

## From the Eyes of The Foreigner

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### Part 1

Identities change over time and ‘Incredible India’ added a new dimension to my identity as soon as I landed on my ancestors’ *Matrabhumi*: I became a foreigner. My coming to this ancient land has a greater purpose in life (that was told by the High Commissioner at the High Commission of India in Fiji). I am still trying to figure out the ‘greater purpose’. My present purpose is merely to speak up through writing. Does writing serve a purpose?

Believe it or not, writing does serve a purpose. Otherwise, the great works of literature would have become obsolete by now. And Francis Bacon once said, “Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man...”. Now that I am inspired to write, be warned that this is, if anything goes by, experiential writing.

Did I tell you where I come from? I come from a small group of islands in the Pacific. As an Indian diaspora, a research scholar’s seat was awarded to me at one of the oldest universities in India. A powerful deity - *Mata Chamundeshwari* protects this university (I was told quite proudly) and she singlehandedly destroyed many demons, at one time, before retiring in her majestic temple. Hmm, this place is sacred, I reckon.

The picturesque university that lies in the outer skirts of the heritage city is a Raja’s novel idea. The Raja invited great thinkers, scholars, poets, intellectuals, and scientists to teach the students of his kingdom. In no time, the centenarian university nurtured prolific scholars and writers like Kuvempu, R.K. Narayan, A.K. Ramanujan, S. Radhakrishnan, C. D. Narasimhaiah and many more. Great! What else does a research scholar dream of! With such noble thoughts, I reached the department that would host me - The Department of Studies in English. Disclaimer: The names of the characters are fictional. Note: The Foreigner replaces I from now onwards.

### Part II

The Foreigner was received with warmth by Mafiadeva, the senior-most faculty member, who gladly agreed to guide the Foreigner in his research. Before the actual act of

research, The Foreigner overcame the usual administrative hurdles that, metaphorically speaking, took ages. It seems the idea of adjournment is a norm of office administrators, almost to their heart. And why not? Paper pushing is not a matter of life or death! The students, as subalterns, must wait while the ‘man of files’ watches YouTube videos, don’t you think?

Once The Foreigner’s registration (that took a little more than two months) was processed, he headed to his research guide – Mafiadeva Gundappa. Mafiadeva is god-like amongst his students; a rare achievement of a *paanwala*’s son. Growing up in the slums of Mandi did not deter him from becoming a brown sahib. The *paanwala*’s son became a Professor riding on the affirmative action policies. Based on such preferential treatment, he headed to a central university - the Oxford of Indian universities. After completing three chapters, Mafiadeva’s guide piteously awarded him the highest degree. It is on that day; he removed his *khadi* shirt and pants and wore a pantsuit, unlike Gandhi who shed his three-piece suit in favour of *khadi* upon his return from South Africa.

While Gandhi shed his colonial attire with a contempt, Mafiadeva wore the same garb as the Emperor’s new clothes. Like a brown sahib Mafiadeva started wearing matching pantsuits, sometimes brown, sometimes black, other times navy blue. Sadly, inside the coat, he couldn’t help but wear a worn-out shirt, and beneath the shirt a vest with numerous holes of various shapes and sizes. Outwardly, he was a Professor of English who walked proudly along the corridors of the English department; inside he was hollow like a *lota*. Like any other man of books, he was quick to realise his weakness. It is said ‘you can take a man out of the village, but you can’t take the village out of the man’ though credit goes to Mafiadeva; he was hell-bent on shedding his Mandi *paanwala* identity.

Mafiadeva tirelessly emulated western sensibilities but failed each time miserably. The more he tried to display the nuances of an Englishman, the more he ended up like Her Majesty’s brown clown. Once he memorised some eloquent yet gnomic expressions to regurgitate in a literary gathering but went overboard making a fool out of himself. He was mocked mercilessly. As a result, he felt acutely inept in any conferences leading to frustrations. Like a teeming sore, the disappointment of failure seeped into his mind. Cassius-like jealousy clouded Mafiadeva mind. This jealousy was not seen at first but developed eventually after his PhD convocation. It happened like this.

