

Rough with the Smooth / Ram Govardhan

Excerpt from Chapter 5

After declaring '*all Indians*' untrustworthy, with no redemption of any sort in sight, a penniless Unni decided to embark on an endeavour that required no partners, definitely not *Indian* ones, not for all the tea in China. And one that required no investment, of it, anyway, he had none at present, none whatsoever. Just weeks before beginning a new *mobile* life, Unni had harboured thoughts of suicide but little Omana's pure smile spurred him on to fight his way through. "A land overcrowded with graceless, inhuman, and inhospitable crooks," he reminded himself oftenly so that cheats don't victimize him anymore, anywhere, anytime; even in his nightmarish daydreams.

Within fourteen months after landing in India, he got enlightened and told Calicut Rajan, "After all, it was their abject poverty that drove them to these lows. Because of caste, creed, language, and religion based lopsided opportunities; they became ruthless electronic-age barbarians. People embraced, rather reluctantly, dubious methods to make a living. Each individual was at war with his own kind; just to make ends meet. Every kind of means that was employed to win this war, just as between nation states, was reckoned just and fair."

And it was between such a hopeless now, hopeful now interlude, one drizzly day, after spotting a skinny *Malayalee* hawking hot tea on a bicycle, it occurred to him that, surely, he too can prepare the 'best' tea that the citizens of Ottapalam ever drank. Unni proceeded to establish his own 'business' on bicycle for he needed no one to partner him, certainly not an Indian. He bought a steel drum and a bicycle and set in motion his mobile drum-tea-stall cycling around the town vending the 'best' ready-made-tea in town dispensing, not in exquisite china tea-ware but in

disposable 'non-biodegradable' plastic cups. From that day onwards, when asked, he would say, without any hint of vacillation, "I am a businessman." At last, fifteen cathartic months later, back in India, he was doing something that 'could' be called a 'business.' All through the first fifteen wretched months in India, with millions of rupees in banks, he could only plan, daydream about his business ventures but nothing got off the ground. But now, after achieving the status of a pauper, he could 'start' something on his own. "An impoverished country, perhaps, permitted entrepreneurs to start anything only after they are rendered equally impoverished," Unni told himself. Inside the triangle of his bicycle frame, on a piece of tin, he painted "Oman Tea Stall" without any prefixal vacillations or compulsions.

Just as Unni was coming to terms with his mobile hawker's life, Rupa's post-partum health deteriorated to such a degree that a government doctor asked Unni to get her admitted into a private 'corporate' hospital. "Her days are numbered. Now, haste is of essence, hurry-up... otherwise she may not live for more than month," said the physician. Mr. Ten Percent, Unni's next-door banker, refused to lend anymore and, before Unni could borrow some money from someone else for her expensive cure and medication, she died a pangless death within days. Unni thanked his God for granting as pain-free a death as the one bestowed upon Rupa but it was in no way a painless one; a stoic that she was, Rupa had never revealed to him about the fatal uterine damage the potholed cycle ride inflicted upon her womb.

Calicut Rajan, Unni's one and only friend, was away in Hyderabad consulting a world famous astrologist cum nameologist. And with no one to help in the whole of metropolis, Unni requested two wayside leprous beggars to help shoulder Rupa's coffinless body up to the Hindu necropolis. Three of them carried her body by balancing it on an old plywood plank sourced from a nearby junkyard. Though not exactly a leprophil, while on his way vending his tea, everyday, Unni treated these beggars with his free tea; and bearing a disfigured hand was the only way the beggars could ever manage to barter back.

The *vettiyan* caretaker at the government Hindu burial ground demanded a death certificate issued by the birth and death registrar. When a humbled Unni pleaded ignorance, the *vettiyan* caretaker rudely demanded five thousand rupees. “Five thousand!!!” a shocked Unni mumbled, the *vettiyan* caretaker crudely replied, “Five is this week’s rate, next week it can be six thousand,” and sternly warned, “don’t argue...these are fixed rates, take the body back and bury it in your own backyard and kneel down everyday.” Unni left Rupa’s body in the open and asked the two mendicants, who had volunteered to shoulder the body, to shoo away the swarm of flies that hovered around the burial ground looking for juicy open wounds on dead bodies.

