

## Poets and Pancakes



**Ashokamitran** (22 September 1931 – 23 March 2017), pen name of **Jagadisa Thyagarajan**, an Indian writer regarded as one of the most influential figures in post-independent Tamil literature. His father was a friend of Mr. S.S. Vasam who owned the Gemini studio. He worked there over a decade and often unofficially wrote application for loans and advance payment on behalf of others. His experience in the film studio was published in the Illustrated weekly of India and later published as a book named “My years with Boss”. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for his exceptional contribution to Tamil literature. **His writing style is characterized by clarity of thought and simplicity. He brews his personal and professional experience with impeccably crafted wry humour which is ironic, clever and subtle. His keen observation of the characters and knowledge about every nook and cranny of the studio portray how well informed he was. He did not sketch a line about Mr. Vasam directly but gradually unfolds the character of Mr. Vasam through the characterization of others.**

**S.S.Vasam**- The movie mugal in the erstwhile South Indian cinema was an Indian journalist, writer, advertiser, film producer, director and business magnet. As a director, Vasam was known for his grandiose sets and innovative techniques that he introduced. He debuted as a director in **Chandralekha** which is considered as a mile stone in Indian cinema. **He owned the most revered Tamil Weekly Ananda Vikatan. He was an extremely influential figure in the Indian film industry, Journalism and Advertisement sector. He was awarded Padma Bhushan in 1969.**

**Gemini Studio**- Situated in Madras, present day Chennai was bought by S.S.Vasam. The logo of the Studio has two identical naked boys playing bugles. Hence, the name Gemini-the twins. In modern day Chennai, a flyover that crosses this area is named Gemini Flyover after the studio. **Gemini Studio served as a breeding ground for innumerable artists, technicians, writers, poets and idealists.**

### Poets and Pancake- The Title

Alliteration; ‘Poets’ indicates writers and poets who worked in the Gemini studio or often visited the studio. Pancake, founded by Max Factor, a makeup artist, was a dehydrated light weight, natural looking cream powder base hugely popular in 1930’s replacing traditional greasepaint make up. This makeup cosmetic was used by the actors of Gemini studio. Thus, ‘Pancake’ refers to the venue, that is, Gemini studio where several characters displayed their writing abilities including the writer and so, ‘Poets’.

**Para 1:** *‘Pancake was the brand name of the make-up material...’.*

The writer is introducing a time line of the use of Pancake in film industry. Greta Garbo (acting-1920-1941), Miss Gohar (acting-1920-1935), Vyjayantimala (acting-1949-1967), Rati Agnihotri- South Indian actor (acting-1979-2003). *“Rati Agnihotri may not have even heard of it”* because by the year 1951, Pancake makeup diversified into manifold developed products leaving the original Pancake into oblivion.

**Note the ironic and humorous** use of ‘truckloads’, ‘impossible battle’, ‘brief life and an even briefer stay in Madras, Robert Clive seems to have done a lot of moving’, ‘marrying a maiden’.

**Para 2:** *‘The make-up room had the look of a hair-cutting salon.....’*

The writer describes the studio which resembled a salon with terribly bright lights causing excruciating trouble to the actors who were subjected to make up. Then, the writer proceeds to describe the positive side of the studio which boasted of unity in diversity accommodating all linguistic and ethnic groups in the makeup department. He also cleverly praised Mr. Vasam who maintained hierarchy even in the makeup department and provided ‘office boy’ for help. In this paragraph the writer introduced the character of office boy who claimed to be a poet (First instance of ‘poet’ in this prose piece).

Note the humorous style (*This gang of nationally integrated make-up men could turn any decent-looking person into a hideous crimson hued monster with the help of truckloads of pancake and a number of other locally made potions and lotions.*) of describing the unity in diversity, hierarchy in the department and the challenges that the make department faced during those years.

**Para 3:** *"In those days I worked in a cubicle..."*

The writer describes his own frustration about the work he was assigned, though without any complaint but with a touch of humour. His work was to cut and preserve newspaper cuttings on variety of subjects which probably would be required for writing articles in weekly. His work was a stark contrast with the occupation offered in Gemini studio. The writer did not directly criticize the office boy or his writing, instead jokingly pointed out his dislike of the writings of the office boy.

