

THE SNOB AND THE SYCOPHANT

Sangu Parambil Neelakantan Potri hailed from a village near *Udiyankulangara* in Kerala. When he first arrived in Mumbai on transfer from Kanpur, he had only six more years to retire from service. For convenience, he shortened his name as S.N. Potri. According to the Malayali tradition, Sangu Parambil was his given name, Neelakantan his personal name, and Potri referred to his clan. But in the north, Sangu Parambil was considered his first name, Neelakantan his father's name, and Potri the sect to which he belonged.

Potri had beautiful handwriting and, though one could easily make out the name from his signature, it didn't lend itself to forgery. His English too was impeccable. Prior to Independence he was inspired by his mentor Kalpathi Viswambara Iyer, who worked with British officers like Sir Joseph, K. Armstrong and others, encouraged Potri to refine his language skills.

There was only one problem: Potri often boasted that he and his mentor were the only two who spoke proper English in the entire country. Well, we see people doing this - describing themselves eminently - all the time. Where is the need to make a big fuss about it?

At twenty-seven, when his career took him to North, Potri left his wife in his hometown where she lived in a big house and worked as a teacher. He would go home once a year - usually during the *Onam* festival - on a month's vacation; his wife and children would visit him in April-May during the children's summer vacation.

For the rest of the year, Potri managed with self-cooking. Mornings he would have *dal*, curds and *uppili puttu*. Lunch was nothing special; he would walk to a shop, buy and eat a couple of *kela*, the Morrison bananas. At night the menu would be same as in the morning, invariably starting with two large pegs of military rum.

Still Potri always seemed to be in a bad mood with a permanent scowl on his face - like a patient suffering from piles; he was averse to engage even in a small talk with anyone.

On the mornings, when he was not in a mood to cook, Potri would simply have a cup of *chai* and go to work; for lunch, he would order a *dosa* and *kela*. After washing hands, he would enter his A.C. office by simply pushing the doors with the shove of a shoulder. If it became absolutely necessary to shake hands with someone, again he would go to the sink and wash hands.

Was he scared that once he got close to others they might ask him to lend some money?

According to the Mumbai tradition, the name Chidambara Kuttralam Pillai Meenakshi Nathan has been shortened to C.M. Nathan; still, many called him *Nattan*¹; maybe in a way that name was apt because Nathan wore underwear - *the banian*, shorts, socks and handkerchief quite infrequently; that's what distinguishes the summer from rainy season. He washed the clothes and wore them on Sundays. Was there another human being who had only one set of undergarments? To Nathan, marriage was a dream yet to be fulfilled. He has been working in this company for the last ten years and steadily advanced in his career - as a typist, steno, office assistant, and senior assistant. He knew pretty much everything in his profession.

When Rustomji, Nauroji Bhagat, the Parsee head of the sales department at the company's headquarters, retired, Potri at Kanpur office was promoted and transferred to Mumbai to assume that position.

By and large the North Indians called South Indians in Mumbai *Madrasis*; of course, they have no knowledge of the legend of *Kanaka Vijayan* carrying stones from the Himalayas to erect a monument to Kannagi. In the Indian tradition the lines between history and legend are always hazy. There are scholars who glorify legend as history; on the other hand, there are those who promote lies as history.

Every Malayali who travels outside of *Palakkau* becomes a Nair; every South Indian crossing *Solapur* becomes a *Madrasi*. There is a regular complaint that *Madrasis* are averse to share their river waters with other states. To the Northerners, the word *Madrasi* implies a negative connotation and a sense of inferiority. All the three phrases - *O Sala Madrasi*, *Jare Madrasi*, and *Madrasi Bacha*, are grammatically correct, and carry a thin veneer of slander and intense dislike which had inadvertently created a sense of fellowship between the Southerners - like the backlash we saw at the height of anti-Brahmin movement in Tamil Nadu. In reality, the *Madrasi* had little to do with those demonstrations and sloganeering for a separate Tamil country. As a matter of fact, invariably in all offices and among professional groups, there was an unspoken camaraderie among the *Tamils*, *Andhras*, *Kannadigas* and *Malyayalis*. In South, when a Tamilian comes across a Northerner, the very fair skin evokes respect; on the other hand, when two South Indians find themselves talking in their mother-tongue, they are likely to be teased by onlookers: *Kyare, andu gundu tandapani . . .*"

We are digressing; let us not get lost in the high road . . .

