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Remitha Satheesh

The Art of Missing Home



It is nostalgia time again. Yet another Onam, yet another year 'celebrating' it away from home and yet another day of my inbox filled with images so idyllic, so bucolic, so pure... I doubt if I would be able to find the originals even back home. All that paadam, puzha, and of course, paattu are a Malayali's greatest weakness. The three Ps that can reduce any maru naadan Mallu to a bundle of quivering emotions. You know when he has been hit by the Ps. There is no hiding the fact. He gets this look in his eyes that tells you that he is thousands of miles away. They just glaze over and he goes all slack-jawed. Why, he might even sub-consciously try to tighten his non-existent mundu. Just take a look at him if you want to know what nostalgia looks like. I do not think there is anyone else who loves to wallow so much in wistfulness as the Mallu does. And what a beautiful word we have for it! 'Grihathurathwam' - A tongue twister of course! No decent Mallu word would stand the ignominy of just simply and easily slipping off your tongue!

Want to trigger the effect? Or

heighten it? Just play any old number by the Dasettan-Vayalar/P Bhaskaran-Devarajan/Babukka team. You might even succeed in reducing the guy to tears.

What is it with the Malayali and nostalgia? For a clan that has never hesitated to go and put down roots just about anywhere (remember that chayakkada on the moon?), or think twice before bidding goodbye to the beautiful shores of home, it is surprising that this is often the ruling emotion.

Don't you think that it is highly odd that the average Malayali spends most of his life dreaming of the other shore? When he is home, he dreams of leaving for (usually) the 'gelf' or the US. Once he gets there, then the rest of his free time (and he probably gets a lot of it considering the fact that now he does not have to tie and retie his mundu/lungi/kaili... as the case may be...) now is spent reminiscing about what he left behind.

Is it an incurable case of the GGO TOSS (grass greener on the other side syndrome)? Is it programmed into the Mallu gene that in order to fully enjoy his 'Malayaliness,' he has to go abroad

But don't be surprised if you find Alliyambal or Suruma Ezhuthiya Mizhikale vying for space with Alejandro and Supernatural on your all American offspring's iPod. How many of us would you find who does not, at least for a minute feel a delicious warmth in his heart as the notes of 'Thamasamenthe Varuvan' come wafting by or close his eyes for one achingly sweet memory of padams and puzhas and thonis on hearing Dasettan croon 'Kalakalam Kayalorungal.' And speaking of Dasettan, if there is one topic that the naturally argumentative Mallu would be in absolute agreement about, it is on the topic of our one and only Dasettan.

or at least far away from that strip of land stretching from Kanyakumari to Gokarnam (I stick to the traditional boundaries here)? It is like a pre-requisite that being a Malayali means having to leave your beautiful land behind. He woos the world to come visit God's Own

Country. But all he dreams of is to leave it behind. And once he does that, realization hits... that it really is God's Own Country... so now he gets to wallow in his favorite emotion –nostalgia.

And all the ones who left, what do we do? We have an uncanny knack for seeking each other out. Often one look at a person is all it takes. Facial features? A tell-tale moustache? The shape of the thali/minnu? A golden anklet peeping out under the hem of your skirt? (Apparently only the Mallu wears gold on her feet. Others are more respectful of the yellow metal.) Or more obviously, a heavily accented remark that 'simbly' gives you away.

And once we seek ourselves out what do we do? What else but bond of course? Other communities have accused us of being a lot of things, some of them quite unpleasant I assure you, and chief among them is that we are clannish. Maybe we are. But then, aren't we all? We majorly bond over our food, our music, and our politics more than anything else.

We drool over our kappa and meen curry, our appam and stew, our beef ularthiyathu and poricha kozhi; karimeen fry and chemmeen chammanthi; our avial and theeyal, puliserry and erissery, kaalan and olan; our matta rice, our ada prathamam, and our chenda muriyan! Ahhhh... by the time we are done with the reminiscing, the most resolute of us can do nothing but rush to the nearest Indian grocery store and buy every 'Daily Delight' and 'Wynad' product in sight. What would we do without them to sate our insatiable appetite for 'home food'? Yes, some of us make them at home too. We are slightly mollified, but after all that there is still a slight feeling of emptiness... ah the fish we get back home tastes so much fresher, and the nenthrapazham so much sweeter... And when e fly home in the summer, we are armed not just

We drool over our kappa and meen curry, our appam and stew, our beef ularthiyathu and poricha kozhi; karimeen fry and chemmeen chammanthi; our avial and theeyal, puliserry and erissery, kaalan and olan; our matta rice, our ada prathamam, and our chenda muriyan! Ahhhh... by the time we are done with the reminiscing, the most resolute of us can do nothing but rush to the nearest Indian grocery store and buy every 'Daily Delight' and 'Wynad' product in sight. What would we do without them to sate our insatiable appetite for 'home food'? Yes, some of us make them at home too.

with shopping lists and visit lists, but also food and restaurant lists.

