

## Bearings

The blue slides with white fonts flashed sporadically in his mind's eye, burgeoning motley of ideas, thoughts, challenges, perspectives and even vague premonitions far beyond the realms of Physics. As he fastened his seat belt, he vividly pictured one particular slide from his lecture notes that explained the Maxwell's equations. "The magnetic lines of field always go from North Pole to South Pole, and since magnetic monopoles do not exist, the net flux in a closed surface is zero," he would say, with his characteristic confident aplomb and stentorian voice that has never failed to enrapture his audience.

His face turned toward his students, body oriented diagonally along the classroom and hands pointing to the large screen behind him, he would draw the class's attention to the illustration on the screen - A large vertical bar magnet, its top and bottom ends connected by circular loops, and beneath it a set of complex equations which he was far too familiar with. He would often jocularly add that his daughter Megha once imagined that the illustration depicted a butterfly gifted with multiple pairs of wings and that she took her version of his technical drawing, far more colorful and creative, only to perplex her drawing teacher.

He smiled, perhaps more at his own nonchalance than at Megha's innocence.

Neel plugged his ears to an MP3 player whose battery died 15 days ago during his onward flight. Yet he chose to have his ears plugged, his style of evading frivolous conversations with co-passengers. Not that he was of reticent disposition; he was far too engrossed in another conversation – with himself.

With his thoughts still glued to the slide, he drew some vague parallels and anti-parallels. Like the magnet, he knew, there existed a strong intrinsic duality in him. As much as he pretended not to acknowledge it or be oblivious of it, it surfaced with a knavish and conspicuous light, staggering him when he expected it the least and viscerally shredding him into two poles, each pulling him in opposing directions. But unlike the magnet, his poles were the east and the west, repelling, the flux lines of his thoughts shunting chaotically and often times resulting in a non-zero sum, in a fashion far more complicated than the equations in the slide.

He was reminded of his first flight westward to America and ever since then a part of him belonged to America in the west and a part of him to east, to his roots in India. His journey that he began then was still on, although in the interim, he had planed and deplaned several times at several different locations. "22<sup>nd</sup> July," he told himself. That was the first time he marked his physical presence in America, 15 years ago. Ever since then his life had taken interesting quirks. Co-incidentally, Megha marked her first physical presence in America on this very same day 8 years ago, separating herself from Asha's umbilical ties - physically, that is.

It was Asha who proposed the name 'Megha' and it took Neel quite a deliberation before acquiescing. To Neel names meant far more than a calling word, they implied strong emotions and hence misnomers annoyed him, so much so that he experienced a transitory, yet discernible anger every time he explained to his students that electromotive force in reality referred to a potential difference.

Fortunately for him, the women in his life lived true to their name. His mother Manjusha-jewel box. Precious in every sense. His wife Asha: hope, desire; and Meghana: dense clouds. For him Meghana, or Megha as he would call her, was akin to what '*Meghana*' meant to farmers – everything.

'Megha' was not so much a traditional Tamil Iyer name and the mention of it made his parents frown. His parents named him Neelakantan, which translates to 'blue throat', in reverence to Lord *Shiva*, who had consumed poison and held it in his throat causing a circular blue ring. It was also his grandfather's name, in keeping with the Tamil Iyer tradition of naming the first child by his or her paternal grandparent. But when Meghana was born he had lived in America long enough to understand that he had other priorities to cater while naming her. He wanted a short and easy to pronounce Indian name. His own name was often molested by many Americans until he shortened it to Neel. Those who had the privilege to address him by his shortened first name, called him 'Neil' as though it were a common American name, blissfully unaware of Lord *Shiva*'s heroics and his patriarchal lineage. The rest molested his last name, calling him something that he trained his ears to perceive as Dr. Parameshwaran. Until he applied for his Indian passport, the concept of a last name was alien to him. Back home, he went by his first name and his father's initial 'P' for Parameshwaran. And in his early days in America when people addressed him Mr. Prameshwaran, it took him a while to realize that they were indeed talking to him and not to his father.

"Asian vegetarian please," he heard himself say to the tall and slim airhostess who interrupted his thoughts with what seemed to be her louder than usual voice to beat the MP3 player that she imagined was playing in his ears. She was dressed in a white shirt, navy blue skirt and a funny looking uniform cap. Her name badge read Meenakshi – *fish eyes*. It was then that he looked at her round eyes and smiled at the misnomer.

