

A FRESH GARLAND

It was the official government holiday celebrated all over the country. The general public and the government may not have much in common, but how can one ignore a national holiday? For that matter, it will be nice if every day was to be declared a government holiday; there's a problem though: all the liquor shops in the country will be shut down for three days - before and after - the holiday; people tend to forget this, but won't they be disappointed if they can't get liquor on demand? If the government were to declare the whole year holiday (!) the entire country would be freed from the scourge of chronic alcoholism. But that would mean the government would be deprived of millions of rupees in revenue. Of late, it's become common among friends to exchange advance, alert messages on the eve of government holidays.

Bhoominathan was a Class IV employee in one of the government departments; it's not important to know in which department. He works and makes money on holidays. First, he has to dust off the old cardboard box and take out the picture of Mahatma Gandhi buried deep inside; then he has to remove the national flag and purge the pests or any of the crawling bugs from it; then, finally, he takes out the long, white rope for flag hoisting, a square tray for storing flowers and a plate to serve candies to children; these chores would be taken care of the day previous to the celebration.

The last items to be procured include a small garland for honoring the Mahatma, fresh flowers to decorate the national flag, a large garland for the chief guest, bouquets, and orange candies that have been traditionally given away to children since the first Independence Day celebration.

Don't ask me which child would be interested in attending an office function . . .

Bhoominathan's boss instructed him to draw cash in advance to defray his expenses. The program was to be held tomorrow but, today, Bhoominathan wanted to accomplish as much work as possible. The garlands, bouquets and fresh flowers would be available only tomorrow morning. The vendors also knew this; otherwise why would they be eagerly waiting to offer everything needed for the ceremony, including floral wreaths?

The occasion demanded that Bhoominathan don a uniform consisting of a white half-pant and white shirt for the ceremony. It wouldn't matter how he dressed on other days. He must also

procure the expensive sweets, roasted cashew nuts, ripe bananas and American soft drinks. His previous supervisor permitted Bhoominathan to take the left-over items home; the current one wants them to be delivered to his home.

The garlands, bouquets, candies, sweets, cashew nuts and soft drinks, would cost, approximately, around one thousand and five hundred rupees. Bhoominathan would set aside a hundred or two hundred rupees for his personal use; his current boss wants him to show five hundred rupees as an additional expense for apples, oranges and grapes that were neither bought nor accounted for. That's how the system worked: the king was corrupt and the subjects went along without complaining and paid their dues.

That's an open secret but the employees have taken a vow not to incriminate one another. Was this what our ministers considered their secret oath of office? Other than the normal work, every employee was engaged in a minor role - a sort of 'fishing expedition' - and could claim what he caught, as his own. When the catch was rather big, the consensus was that a larger portion of it accrued to superiors. Bhoominathan too got a part of the catch - a fin or a head - while the rest was stashed away in boxes and duly served to his higher ups. It was generally agreed that everyone in the establishment - from the topmost to the lowest, with no exception - liked fishing.

Of late no fish ever smelt bad or offended any nostrils.

The price of the orange candies has since gone up; when Bhoominathan joined the service, a kilo cost three rupees and, now, it is forty eight; in thirty years it has increased sixteen-fold. Of course Bhoominathan's monthly salary didn't grow up that fast; still his fishing expedition had a considerable growth. At the end of the day, when the employees returned home, invariably every one of them carried a bundle of extra cash in their pockets. Many would go home only after enjoying a drink or two on their way; after all, they're worn out after spending most of their day in paper work; only a quarter bottle of IMFL (Indian made foreign liquor), a Pepsi or a Limka, and two boiled eggs, would help revive their spirits. Else, how do you expect them to keep shuffling papers from here to there, continuously?

At around ten, the chief guest, a member of the Parliament, would arrive in his foreign vehicle that looked neither like a car nor a van. It had all the trappings of modernity - air conditioning, a small television set, a phone and smooth, white, spotless, velvety pillow covers. Well, you can't expect everyone to enjoy such privileges . . .

A few more aides would also escort the chief guest who invariably looked like a hero in an action scene from a Tamil movie. One begins to wonder if only Indians sport such pot bellies.

A few more cars would follow the chief guest's; the venue would soon turn ecstatic and jubilant with the building – already tottering under bad construction – close to collapse at any moment. Ten years ago, the minister for public works inaugurated that building; apparently, he had caught many a fish during construction because Bhoominathan too had availed a chance to sell off his bicycle for fifty rupees and buy a new one.

Normalcy would return around ten-thirty and the building would be locked up after the departure of the officers and the chief guest. The flag must to be brought down the same day before sunset; a Class IV employee may bring down a flag that's been hoisted by a member of the Parliament. One wonders who brings down the flag hoisted by the nation's President; do the folks over there also serve orange candies at those ceremonies?