And then our music. Somehow our songs, our golden evergreen melodies bring us closer than anything else. I know that this aspect, like most other things I mentioned, applies to us older folks and not the younger crowd. But don't be surprised if you find Alliyambal or Suruma Ezhuthiya Mizhikale vying for space with Alejandro and Supernatural on your all American offspring's iPod. How many of us would you find who does not, at least for a minute feel a delicious warmth in his heart as the notes of 'Thamasamenthe Varuvan' come wafting by or close his eyes for one achingly sweet memory of padams and puzhas and thonis on hearing Dasettan croon 'Kalakalam Kayaloranal.' And speaking of Dasettan, if there is one topic that the naturally argumentative Mallu would be in absolute agreement about, it is on the topic of our one and only Dasettan. I don't think the proud Malayali is prouder of anyone else than he is of Yesudas. In my personal opinion, when Dasettan sings 'Harivarasanam,' Earth Herself stops mid-spin to listen. No two ways about it. Discovering a fellow music lover, especially one who loves old songs is one of those wonderful "Ah!" moments that rank right up there with the best.

And then politics... whether is is Achu Mama or Anthappan,

Leaderji or Monji... A highly opinionated community, we have our ideas and points of view over everyone and everything. Despite being far away from home, we closely follow the rise and fall of our political netas and kuttinetas back home and can argue ourselves hoarse over their policies. And what a rush we get from it!

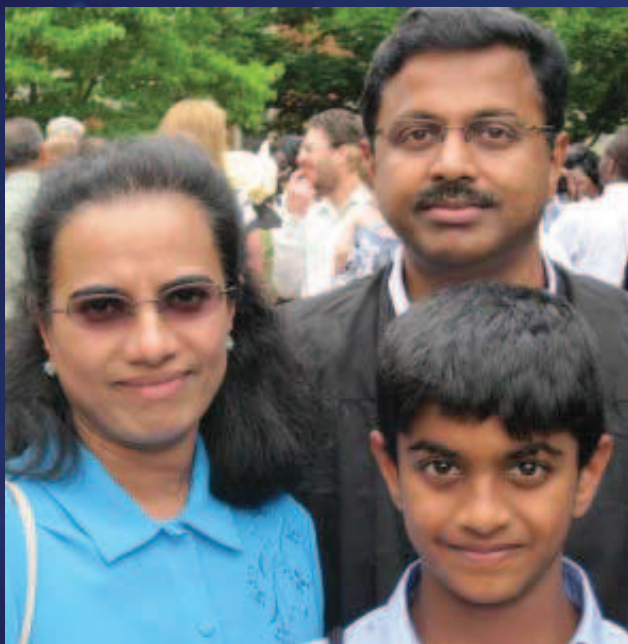
However, if there is one thing that I strongly believe no Mallu misses about home, it is the numerous strikes, bandhs and hartals, called for at the drop of a hat. But I am sure that somewhere deep within, ever maru nadan Mallu secretly longs for it once in a while. One, for that feel of home. Two for doing what his brethren back home do every hartal... enjoy an unexpected holiday indulging in what is now being recognized as the Mallu's favorite pastime - 'smalling.' So that's the Mallu for you. We wallow in delicious nostalgia, in remembrances of things past. We leave home so that we can long for home. And somewhere in our minds, we all have a charu kasera out on the verandah overlooking the paadam and puzha, a piping hot cup of chaya and parippu vada ready by the side, an old transistor going, "Vividhbharathiyude Vanijya Prakshepanam" and the Idavappathi pounding away at your heart... Sometimes it is that one image that keeps you going, whether in the desert or across the seven seas.