Reeling in the success of his achievement, he penned a poem about his life - ‘Me, Myself, and I’. “Short, evocative, and akin to John Donne’s metaphysical style,” he proclaimed. With his PhD degree in one hand and his poem in other, Mafiadeva rushed to a prominent publisher near him. Not wanting to hurt Mafiadeva’s feelings, the publisher accepted his poetry

(in principle) but encouraged him to get it published in Europe for greater appreciation. The publisher was bluffing in fact. Later he made a sarcastic remark in a literary gathering, “Any idiot can write better than Mafiadeva.” The aspiring poet’s heart bled after hearing such a piercing remark. The next morning, before the sun woke up, Mafiadeva marched up to his deity and took an oath, “one day, I will run my own publishing house and publish my poems in it.” Later he ordered his students to spread his proclamation far and wide.

### Part III

That was forty years ago. After all these years, Mafiadeva is unable to face his deity. Every morning, when he offers fresh flowers to her, as the flowers fall on her feet, Mafiadeva feels someone peeling-off dead skin from a festering wound on his shoulder. The first few years was bearable but his bitterness heightened every year, on the day he took an oath. And every year, Mafiadeva was made the butt of ‘Me, Myself, and I’ joke in the same literary gathering. Whenever Mafiadeva heard this joke cracked, he felt as if boiling oil poured into his ears. Poor fellow, to avoid such embarrassments, he formed his small world.

Mafiadeva’s world was full of vile. Only his handpicked research scholars had access to it. There Mafiadeva often ridiculed his colleagues as ‘idiots’. The handpicked research scholars joined him (all in the selfish desire to get their PhD degree). It was a sacrifice, on their part, to sell their souls to Mafiadeva until they got their degree certificate.

Unfortunately, the other faculty members also had to bear with him. A Professor of English once compared Mafiadeva to hot *ghee* served as *prasadum* - neither can you swallow nor can you spit it out. For this reason, those with natural temperament avoided him. Sadly the students couldn’t escape him and his classes. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom, postgraduate students had to suffer his exploits and bear his pettiness. Those who dared to question him were made targets for future taunts. Like a tyrant, he didn’t shy away from victimising any student who dared to speak up to him. If only The Foreigner knew these details, if only. More on that later, first let us see how the first meeting went between Mafiadeva and The Foreigner.

“So your ancestors were from India,” Mafiadeva began, with a broad smile.

“Yes, sir,” replied The Foreigner, with equal enthusiasm.

“You know, they were poorest of the poor from the streets, they were beggars who went looking for money,” he blurted out to The Foreigner bluntly.

“Sir, a study proves that not all were, as many assume, poor! There are as many reasons as the people who left India, some even enjoyed travel itch, they were *ghuumakads*,” The

Foreigner reasoned. Suddenly Mafiadeva's face turned grim. Did The Foreigner vex him in the first meeting? The meeting ended abruptly.

The next day The Foreigner fulfilled the departmental administrative procedures. Then the research scholars' room was shown to him; a place that accommodated a table and two desks, three wooden chairs, and pile of approved synopses covered in a thick layer of dust. The Foreigner thought hard, then decided to tread carefully. Eventually, a research scholar came in. He greeted The Foreigner and remained aloof. Tea-time and then arrived Hash Baimaan.

Hash Baimaan is the stalwart researcher of the department whose initial five years was spent productively in procuring eight primary texts. The aloof scholar, with newfound intensity, walked towards The Foreigner and informed him curtly that Hash Baimaan was doing groundbreaking research and thus deserved much higher respect. Calling him SIR would be befitting. The Foreigner agreed wholeheartedly. After all, who is he to disagree? Using the taxpayer's money to procure eight primary texts in five years is part of the grand research. Can you question such a grand scheme? Surely not The Foreigner!

#### **Part IV**

"Hi, I am Hash Baimaan, I am doing my research under Mafiadeva SIR," and so in his pompous nature, he side-tracked on a repartee of his sporting achievements etcetera, etcetera, and etcetera.

"What is Antony doing in a library," The Foreigner questioned himself. With a sigh, The Foreigner unwillingly lent his deaf ear to the grand scholar.