"Asian vegetarian please," he said to himself again, as thought to amuse his inner self. Over the years his accent, demeanor and etiquettes had turned strongly American. He remembered his days as a Grad Teaching Assistant. Back then, he had two distinct accents, one strongly Indian, its scope confined to his fellow Indian grad students, the other that was western, American and professional. Over the years their boundaries became slowly imperceptible, now he could speak only one way, the American way. Unfortunately things that mattered more, his identity, his dreams, and his sense of belonging would not settle as easily as his accent.

He pulled his tray table, which to his trained vision, appeared to be a wide cantilever beam. Meenakshi, the round eyed airhostess, laid his packaged meal on the table. A black plastic container with ramparts to separate its contents from flooding and mixing with one another, covered by a thick aluminum foil with the airline's logo on it.

In it were *palak paneer* – spinach tofu, plain rice, small plastic bowl with assorted fruits and to his relief, yoghurt. He ate in no hurry, pausing and allowing the luxury on being lost in thoughts while his spoon lethargically mixed rice, spinach and yoghurt. After his meal he preferred apple juice over coffee. To him the only thing that qualified to be called a coffee was his mom's 'degree coffee' a typical south Indian milk based coffee. To call anything else a coffee was a ruse, a misnomer, like the electromotive force or Meenakshi. After the meal the lights went dim. Before his knew, he was asleep.

Neelakantan was flying back to New York after a 15 day "vacation" in Chennai. In reality he had stolen an opportunity to visit Chennai under the pretext of attending a technical symposium on Wide band gap semiconductors. He made a presentation on his recent findings in this field, to men of Physics and won their awe and appreciation in the exact same way he did with his students. But then, the truth of the matter being that he wouldn't have even considered a trip, had the venue been Beijing or Singapore or any other place outside India.

Chennai to him meant much. It was the place where he lived the early years of his life. He remembered his school days when he wore a navy blue trouser and a white shirt, very similar to the uniform the flight stewards' in the continental flight he was traveling. Every bit of Chennai mapped him to a memory of his childhood. Every façade of it amused him endlessly, so much so that when he spent a week at Miami for his honeymoon, he confessed to Asha that he found a few things missing in the popular tourist destination. He missed the Elliot Beach's 'modestly clad' talkative crowd, the oily *mollaga bajji* – deeped fried long peppers, the cotton candy man, the giant wheel, kids playing cricket, the fortune tellers with a parrot looking to lure customers lost in dreams, the catamarans, the foul smell of stale fish, the tall advertising hoardings, the horsemen who eked out a living by catering to kids' equestrian dreams, the groundnut vendors accosting young couples: their prospective buyers, and even the couples, and their physical distance dictated by the conservative Chennai community...

But among the most important things that drew him to Chennai, apart from his parents of course, was Tamil, his mother tongue. Chennai Tamil amused him, the dialect of Tamil that rickshaw pullers spoke without parting their lips and keeping their *Beedi* – indigenous leaf rolled cigarette- intact taught him an important engineering principle: Ergonomics. Over the past decade and a half, his Tamil slipped by continually. At home he was alternating between two languages, neither being his mother tongue. Asha's knowledge of Tamil was restricted to random words she learned from Neel in the early days of their association. Megha was strongly monolingual. Their attempts to teach Hindi failed. She would comprehend every bit, but would choose to reply in English with a thick American accent. And every time she did that, Neel imagined it was her way of asserting that America was her home, *their home*; her way of saying, "We are not going back to India for good, pa."

Neel was a victim of what most NRIs (read Non Returning Indians) call the 'n+1 syndrome', a terminology he borrowed from a fellow Indian Professor at Rutgers who taught Communication Disorders. Like most Indians he believed that he would return to

India for good the following year and kept believing it for years. He had broached the issue time and time again, and all Asha had to do to put a quietus on it was to weigh their options. It would silence him and make him resign to a weak “touché”. And then he would dexterously maneuver the conversation to things that brought him joy, Megha’s soccer practice for instance. In many ways this summarized Neel’s journey.