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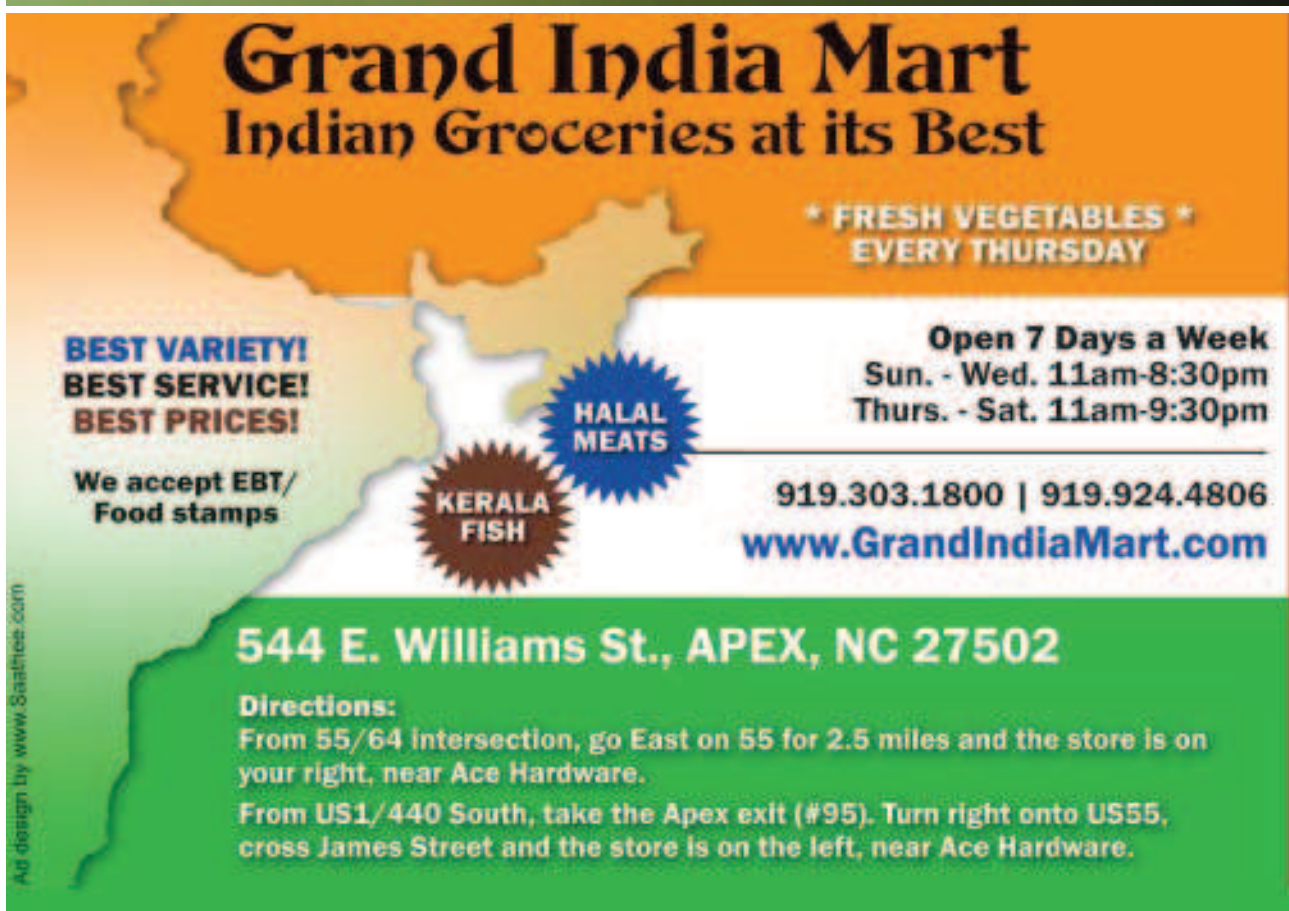


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The Bridge Of Freedom



poem

Kaviya Prakash

The small street that runs across the backyard of my neighborhood
My place of wonders and possibilities
The sparkling fountain of youth to the right
The path covered with vines and twigs
The animals that speak in silence
The Bridge that connected my two worlds

The Bridge of Freedom that stands still
A uniqueness that resides above the lake
Flooded with the magic but without tension
To remind us of that curiousness
To take us all back to our childhood
The Bridge Of Freedom

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The dailies I read
Were again before me
On a gloomy night
To be censored
And compiled
In my shelves,
After due care.

While I went on
Editing the editors,
I knew I was beyond
The boundaries
Of their elite
Estate.

I was only
Scanning the pages,
Just to churn-out
The dispatches
Worthy of my file.

Rest were blighted stories
They wanted me to
believe;
Heavily spiced
With fillers, and
Money spinning ads
For clogging their coffers
By spreading their papers.

To me the message
Was loud and clear;
As I used
A double-edged razor
To cut these fables
Into corny shapes;

Throwing the junk
To doom as pulp,
While I sleep.

Few clippings I stored,
Leaving the editors
To their daily plight,
As they made
Mountain
Out of mole-hill
Claiming
The freedom of the press
Was their only bet
To scare the plain
And the rotten alike
In a world full of cream!!



M.A. Abdul Khader (1944-2003)

from his book of poems,
Grazing Clouds

EDITING THE EDITORS




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Jayasankar Vadakkeveedu

Sounds, The Sign Of Life

Each day and night we are exposed to various sounds around us. Each of these sounds gives us different feelings and generates different reactions from us. We get used to these sounds, and though we are cognizant of these happenings around us we don't give any special attention or consideration. It just becomes a part of our surroundings, As the world changes and we move from place to place, these sounds also change. Nevertheless, there will always be these sounds around us which really are signs of life we can observe.