On weekdays the employees would start arriving for work between ten and eleven-fifteen; they are free to leave anytime after three in the afternoon. In between one can avail the time to attend to personal needs like, visiting a bank, doctor's appointment, shopping for vegetables and groceries in the mall, chatting with a colleague, checking on a personal application for a loan to carry out minor repairs in the back yard or canvassing votes for a preferred political party. Still, the wheels of the bureaucratic machinery were fully active with full blast and chatter. One also heard complaints that the oil and grease needed to sustain the bureaucracy were woefully inadequate and, from time to time, bills were introduced in the Parliament

Bhoominathan had to show up for work by nine-thirty. Forget his routine of daily work; there were a couple of officers who had to work late until seven after their supervisor was gone home; you often wonder if they are the ones running the administration; they would never leave immediately after work, so the formal closure of the office would have to wait a little longer.

The formal flag-hoisting ceremony was to begin at ten in the morning but Bhoominathan left home by seven to take care of things unfinished until the last moment. A Class III typist was to join him at eight; his superior was expected at quarter to ten.

Bhoominathan had made arrangements for supply of flowers, garlands and bouquets with a flower vendor in Singanallur market. He was pedaling, leisurely, on his bicycle and was about to change from Kamaraj Lane to Tiruchi Lane when he heard someone singing in a hoarse voice, but without missing a beat.

A man in his seventies stood in front of the statue of the Martyr N.G. Ramaswamy, affectionately known as NGR. The man wore a *khaddar* dhoti, a *khaddar* shirt, a Gandhi cap, while a small tri-color national flag hung over a shoulder. A plastic wire bag lay at the foot of the statue beside to a lunch box, a water bottle and a thick book. He looked like one of the vendors that hawked their wares in front of stores.

The Martyr's statue stood at the intersection of Kamaraj Lane and Tiruchi Lane and opposite to a police station. Kamaraj Lane was once called Cotton Mill Road; some ten or twelve large cotton mills –starting from the Lotus Mill and ending with the Jubilee Mill -stood at the corner of Tiruchi and Avinashi Lanes. NGR, the political activist, had been brutally murdered for his involvement in labor movement. He struggled for his life at the hospital, yet when the police questioned him – repeatedly – he, a true Gandhian, refused to reveal the identity of his attacker.

Bhoominathan was quite familiar with the neighborhood where the killing took place; for the last fifteen years, he has been taking that route daily – going from his home in Uppilipalayam to work. He happened to watch the NGR statue when he stopped for the traffic signal.

Bhoominathan's father was also a mill employee. He worked in the floor room where he was exposed to industrial pollution, became a cancer patient and spent the last years of his life constantly coughing. It was he who regaled his son with the stories of legendary NGR – who was born in an affluent family of a mill owner but ended up starting a trade association for the mill employees.

NGR championed for a workers' institution that would serve as a seminal organization for others to follow. The mill owners were determined to wreck his plans for a labor union, so they tried to buy him off by promising to set up a mill in his own name; they also sweetened their deal with a bride. They wanted to cash on his caste and popularity and, when he would not budge an inch, they deployed their only weapon: they broke his bones and took his life. The perpetrators had plenty of time left for other charitable things when it suited them, like building a medical hospital or a stadium: there were always politicians around who had free time to inaugurate their memorials and give away honors to the founders.

NGR died when he was thirty – yes, thirty – and Bhoominathan recalled the day of the funeral in Noyyalaangari, on the Singanallur – Vellalur Highway. The tragedy shook up the whole community and it was said that everyone in the crowd 'became speechless and frozen on the spot.'

The martyr was facing toward the southern direction. Bhoominathan used to wonder if NGR was keeping a constant vigil on the police station.

The old man seemed lost in meditation as he stretched his both hands in front and, with eyes closed, stood against the sun and began singing while his face shone under the warm, yellow sun light.

What was he singing? Was he paying tribute to the Martyr? Or was it an ode celebrating the universe? Or was it a spontaneous outpouring of an admiring disciple? The sun's rays were stroking his moist eyes. Traffic was in full swing; farmers were on their way carrying bags of vegetables they bought in the fair; all the shops were now open for business. The bright sun, Bhoominathan thought, was showering kindness on humanity.

He was averse to leave, but he had to. He pedaled the bicycle to the flower vendor where the florist gathered the items reserved for him – fresh flowers, a garland of roses with a tassel for the chief guest, a bouquet for his hand, and a small garland for the Mahatma – and put them in large bag,

“I need another garland.”

“You asked for only two; didn't you?”

“Why, can't I have another one?”

“Of course, you can. Don't get mad at me. We are here to serve your needs.”

He locked the bicycle in front of the flower shop and, with that single garland in hand; he walked toward the Martyr's statue.

The morning sun was eagerly waiting to see if Bhoominathan would garland the statue or the man in prayer.

(Original title: *Soodiya Poo Soodarka*)