Neel’s early days in America were a mishmash of multiple emotions. He lived the first half a decade of his American journey in a nondescript university town in the south that proved contrary to the picture of America in his dreams. There was nothing tall or big or pompous about the town and the whole place went crazy about football. Back then he could not comprehend why they called it football when it was played using hands. A dollar meant 46 Indian rupees. Finding vegetarian food outside was a challenge. The leafy burgers annoyed him. The language annoyed him further. During his first visit to a local food joint, he had no clue what the fat lady meant when she asked, “for here or to go?” in a weird accent. Taking all into consideration, his association with America was far from love at first sight. It was only after the initial few months after his ‘Zed’ turned ‘Zee’ and after he embraced the American style that things started to change. The following season he turned a football fanatic, his work with his advisor, a Bengali professor who sported a rock star’s coiffure, showed promise. He was involved actively in the Indian Student Association, became popular with his students for his elegant lectures. He graduated with a PhD in style and chose academia which seemed an obvious sequel to his grad school success story taking up a teaching job at Rutgers. At Rutgers he wrote research proposals, published extensively, received grants from NSF, DOE and some corporate sponsors and at 36, he was a successful young physicist. And with every step, every turn, every success, America became dearer to him.

In America he found three treasures, closest to his heart: Asha, research and Megha – the order in which they embraced him. His first meeting with Asha at an Indian function was brief. Back then, he looked a typical geeky grad student, with an unkempt beard and insipid dressing, lost in his own world. Asha’s first impression of Neel was similar to Neel’s on America: indifferent. How, when and why this indifference turned to admiration, respect and love puzzled Neel more than any of his research problems. Occasionally he would ask Asha and she would respond with a smile. A smile that said it all, a smile that he would never comprehend!

America had even done Neel’s father proud in ways Neel could never comprehend. Parameshwaran was moved to tears during Neel’s graduation. When people addressed his son Dr. Parameshwaran, there was a vicarious pride of accomplishment. Perhaps it was this pride and joy that let him condone all that his son had done: marrying a Kanpur girl, naming his granddaughter ‘Meghana’ and even Neel’s ‘self imposed exile to America’

*“Solemnly, freely, and without mental reservation, I hereby renounce under oath all allegiance to any foreign state. My fidelity and allegiance from this day forward is to the United States of America. I pledge to support, honor, and be loyal to the United States, its Constitution, and its laws. Where and if lawfully required, I further commit myself to defend the Constitution and laws of the United States against all enemies, foreign and*

*domestic, either by military, noncombatant, or civilian service. This I do solemnly swear, so help me God."*

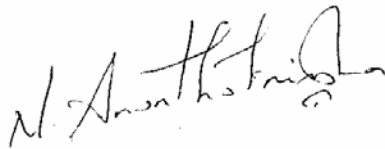
Two years ago, on Asha's birthday, a portly Judge administered this oath to Asha and Neel, thereby making them citizens of America with all rights and honors. It was Asha's best birthday gift. As for Neel, pandemonium ensued. Going by the literal sense, he was guilty of perjury when he said, "*I hereby renounce under oath all allegiance to any foreign state.*" Neel had an unstinting faith in America but he could never chose it over India or much less "*renounce under oath all allegiance*" to India. The portly Judge who administered the oath rationalized that America would embrace him with open arms along with his culture, his values and the traditions he was raised with, and he would never have to relinquish any of these to be an American citizen and that America believed in pluralistic society, "*E Pluribus Unum,*" he added with conviction. He believed him and knew he would be eternally grateful to America for this. But then, Neel was no politician, he could not choose expedience at the cost of truth. He had dreams of returning to India; he now suffered from, 'n+5 syndrome' (which his colleague thought was an advanced stage the n+1 syndrome, where one imagined he or she would return after 5 years)

He hoped that someday Megha would embrace Indian ways, speak Tamil, wear a saree, have a deep vermillion dot on her forehead, light oil lamps at twilight, recite hymns like her grandmother. Someday he along with Asha and Megha would go to India and go for good. He hoped!

Neel slept through and skipped the next meal. In the entire 7 hour flight, he spoke to no one but the airhostess, their conversation not exceeding a few words.

Neel was woken up by the announcements onboard. "We have reached JFK international airport. The local time is 2:45 AM and the temperature outside is 53 Fahrenheit. Please be careful while removing your bags from the overhead bin as they might have moved during the flight. At this point, it is safe to turn your cell phones. We hope you enjoyed the flight. Thank you for choosing Continental and we hope to see you again. If New York is your final destination, welcome home."

As for Neel, he was unsure of both. His final destination and home!



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