off the edges of milk packets and squeezed on more.

Mani’s heart stopped for a second when he saw the beggar woman he condemned earlier in the day, collecting the dripping milk into the milk bottle for her child. No one was bothered by what the beggar woman was doing.

No one.

Feeling contented that the milk bottle was almost full, she closed the cap and ducked her way out from the raucous crowd. The thunderous celebration engulfed the child’s cat-like cries. Cajoling her baby, the beggar woman tilted the milk bottle. The hungry child suckled vigorously on the teat and ended her prolonged thirst. Amidst the melancholy surrounding her, the beggar woman mustered her strength to smile at her only child.

‘Brrrrrrng!’

A loud horn from a lorry made the beggar woman look up. She caught sight of Mani, looking at her feeding the hungry baby in her arms. Her enraged eyes stared straight into his soul. Mani threw away his unfinished beedi and kicked the bicycle’s stand to prepare for its flight. The jolt of pain increased as he jumped on his hot bicycle seat and pedaled hastily away from the spot.

(2983 words)

THE END