More than his sporting achievements, Hash Baimaan was outwardly proud to mention his chauffeur-ship while driving Mafiadeva's wife for shopping and buying groceries (all at his own time and expense). His face beamed while boasting of his domestic feats. That baffled The Foreigner. In many parts of the world, Hash Baimaan's actions qualify as bootlicking. But in a place where vice is considered a virtue, one's actions become questionable. Was The Foreigner expected to carry out similar duties?

After a few weeks, another research scholar, Analppa, came under the Mafiadeva's wings. This character, who could barely string a proper sentence in English, had earlier taught English literature in a local degree college! A research scholar's seat allotted to him baffled many other aspirants but not his friends. They were well aware of his natural ability to slither up to any available 'warm place'. In short, he was an excellent Ball-greaser. In no time, like Octavius, Analppa was treated like a son Mafiadeva never had!

Some tension was brewing within the department. Whispers were heard, strange events like birds dropping along the corridors were seen, three witch-like women were spotted at night by the watchman, a coconut with *kumkuma* marks was found lying near the chairman's office, and a general sense of gloominess spread in the department. The news arrived eventually. DEVI- a Professor of English Literature was appointed as the department chairperson. Although a routine change of leadership, the words of caution flew along the corridors as if someone had sighted Claudius' ghost. In no time, Mafiadeva summoned his research scholars and favourite students in his cabin. "I am retiring soon, now DEVI is the chairperson, no one will save you," The Foreigner heard his guide's words with trepidation.

"Why does he need someone to save him from the Chairperson?" he reasoned with himself. Reasoning with anyone else would lead him into trouble, that he learnt within a few weeks. He also came to know, in due course, that Mafiadeva is the BOSS; and the BOSS is always right, no matter what! Stop. Don't get too carried away by these descriptions. Don't you know the demon king of Lanka, Ravana, the one with ten heads, handle-bar moustache, wagging tongue, rolling red eyes! He was million and one times stronger than this mere mortal. Guess what happened to him? An innocent woman became the reason for his demise! At least this professor of literature should have learnt a lesson or two from the epic Ramayana. Now let me dwell away from this mere mortal; time to introduce DEVI.

Devi is no *abhla nari* or *Sita* - who followed her husband faithfully in exile. Nor is she *Ahalya*! Are we getting too mythical? Let us descend to the mortal world. DEVI belongs to a family that earned prominence through their efforts. Her father was one of the first senior office-bearers in a government department from a remote village. Such achievement in a caste-oriented society is remarkable. For DEVI, this privilege position led to a PhD degree in English Literature. But sadly, she studied feminism to the extent that she began to hate men, believing that as the ultimate goal of a feminist. Before this unfair bias consumed DEVI, she had close friends of the other gender. Believe it or not, at one time, Mafiadeva was her mutual friend! But their friendship turned sore when Mafiadeva, as insensitive as he is, insulted DEVI's scholarship.

Now you see the archetypal conflict between Tom and Jerry! In their upmanship, Mafiadeva (in his capacity as chairman) made DEVI's life miserable. In return, DEVI prayed for her day of revenge. She patiently waited to occupy a chair where she could wield power, and her day arrived, eventually, when DEVI was appointed the chairperson. The proverbial whip was in her firm grip! To her utter dismay, Mafiadeva was retiring soon, that meant DEVI had to vent her anger in a short time, she thought.

Little did she know that any position of power has its limitations too. Each little decision is exposed and expounded, even by those who have nothing to do with it. Above all, DEVI was a fair lady. Between foul and fair, she chose fair unwaveringly and stood her grounds firmly. Imagine this odd behaviour in a place where the mutual act of scratching each other's back is prevalent! In the past, she was pushed to the margins for her attitude. In response, DEVI formed a hard shell around her like a coconut. Only a few people knew the real DEVI; the one who was sweet like the coconut juice.

Unlike Mafiadeva, success in life never affected DEVI, nor did she shy away from her Indianness. It was seen in her simple *saris* she draped herself in and her graceful walk like Indira Gandhi. When she spoke English, she spoke with intent and eloquence. These qualities that DEVI possessed were cornerstones in academia, but when an opponent is a person like Mafiadeva who turns every discourse into a dogfight, how could fair reign over foul?