¹ The word *Nattan* also means someone who smells bad

There is a joke circulating in Mumbai sales office: "Any employee sporting a tie is a sales representative; if he wears a coat, a sales manager and, if he has a car, a general sales manager." That was certainly true in the last generation. But there had been also someone from the *Sambavar* caste in a Southern coastal town who joined the company as a helper and finally retired as an office superintendent in their international division.

That was how Nathan ended up there as a salesman; he was hired on recommendation from Bhagat. On no occasion did Potri ever openly reveal himself as a *Madrasi*. Now, Nathan swam like a fish in office politics; he lacked only field experience. Potri constantly hounded him and insisted that he accompany him in his business trips.

Potri lived in a one-room apartment with a kitchen in a one-story central government office in *Golivada*; he had a roommate - another close Malayali friend- who worked as a coast guard. He would come ashore once in a fortnight. Nathan lived in *Mumpra* - a Muslim-fishermen community- bordering *Thana*; he preferred its rural atmosphere to the city life as well as the low rent.

Potri did his own cooking and helped himself with military rum of different brands - *Old Monk, Old Cask, Black Mischief, and Hercules* - thanks to help from his roommate. Occasionally, he took Nathan to his apartment. The pair would get off at King's Circle station, take a short cut and walk down a secluded road under the rail bridge to reach their destination. Along their way they would witness scenes of Mumbai homemade market come alive: fishermen peddling their fresh catch; Tamil women hawking mixes of vegetables in clusters; bargain deals for coconuts, *Malabar* bananas, banana chips, and tapioca; chetans pitching *pappads*; *kaka* hustling breads and eggs, and dealers unloading *vada pav, usal and pav*.

Potri, on his way home, would buy vegetables like green *moong dal* beans, cabbage, carrot, and beetroot that could be easily cooked; he would get a quarter or half a pound of green *moong* beans; after thoroughly washing them in his kitchen under a sink, he would line them up using the edge of a knife or the side of his hand on one side to trim off the tips and cut them all in one stroke. After disposing the scrap, he would gather in a pan the beans now cut into lengths of one-and-half inches, fry them in oil, add salt to taste along with slow and steady doses of red chilies, stir the contents and be done with it. Then he would prepare tomato soup. Once he had set up the rice cooker, he would take up a glass of rum in one hand. He was a firm believer that it did no

honor to a good citizen to clink a glass of rum with another before drinking it. Even in the office parties he never bothered to extend a glass of wine to Nathan.

When Potri left a liquor bottle on the kitchen table and was gone out to the rest room, Nathan would discreetly help himself with two large mouthfuls of rum in a single gulp and, like an innocent boy, rinse his mouth. When it came to having a drink, it didn't matter to him if it was spittle. Bhagat was antithesis to this; away from work, he always sought and enjoyed the company of his subordinates. If someone had, by chance or on business, visited his house in Charni Road, the very first thing Bhagat did, after seating the visitor, was to set up a table with two glasses and a bottle of Johnnie Walker whisky. What else the visitor could do? Thus Potri and Bhagat were entirely different bosses; Potri never forgot he was the one giving the marching orders - even when he was closeted in the rest room . . .

He had a season ticket to travel to and fro from home to work by the local electric train; he brandished an Akola briefcase - it carried only his house key and the *Times of India* newspaper. One might ask why he needed a briefcase. Well, a briefcase conferred a mark of respectability to its owner. Some would even put away their midday lunch boxes - the heavy, round, metallic containers - in their briefcases. Also, the contents - *chapattis and suka bhaji* - wouldn't leak or trickle. Some would even use them to store the vegetables they bought on their return journey.

Like a soldier marching with a majestic posture, Potri would alight from the rail station and stride to his office with a briefcase in hand. He would enter the office premises exactly at ninety-four AM and leave it exactly at five-fifteen PM. He was not like some other Southerners in the office who toiled in their seats well into 8 PM.

Nathan had learnt a lot from Potri and he actively practiced it; the very first lesson was cleanliness; the second, frugality; third, an active sexual life without courting diseases; lastly, an excellent command on how to speak and write in English.

When Nathan, after some care and reflection, drafted a letter for his approval, Potri would invariably make a couple of corrections in red ink. For example, if a sentence read "We can attend the meeting on the day scheduled," he would amend it as "We may attend the meeting on the day scheduled." There might not be much difference between the two, but Potri was not the one to forget that he was the boss. On the other hand, Nathan's attitude was one of indifference: why bother whether it is left or right?