As a child growing up in a Kerala village, each morning I woke up listening to roosters crowing, cows mooing, birds chirping and people starting the day in general. During the day I listened to various activities around me. These were sounds of vendors selling stuff, children playing or going to school, men and women working in the fields, sounds of cooking, washing and cleaning; days were full of life.

Dusks were filled with sounds of prayers...'sandhya

As a child growing up in a Kerala village, each morning I woke up listening to roosters crowing, cows mooing, birds chirping and people starting the day in general. During the day I listened to various activities around me. These were sounds of vendors selling stuff, children playing or going to school, men and women working in the fields, sounds of cooking, washing and cleaning; days were full of life.

namam chollal' was a non-negotiable tradition in Hindu families those days. Melodious voices of popular playback singers beamed out of many radios as people listened to 'Chalachitra Ganangal'. I could also hear children studying around the neighborhood. Though my brother and I were silent readers, reading books aloud as part of studying used to be very common those

days. This of course resulted in my mother complaining that her sons were not spending enough time studying!

There were signs of life even in the darkness and quietness of night. I could hear dogs barking, crickets chirping and occasionally an owl hooting...ironically there was this belief that if you heard an owl in the night, you may hear about a death in the neighborhood in the morning!

These sounds gave me a sense of security for my present and a hope for the future. When I heard the rooster in the morning, I knew that there is a very bright day ahead of me; a day which will be full of diverse activities and events, many of those unknown and unpredictable at the dawn. I may meet new people, I may learn new things, I may try new food, I may even make a new mistake...it could be anything. It is an amazing feeling to know that there is life and hope around me. Also, the diversity of possibilities is really a refreshing factor.

As years went by, these sounds and signs changed as the

world changed and I moved from place to place. When I moved to Bombay, the sound of roosters and cows at dawn were replaced by the footsteps of paper boys and milk men running up and down the stairs of the high raised apartment buildings. The hooting of owl was replaced by the occasional sound of a cab and the auto- rickshaw dropping off a neighbor who is late from work, and of course the whining of his wife for his tardiness.

Though different and evolutionary, these were still sounds of life. While I was aware of these sounds around me, I never thought these were special....I took those for granted

Then in late '80s I had to live in Hong Kong for some time as part of my job. During my stay in Hong Kong, I had an opportunity to view a refugee camp where the 'Vietnamese Boat People' were housed. For those who have not heard about the 'Vietnamese Boat People', these were the asylum seekers from Vietnam after the war, trying to escape the communist rule there. Many of these people ended up in refugee camps in Hong Kong. The plight of these people was a politically charged topic of that time with many people sent back to Vietnam by Hong Kong government against their wishes.

One day, during hiking with my friends, we reached a hill top from where we could see the refugee camp at a distance. The dwelling structures looked like long barns with both walls and roof made of aluminum (the picture below is one such camp). I could see adults and children standing in line for their daily necessities...food, water, bath, etc. There were very high barbed wire fences with watch towers and policemen surrounding the dwelling units. Areas outside the fence were all cleared for miles on all sides from any trees or shrubs. The emotional impact of seeing this in person is much different than the



one from seeing the picture on TV or on newspaper.

I couldn't sleep that night. What are the signs and sounds of life in that camp? The air could be filled with the sound of endless cries of children who are totally at the mercy of the Mother Nature to stay dry, warm or cool. It could be the moaning of sick and injured people who do not have any idea about what their next day, hour or minute will look like. It could be the sounds of boots of the police moving around in the camp to keep the place in order.

These sounds surely are monotonous hour after hour, day after day, week after week. There will be no croaking of roosters, chirping of birds, mooing of cows or even hooting of owls. None of these sounds heard in the camp gave those people who lived there a sense of security or hope for future! On the other hand, these sounds gave them more fear and uncertainty! It only reminded them of their plight and helpless situation. Am I not blessed for all the good things I had and continue to have in my life? It made me thank god for my past and the present, and pray for all those good things to sustain in the future as well.

After that event, each time I heard about hardships of people, I will think about the signs and sounds of life they may be experiencing. Are those giving them a sense of security and hope, or are those reminding them about their tragical plight and hardships? Think about the people of Ethiopia or Somalia suffering from famine and draught. What security and hope for future do they have? What about the days when Afghanistan was under Taliban rule, when the people of that country were not allowed to have any entertainment, including listening to music? Can we visualize the life in Haiti after the earth quake, with over a million people stays in blue tarp tents exposed to the extreme wethers? Even in this great country we heard about similar sufferings of people of New Orleans and other areas after hurricane Katrina.

So, friends, when you experience signs and sounds of life around you which give you hope and sense of security, take a moment to thank the almighty for that. Also, think of hundreds of thousands of people around different parts of world who are not so lucky as we are, and pray for them!

പൊന്നോണാശംസകൾ

Satheesh Nair,
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