**Para 4:** *'In all instances of frustration, you will always find.....'*

In this paragraph, the writer introduces **Kothamangalam Subbu** (was an Indian poet, lyricist, author, actor and film director based in Tamil Nadu. He wrote the cult classic Tamil novel *Thillana Mohanambal* and was awarded the Padma Shri.). The writer himself was influenced by the writing style of **Kothamangalam Subbu**. The writer also subtly presents the prevalent caste system and the privileges enjoyed by the Brahmins in erstwhile Tamil Nadu. Kothamangalam Subbu had all the positive traits that a person craves for- Cheerful in spite of failure, helpful as he had works for everybody, loyalty towards his employer, very skilled and creative so far as films are concerned and an extremely talented writer who chose to write in the language of the masses though was capable of writing in complex form and language. His skillfully created characters of the Devdasis was a sensation and success. His house was a permanent residence for far and near ones which indicates his generosity. All these qualities made him the 2<sup>nd</sup> Man in the Gemini studio though some may have called him a sycophant. The office boy considered Subbu as his only enemy though the latter did not think the same way which reflects the positive side of the character.

**Para 5:** *'You saw Subbu always with The Boss but in...'*

The writer ends the character of Subbu here but silently introduces the Story department and another character of the **legal advisor** along with the prevalent socio-political scenario of South India. **The satirical language and tone are to be noted while the writer describes a new character.** The legal advisor had all the negative attributes in comparison to the previous character of Subbu. His dress was also different from others who wore Khadi but his dress was like a Coat of Mail (A metal dress/armour made out of metallic mesh or net to protect from Swords). The legal advisor was mocked by others, he was vindictive and destructive. He spoiled the prospects of many actors and would-be actors. Despite the fact that he did not have talent to produce a film, Mr. Vasan gave him an opportunity but he failed and lost his job.

**Para 6:** *'Gemini Studios was the favourite haunt...'*

The writer silently pours the political stance of the people of Gemini studio and the ambience suitable for writers. The studio atmosphere, which was relaxed and conducive, offered creative acumen to excel. That is why the poets, playwrights, dialogue writers assembled here and interacted which was further augmented by liberal coffee. S.D.S Yogiar was a script writer for Tamil films and poet, Krishna Sastry was a Telugu poet and translator, Harindranath Chattopadhyay was an Indian English poet. All of them were admirers of Gandhi but beyond that they had no political affinity or affiliation. 'Communism' was not an appreciable political thought at that time in south India. Everyone considered a 'Communist' to be a 'Godless' man without love for parents, wife or children and was always ready to initiate unrest among common people. **Such was the belief because the Bolshevik's wanted immediate and violent protest led by Lenin in 1917 October Revolution in Russia.**

**Para 7:** *'When Frank Buchman's Moral Re-Armament army...'*

The writer introduces the scenario post WWII. When Europe was rearming the military before WWII, Frank Buchman started MRA (Rearming the spiritual and moral aspect of human beings). MRA was against International Communism as it was violent and Mr.Vasan was a puppet in the hands of the MRA which was indicative of his affiliation to anti-International Communism. The innocent and ignorant family of Gemini Studio, some 600 strong, welcomed the MRA group with 200 members of 20 nationalities. The effort of the MRA to spread anti-communism through the dramas 'Jotham Valley' and 'The Forgotten Factor' ended in vain as the Gemini Studio people, who could not figure out the purpose of visit of these foreigners, considered it a circus. However, the dramas influenced the Tamil movies in the years to come.

**Note the funny yet satirical language to describe the reaction of the Gemini studio people to the earnest effort of the MRA. The writer appreciated the stage and set up of the MRA along with the simple message that they tried to spread. This visit had creative influence on Tamil cinema for long. Also note the involvement of Mr. Vasan with the MRA which reveals his participation, though indirectly, in spreading anti-communism.**

**Para 8:** *'A few months later, the telephone lines of the big bosses...'*

The writer creates surprise and suspense in this paragraph as an instruction came to prepare a stage for a visitor who was a poet. The Gemini studio people, who heard of Wordsworth or Tennyson or barely heard of Eliot, were perplexed as they never heard of the name of this poet from England. **The writer continues the suspense and confusion in the next paragraph**

**Para9:** *"He is not a poet. He is an editor."*

Since it was Mr. Vasan who was giving such a grand reception, naturally common conclusion was that the man must be an editor. The confusion goes on.