Mr. Ten Percent refused to lend him five thousand but, pitying the burial ground situation, agreed to lend him a little less; stipulating that all debts, this and the previous ones, including interest accrued thereof, must be settled within a month. Unni had to return to the burial ground with just three thousand rupees. An evidently offended *vettiyan* caretaker ordered his assistant to make available some portion of land in the far corner. All the dead ones, whose relatives unhesitatingly greased the palms of the *vettiyan* caretakers, deserved the centre stage in the cemetery. If you cannot get on to the centre stage all your life, you still had the hope of making it to it after death, if only you had some money left behind and, if only, if only your relatives were generous, honest enough to spend it at the burial ground after you have ‘permanently’ gone.

Just as the helper was hurriedly digging a rectangle ditch with a spade, some fresh bones protruded out of it; he threw them out and kept on scooping. Then a decomposed skull emerged, the assistant *vettiyan* threw it out onto the neighboring grave where a naked, hairy beggar, who was defecating by the side of a rich man’s brightly painted grave, caught it with a skill matching that of an international cricketer’s; in a cricket crazy nation, this is the least one can expect out of a beggar. Most Indian cemeteries, crematoriums are open public toilets for all the citizens

living in the neighbourhood and also to those who live not so close by, but ‘are’ in a hurry.

Unni protested saying the grave was not ‘deep’ enough but the chief *vettiyan* caretaker, who was keenly observing all the undertaking silently, beckoned his helper to lower Rupa’s body. Ignoring Unni’s cries, even before it descended to the bottom, while the owls on the dead trees were hooting, the assistant *vettiyan* caretaker began to fill up the shallow, oblong pit with the mounds of earth that was just dug out; without a funeral cleric or funeral orations.

While walking back, on the edge of the graveyard, fighting back his tears, a moaning Unni turned back to have one last look at Rupa’s grave; a goat and two cows were eating away the rose, marigold wreaths that garlanded the grave, and licking away the yellow turmeric, scarlet vermilion powder dusted over the grave-mound. Further way back from the graveyard, Unni reflected upon his present predicament of his incapability to give his wife a proper, decent and dignified burial.

“In Oman I had my prestige, money and future but now, back in India, I have lost all of them in fifteen arduous, treacherous months flat. Losing money and prestige was fine but have I lost my future too forever? And, with mine in the doldrums, have I jeopardized Omana’s future too?” worried Unni

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Overwhelming despondency was ruining Unni’s health following Rupa’s demise and a distraught Unni was loosing all hope in life. His friend of fourteen years Calicut Rajan, who worked along side in Oman for nine years, advised him, “In India our temperament has to be highly malleable, and those who are inflexible and do not adapt, suffer indefinitely, incurably.”

Calicut Rajan suggested him to meet Vijayan Gounder, a Tamil politician and business magnate in Madras, who was just planning a foray into hospitality industry. “But before meeting Gounder, consult a very famous nameologist cum numerologist who can change your life forever,” said Calicut Rajan. Calicut Rajan himself had consulted the nameologist cum numerologist who recommended a change in the way his name was spelt. Now Calicut Rajan was spelling his name “Challikkat Raajhan.” “I am observing some positive changes in my life after I consulted the nameologist cum numerologist.” Challikkat Raajhan assured Unni.

When Unni consulted, after charging fifteen thousand rupees, the world famous nameologist cum numerologist scribbled some numbers on a piece of paper, handed over a colorfully wrapped, sealed envelope to Unni and asked him to open it at home at exactly at eight in the evening.

The visit was a double bonanza for Unni; the nameology cum numerology expert was also a Feng Shui expert. After collecting the Feng Shui consultancy charges of ten thousand rupees, Unni was told to place an aquarium facing north with goldfish and flower horn kind of fishes for harmony and peace in life and business. The numerology cum nameology expert had a word or two for India as well, “If India is renamed as *USI, the United States of India*, within a matter of two years, it would become a great superpower; both economically and militarily leaving behind the US and China.”

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