DEVI's intention, in the beginning, was clear – to take her revenge. But soon she realised that leadership is more than petty personal tussles. DEVI travelled the recesses of her heart and found her true self. In no time, her decisions, which came from the depth of her mind, impressed many. They noted fair decisions by the chair, for the greater good, and above all, just. As for her nemesis, knowing Mafiadeva quite well, she decided to keep an eye on his mischiefs and pray for his retirement.

### Part V

DEVI's change of heart had no bearing on Mafiadeva's plans. As usual, he had something in mind, like in the past when he had played all sorts of dirty tricks. From conniving against colleagues to resorting to fisticuff, Mafiadeva had all under his belt. In short, Mafiadeva was a battle-hardened misguided man whose life motto was to crush anyone who crossed his path. Giving due respect for his devious mind, way before the appointment of DEVI, a plan was laid by Mafiadeva and his Yahoos: Hash Baimaan, Analppa, and Vindictha.

Oh, dear! Time to introduce another vital spoke of this wheel – Vindictha. Vindictha, a research scholar like Hash Baimaan, was Mafiadeva's niece with a singular ambition to 'walk and talk' like Mafiadeva. And here, in modern times, children are blamed for not following the footsteps of their elders! Then again, can you expect sweet *rasbhari* mango fruiting in a *neem* tree? This privileged research scholar eventually graduated by summarising extracts from Wikipedia and not a single right-minded academic questioned the authenticity of her thesis. Is it nepotism?

Nepotism is such a loaded word these days. Ordinary people think nepotism is reserved for politics only, but no! It is prevalent all over. But in this department, NEPOTISM is synonymous to HUMANITY. It is about looking after each other's back. Simple! And for those with a questioning mind, a Mahalakshmi's *motichur laddoo* is the best ways to keep their mouth busy.

Back to the main narrative. Vindicta was given a task to siphon inside news from the clerk and the attendant. The inside information, in secret coordinates, was sent from one room to the other, just like in James Bond 007 movies. Even NASA would have failed to decipher codes that carried information such as: when DEVI's whereabouts, her official correspondence, her telephone conversations, and many other 'inside' information, most of all anything and everything about DEVI. With this acquired information, Mafiadeva and his Yahoos plotted against DEVI. Does George Orwell's *Animal Farm* ring a bell? Vindicta, like Squealer, spread fantastic tales about Mafiadeva and on the other hand, nastiest things about DEVI. Soon Mafiadeva gained the sympathy of his colleagues and students, including The Foreigner while DEVI, on the other hand, was steadfast in reforming the English department.

DEVI remodelled the chairperson's office. At last feminine Midas touch! Apart from the constitution maker's framed photo, the past glories of the department found themselves piled up on the shelves of the storeroom and the chairperson's wooden table got a new flannel cloth. Now to the administrative staff. This group of employees are powerbrokers. Their siding can tip the scale on either side that favours them most.

Two women dominated the administrative office: Abha and Sneh. Abha was the head clerk while Sneh was the attendant. Although their names connote compassion, the two women were the root cause for cacophony in the department. It was not in their nature to show kindness to any student unless their palms were greased. Most of their days were spent watching YouTube videos via free university internet. While Abha, due to her position, watched videos on the monitor screen, Sneh stretched on a wooden bench and viewed in her smartphone. Students often spoilt their joy, but they had a way to resolve that disruption. Those in need of formal letters were asked to type it themselves or offer gifts. Is this abuse of office? Yes it is, but why can't they abuse office when Mafiadeva let research scholars organise the examination papers? The questions and answers were leaked and bargained! Taking moral high grounds here sounds tricky, isn't it? Therefore, the two women kept on with their abuse.

Back to Abha and Sneh. Knowing their inadequacies very well, DEVI put them to work and kept a close eye on their movements, especially Sneh's. The two women were furious. The trickiest task given to them by DEVI was to track Hash Baimaan and Vindicta's movements,

their arrival and departure time, monitor Mafiadeva, and report any peculiar developments. Now Abha and Sneha were caught in the crossfire, a tricky position for an employee of lesser rank. If they report to DEVI, Mafiadeva will rebuke them, if not then DEVI will snub them. The two women decided to obey DEVI, in principle, to show their loyalty towards their employer.