**Para 10:** *'He wasn't the editor of any of the...'*

The writer shows prolonged confusion among the Gemini studio people as the name of the visiting poet was unfamiliar. They joined the dots in their own way and came to the conclusion as 'The Hindu' was taking initiative, he must be an editor though not of the popular magazine of London like Manchester Guardian or London Times.

**The writer so subtly analyzed the human nature to judge situations on the basis of inadequate knowledge, common yet faulty perception.**

**Para 11:** *'At last, around four in the afternoon, the poet...'*

**This paragraph is one of the best examples of wry humour where the writer applied humour and sarcasm in a fine fabric of literature.**

The description of the stage with the poet battling with pedestal fans, the speech of the Boss who hardly knew about the visitor, the supposed poet's speech ornate with words like 'Freedom' and 'Democracy', bewilderment of the audience who could not understand even a bit of the poet's speech which questioned their own presence there, are elements of wry humour. The audience thought that the poet must be trying to cultivate taste for English poetry among the simple people of Gemini studio. The writer continued the mystery of the poet's visit until the end of this prose piece. Remember the name of the visiting poet is yet not revealed which started from paragraph 8.

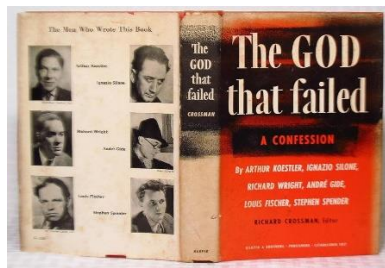
**Para 12:** *'The great prose-writers of the world may not...'*

This paragraph is immensely important for two reasons-1) writer's humour and criticism about the common perception about prose writing, 2) unfolding the mystery about the name of the poet who visited Gemini studio.

The writer commented (actually the view of others) that prose writing is the work of a 'Patient and persistent' person who endlessly toil without a reward or appreciation. He considered himself one such though his writing is a treat to the readers with information and character analysis wrapped in the delicious coating of humour. The Hindu advertised for a short story writing competition in a magazine named 'The Encounter' (metaphorically refers to the encounter with the poet and the sudden encounter with the name of the poet who visited). The writer went to the British council library to gather information about the magazine and found the name of the poet who visited. He was Stephen Spender. In describing the discovery of the poet's name, the writer also humorously described the popular scene in Indian movies where the two long lost brothers recognize each other while singing the same song in the beginning and in the end of the movie. Note that this paragraph is the penultimate paragraph when the writer disclosed the name of the poet and in the last paragraph, the writer disclosed the purpose of his visit aligning his writing with scenes of two long lost brothers.

**Para 13:** *'And years later, when I was out of Gemini Studios...'*

The writer finally discovers what the purpose of visit of the poet was and why Mr. Vasan entertained the poet in the Gemini studios. It was a sudden finding of a book named 'God that Failed' in the pavement of Madras.



Stephen Spender joined the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1936. He was sent to Spain in 1937 to observe and report about the Spanish civil war. He witnessed the 'Red Terror' of the communist party in the Spanish Civil war. Having been disillusioned, he left the party and years later, in 1949, he expressed his disillusionment in the book 'God that Failed' edited by Richard Crossman. He wanted his essay to act as an anti-communist. He was the editor of the magazine 'Encounter' from 1953-1966.

The writer revealed in the concluding paragraph that Mr. Vasan had no inclination to the poetry of Stephen Spender. But that was not the case with the 'God that Failed' which means he had some interest about the 'God that Failed'. Here, the 'God' refers to communism and Mr. Vasan had some connection, that is, he too believed in the failure of the 'God' and thus was an anti-communist for which he entertained another anti-communist Stephen Spender in the Gemini studios.