Potri harbored strong opinions against leftist views, and his stock in trade included many instances to support his own viewpoint. He attributed idioms and name calling to counter his detractors. He literally worshipped Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer; Nathan's idol was E.M.S. Nampudripad; still, he was averse to antagonize his boss. Wasn't the first rule of an organization that one should unquestionably submit to it?

After returning to the headquarters at the end of official business trips, Nathan was obliged to make out a report to his boss; he was required to submit expense accounts. Like a hawk, Potri would comb through them to zero in on items of four or eight annas in value. He would check on the trains used in travels - their arrival and departure times as well as the mileage undertaken in them. He would scrutinize the cost of meals for each day of the trip; finally, he would disallow some twenty and thirty rupees from the total amount proposed before he approved payment. His attitude was like a dog keeping a watch on a cow and a haystack; it couldn't itself eat the hay nor would it allow the cow to eat it!

For the company, business has been showing a marked growth and the sales figures were very favorable; it might have been due to the seasonal rains, absence of any serious power cuts or an encouraging export-market. The stock market too proved strong. No serious complaints regarding the budget, target or booking were raised at the head office.

The company had plans to refurbish and expand an old textile mill in Kolkata. A sizeable number of weaving machinery had been already procured; Nathan held the preliminary talks on the contracts and, accordingly, a huge sum had been proposed. How could things go wrong when a brother-in-law of a Member of a Parliament from a ruling party was involved in the deal? Concerned parties were invited in due course for price negotiation.

"Let me go," Potri said. He got the authorization from the powers to be and asked Nathan to purchase the tickets.

Nathan would play a small trick when he travelled alone on business. According to the company policy he was eligible for A.C. third tier rail fare. He was required to attach the reservation document with his expense account. First, he would make a reservation for the A.C. third tier rail travel. Then he would make a xerox copy of that form and cancel the tickets and the earlier reservation. Now, he would make a new reservation for ordinary third tier rail fare. This would save him a considerable amount of money while the time and distance for the trip would still remain unchanged.

Potri harbored no such plans; he always traveled with the full trappings of his power and position. He would stay and dine only in the hotels approved by the company. He traveled only in rented cars, No one could ever find fault with him where the official rules and regulations were strictly followed.

Nathan was always bent upon saving money in his business travels; he didn't mind roaming the whole day on foot as long as he found some place - any place would do, he would not mind if it smelt of muck and urine - to rest at night. He needed to keep on traveling; how does it matter which class he travels in or what kind of food he eats?

Nathan knew he could hardly save any money if he traveled with Potri. Still, Potri was an excellent salesman; he was quick in making sound decisions and judging people, warts and all. He never disappointed anyone who begged favors from him; neither did he ever grant favors to someone who didn't openly acquiesce to him. He also knew how to complete the deal for the purchase of the machinery within the contracted amount and still make a good profit for the company.

They both traveled in train - Potri in the A.C. Second tier and Nathan in the A.C. third tier. Nathan felt ravenously hungry; the mere thought that someone would think of wasting money like this horrified him. The *Gitanjali Express* from Mumbai to Howrah takes exactly twenty-four hours and now it sped through a distance of 1,951 kilometers embracing the cities *Akola, Wardha, Nagpur, Raipur, Bilaspur, Raigarh, Jharsguda, Tatanagar* and *Howrah*

The company sent a car to the railway station; according to protocol, Nathan occupied the front seat and Potri the rear and they rode through the two-lane Howrah Bridge for an hour. That was Kolkata, the City of Trams. The textile mill was in the border of the 24 Paraganas District. The guests were lodged in a palace behind the textile mill; it was indeed a palace, and the November cold weather chilled one's bones. The British, who built the mill, had sold it to the Birlas who subsequently entrusted it to their siblings under a *benami* transaction.

The imposing guest house sat smack in the middle of a forest and was lavishly furnished: a fireplace, library, banquet hall and bed rooms - all laid down in an elegant style along with a long, eye-catching verandah in the front.

It had been built primarily for the European *Babus*; but Indian *Babus* were by no means less extravagant. It was an ancient edifice but now well maintained, and it looked chic and elegant in every way. Potri and Nathan were not conversant in Bengali, but they spoke Hindi very well.

The in-house cook warned them not to set foot on ground without a flashlight because snakes might be crawling under their feet. The forest seemed mired in total darkness and there was no way one could even identify any of the trees; even a sweater was not of much help in the severe cold weather.