The duo managed to perform some detective-like work. In no time, a certain degree of discipline was noticed. DEVI was inwardly pleased; she let her guard down. To be honest, DEVI was not as wily as Mohini – the female avatar of Vishnu who fooled Bhasmasura to torch himself into a pile of ashes. It is this moment Mafiadeva was waiting - with a mousetrap! Along with his three Yahoos Mafiadeva planned for a grand send-off for himself. Their modus operandi was to create chaos under the guise of a send-off function. And as designed they spread the news “The greatest ever professor of literature retires”. For the event, students were sent for errands during class time. The learning atmosphere was disturbed: students discussed their duties, their dress and costumes, and other arrangements of the send-off. Mafiadeva’s plan was successful double fold. Not only did they manage to disrupt the core business of the university, but they also infuriated DEVI in the process. Suddenly the whole department sided with Mafiadeva while DEVI was left alone on the altar. She was like Sita sitting on a pyre, waiting for her trial.

The send-off programme was successful. Near and dear ones made flattering speeches. Garlands reaching to Mafiadeva’s toes were hung on his neck. Gifts were given to him. Bouquets were laid on the table. Photos were clicked. Food was served in abundance! It was a carnival. But for The Foreigner, it was nothing but a circus.

The week after the grand send-off, students became rebellious. By Friday, DEVI couldn’t stomach any more. She rebuked such behaviour. Students felt offended and rushed to Mafiadeva to grieve. The iron was hot, and Mafiadeva struck it hard. Hash Baimaan quickly gathered the students and lectured them on academic freedom and integrity while Analppa worked behind the scenes, like a pimp, ‘buying’ alliance. All of a sudden, a mob was formed. The mob marched to the Crowfool’s Hole, where the Custodian of academic integrity resided. At the gateway, innocent statues of Gandhi and Tagore were pelted with pebbles. Some girls protested “DEVI out”, “Madwoman out”, “DEVI fit for asylum” and the boys chanted “Mafiadeva Mafiadeva Mafiadeva”. At the Crowfool’s Hole, the mob stood in solidarity. From somewhere an effigy of DEVI was brought. They garlanded her with worn-out *chappals*; she was egged, tomatoed, and stoned! In turn, speeches were made, all ending in a demand to remove DEVI from her office. A girl, who was timid in the classroom, fell in convulsion. She



rolled her eyes, lolled her tongue, threw hands in the air and through her grinding set of teeth managed, “DEVI out DEVI out DEVI out”. A boy jumped out of the mob, took off his shirt, threw it to the ground and torched it. In the blazing garment, he dumped his notes and books. Soon a bonfire started. Each member of the mob threw their bags and books to keep the fire ablaze. Another boy tried to jump in the bonfire. He kept yelling, “leave me, don’t hold me back, let me sacrifice my body, leave me now, leave me, leave me ...” though no was holding him back! His frenzy fizzled out as soon as the scorching blaze touched his skin. Very smartly, he fell backwards in the pretence of fainting. As a stage artist, he acted very well. Finally, the effigy was thrown in the bonfire. Sita was crucified.

Not all were there to protest; some were bystanders enjoying the scene. Others joined when smoke from the bonfire filled the up Crowfool’s Hole. The violent demonstration (later classified as peaceful in a daily newspaper) rattled the chair of the Custodian. He was speechless when he faced the angry mob, his throat dried, and he was shivering inside his pants. All he could do was wet his dry lips with his tongue like a lizard. In his first year of warming his seat, the Custodian did not expect a disorder like this.

Feared by the angry mob, immediate action was taken. DEVI was vilified like Bertha Mason - Jane Eyre’s madwoman in the attic. She was mercilessly removed from her office, without proper investigation while Mafiadeva, without any consultation, was appointed as the chairperson. The deed was done swiftly; the academic coup was successful –Shakespeare’s way but devoid of the poetic justice!

The Foreigner’s deed is also done. His entrance in this story was grandiose, alas after suffering Macbeth’s curse, he chose to exit through the backstage with a greater purpose in life—sine din.