The guests enjoyed hot water baths. Potri had brought his own supply of rum; two large mouthfuls would greatly help, Nathan thought, but he knew the boss wouldn't oblige, and also it would be inappropriate to ask him. After bath, Potri had his rum and, as lunch was getting ready, he gave himself an insulin shot; he suffered from acute diabetes.

Bengalis too, like the Tamils, loved good food; the *urud* dal deep-fried and cooked on purpose for too long turned pulpy and gave out a pleasant aroma when served hot; a fried eel floated in the middle of dal confirming that the Bengalis considered fish as vegetarian. The rest of the menu consisted of items prepared with squash, raw banana; curry, fish diced in chunks and deep-fried in mustard oil with salt and red chilies; pickle soaked in vinegar. For dessert, there was *rasagulla*. Potri wouldn't eat sweets, so his share in the plate stared at him. Why waste it? When Nathan tried to reach it, Potri objected, saying, "That's no table manners!"

'This man doesn't know anything,' whined Nathan to himself.

Potri, by birth, was a Brahmin; by his profession, a *Vysya* and a *Sudra* by what he ate - everything that could fly, crawl or swim. By the standards of modern civilization, he might be a *Milechan*, an uncivilized brute . . .

"You have probably not seen any of this stuff before," Potri would often lecture the young man. "After all, you can't expect *Sambar* and *Puliyodarai* everywhere you go."

The long train journey, the hot shower, sumptuous and sizzling dinner, cozy woolen blankets - all these set off a sound sleep when the pair retired that night. Nathan had a pleasant dream: A *Naga Kanya*², arising from the *Ocean of Milk*, whirled before him. She resembled the actress swinging her awfully big breasts with hordes of soldiers behind her - in a movie he had seen on Nagpanchami Day in *Taloja* Theater:

The next morning Potri woke up to the sounds of birds chirping and crows cawing, washed his teeth, had *chai* and emerged out of the guest house. He felt the surrounding forest intimidating; there was no other human activity. With both hands shielding his chest, he started

² Mythical character from the underworld with the upper part of the body human and the lower like a serpent

walking in the cold weather. There were many new trees along the way, but he could hardly identify any; each trunk evoked its own beauty denoting the creator's unique imprimatur.

He observed a riverbank that wound its way behind the guest house and dropped off at a distance; suddenly, he heard the roar of *Damodar* River in motion gushing its way to join the *Bay of Bengal*. From where he stood, Potri noticed steps leading down to water where a boat was anchored, with a rope tied a post.

'How about taking a dip?' Potri asked himself. Then he remembered the old saying, 'One should be terrified of devil at home and the water in a foreign soil.' A freight ship was visible afar.

Snow had covered the trees; he recalled a Tamil song extolling Lord Vishnu. Like a snake, the *Damodar* River stretched before his eyes.

'How the Europeans and their wives enjoyed these spots and scenic surroundings!' Potri wondered. 'Our present leaders! Do they ever imagine anything other than money?' The siren from the mill echoed in his ears.

"Okay, let's go . . ."

Nathan was in no mood to get up and leave. 'One can spend here many hours just sitting on these steps and enjoying the scenery,' he was thinking. The squeaks and twitters from the birds caressed his nape; the trees too seemed silently preoccupied in silent tête-à-tête.

But Potri's tail has already been set on fire . . .

The breakfast included *jilebi*, the yellow, sweet and sour dish in pretzel shape made by deep-frying *maida* batter and soaked in sugary syrup; *papdi*, the small, flour crackers deep-fried in peanut oil; tender green chilies deep-fried and salted. Having taken his insulin shot, Potri was munching on *papdi*. The cook pushed his share of *jilebi* towards Nathan and went to bring in to bring *chai* - leaving Nathan in a quandary about table-manners.

Both parties finalized the contract to their mutual satisfaction; the Minutes of Memorandum were duly signed. The members parted company after shaking hands and returned to the guest house for lunch.

The Howrah Mail was scheduled to leave that night at eight; they were told a car would pick them at six-thirty. Potri rested for a while after lunch. Nathan went out and again explored the surroundings; he watched the *Damodar* River in admiration as the *mynahs* and crows roamed the

sky; green parrots whizzed low and high; cuckoos, invisible to the human eyes, were making repetitive hooting calls.

On returning to the guest house, Nathan noticed Potri was ready to pack and leave. The last peg of rum was on the dinner table. His evening *nasta* included puffed corn, boiled potato fried with onions, green chilies and sprinkled with lemon juice, and *chai*. Potri again took an insulin shot; was he planning to skip the dinner?

Nathan knew the corn made him insomniac; when it came to food, he strictly followed the advice of *Avvayyar* - and rice was his main staple. He comforted himself that he could have it in the train - after all, he and Potri would be traveling in different compartments. He also eagerly looked forward to watch the *Naga Kanya* that night in his dream . . .

The pair arrived at Howrah station on time and Nathan, after some search, seated Potri comfortably in his compartment and returned to his seat. He heard voices around him: it seemed strange he heard repetitive sounds in their conversations. He recalled someone telling him recently that if an alien happened to come down to earth and explore it, the newcomer would assert that the entire humanity spoke only one language!

Nowadays, the cell phone has become a nuisance when one tries to sleep in train journey. Locked away in a box, it makes response to emergency calls impossible. Tucked away in pockets, it is likely to slip away and get lost. And it is not practical to leave it on the open like a baby beside the sleeper; the problem gets compounded for those who wear spectacles and carry a cell phone as well.

You are told you can judge a man by the book he reads; you can do as well by listening to the ring tone from his cell phone. Many Mumbai residents prefer Mohammad Rafi's songs - the ones yearning for their lovers; others' favorites are *Anoop Jalota*, *Ghulam Ali*, and *Ganapat arti*. The Tamils like *Suprabhatam*, *Tiruppugazh*, or Bharatiyar's patriotic song. One of Nathan's friends had even a message for any caller: "Your very name frightens me!" How can anyone communicate with him?

All these are mere conjectures; how can you make sense of someone who reads *Thevaram* and also a book by Saroja Devi?

Nathan lay wrapped in sound sleep under a woolen blanket when the cell phone rang. He woke up, steadied himself and picked up the phone near the wall to the bed. It was from Potri. "Some table manners!" he muttered under breath. Potri's voice sounded feeble and weak.

“Nathan, get me a sweet or chocolate immediately . . . Looks like my sugar is low; I am feeling nervous . . . Please come at once . . .”

Luckily, the train provided access from one compartment to another; the time was quarter past one. Everybody was in sound sleep under cover and some gave off unhurried snores. Where could one get a sweet or chocolate? Whom to wake up and ask?

Some stranger turned on a bed nearby and Nathan asked him; he could barely understand what was said. Another turned away with a sneer, saying “*Chup Raho.*” Nathan thought he could ask some women passengers, but how to wake them up? And, by the way, how would you know whether it was a man or woman under the cover? When he approached a passenger who was awake, that man had nothing to offer.

Again, a call from Potri . . .

“Nathan, *kuch karo . . . jaldi . . .*”

His voice was slipping. How can you expect a passenger in AC compartment to keep awake at night? Tense and on edge, Nathan ran to the four corners of the compartment in vain - like a rat caught in a maze.

Things could turn really serious should Potri slip into coma; from the train’s speed didn’t seem it would stop anytime soon. Nathan fumbled into some bags that hung within his grasp lest he find a fruit or sweet. No luck.

There was a trash can at the end of the compartment. Nathan rushed, opened the lid and groped inside. A few discarded plastic cartons, banana skins, an empty water bottle, a cast off newspaper, came into view. When he explored, he found a biscuit wrapper. Further down, he found slices of bread and broken biscuit pieces. He wiped his hand, gathered them and ran back to Potri’s compartment.

Potri was half conscious and sweating in his seat. His hand trembled as he reached to Nathan, who brought a biscuit piece to his mouth. Like an eaglet, he fully opened his mouth; then he began slowly swallowing the bread pieces. Nathan offered him a water bottle from a passenger; he had two mouthfuls, and steadied himself. It seemed it would take some more time before he felt normal and stopped sweating.

Eight more minutes, and the train reached a station. A shop on the platform hawking soft drinks was visible in the dim light. Nathan ran and bought a soft drink without bothering to ask for change. Potri drank - in a rush - half the bottle and put away the rest under the pillow. He

became less tense and sweaty. The face slowly turned fit and fresh; he touched his chest with a hand and let out a deep sigh.

He tried to smile at Nathan:

“Escaped, you see! Many thanks . . . Nothing to fear now . . . Go and sleep , , ,”

Unaware, the train ran its course.

(Original title: **Semporul Angatam**)