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The Touch is Mightier than the Pen

Dr Chitra Seshadri

"I am a prolific writer" tells my grandmother whose favourite brill ink filled camlin pen glides *sriramajayam* pages after pages. She claims with a tinge of pride to be nearing the impossible mission of completing one crore times. Her statement made me nervous when I compared her with the present generation young ones who rarely holds the writing weapon and the elder ones like us who stares lazily at it, which was once considered mightier than the King's sword. Before this slim and brittle thing came, there was its predecessor the light-winged feather quill. I feather touched (with guilt-ridden heart that probably my generation will be the last to scribble on paper) my smart phone to google the origin of pen and it informs that fountain pens came roughly around 1850s and ball-point pens in 1888. Again I gingerly googled who gave the metonymic adage "the pen is mightier than the sword". It was Edward Bulwer Lytton in 1839, indicating the power of independent press.

I became evocative of the ancient period when inscriptions were made on stones which later became sites of historical records. This involved a heavy task and precision where a

sculptor used a chisel to inscribe words and names. Many ancient temples bear witness to these inscriptions. Yet another ancient version of writing happens to be the palm leaf manuscripts where they etched /wrote using a sharp-edged rod known in Tamil as “ezhuththaani” literally meaning the ‘writing nail’. I am always reminded of my secondary school Tamil teacher who emotionally narrates the anecdote of the ancient Tamil poet “Seethalai” Saathanaar literally meaning the pus-headed poet, who used to punish himself hitting with the Ezhuththaani or the writing nail on his head whenever his poetic diction miserably failed and so the wounds oozed out pus and hence his name. Nobody cared for the historical veracity of this anecdote, yet any learner of ancient Tamil poetry listens to this story with great awe.

Most of my childhood memories relate with the beautiful camlin pen which had a transparent half inch body to check the ink level and an opaque ‘uv’ type of blunt-sharp body end. Only elders in the family filled ink into it using an ink-filler which sucks ink from the yellow labelled Brill ink bottles. While screwing the nib segment into the body excess blue drops peep out. They carefully wiped with a blue trash cloth solely used for this purpose. Sometimes they screwed the nib upside down and tested whether ink flowed gently even as droplets of the blue liquid landed into the bottle or on the trash cloth. We as children watched this process with amazing delight.

The newly ink-filled camlin is a delight to write with. The nib keeps losing its sharpness as we used for ages and a particular slant position of our fingers determines its flow. As its edges blunt out our handwriting becomes plump bluish. The new sharp nibs are coarsely thin and smart. In fact parents used to

buy new ones before exams and test it vigorously filling ink, ensure that it is leak-free, place it before the Gods in pooja room, caution us about applying too much of pressure while writing and then wish us Good Luck. Despite all these we used to have 'lucky' pens for public exams, even if they are worst blunted writing flabby alphabets. In middle-class family like ours parker pens used to be a luxury and very rarely do we buy pens as we don't lose them.

These episodes sound almost irrelevant today and your experience is likely to be heard like that of the anecdote of the Tamil ancient poet. Such is the impact of Liberalised Market Economy where your stationery shops are flooded with throw away pens and the cost ranging from one rupee to any maximum. But none of us will have pens to sign in the most crucial situations like signing the attendance...no I cannot mention that as it is the era of biometric swipe. But generally in public places like a bank or post office (sorry applicable to non- digital savvy, otherwise why should somebody go to these places that might turn into historical monuments shortly) we borrow from others or vice versa and in most cases we/they forget to return the pen. On reaching home when you ransack your bag for something else you find at least half a dozen colourful plastic click ones or the bland transparent blue ones mostly coverless scribbling on the inner lining of your purse or handbags. You regret with guilt at least ten seconds looking at the seventh one blinking at the new owner.

Children and youngsters of today care a damn for this little thing but it becomes the most precious one unable to find it in their pencil boxes as the school auto or van honks terribly outside and in the melee grab their parents' writing tool lying

orphaned on teapots or dining tables or pickpocket from shirt or pant of their dad's hanging in the wardrobe. The tired sire bathes and gets ready to leave for office and realise the missing signing apparatus the most costly one gifted by his 'bro' only the evening before. As he searches his previous day shirt pocket where he cocksure remembers pinning it vows to punish the offender. Many a hell breaks loose in the evening, but he can only have the jotter refill pathetically peeping out of an disabled equipment ripped apart. Packets of five and ten rupee pens vanish into thin air within a week with children negotiating with mothers for new packets.

But once these children enter the colleges they definitely don't need a pen. The habit of taking notes in classes had died down. They look upon teachers who carry original texts asking them to take down meanings of difficult words as aliens. Google notes and e-summaries will do for them. The art of teaching is fast becoming redundant and in this digital plague the pen is also likely to become a victim. Descriptive three hour exams are becoming a farce. A laziness sets into students when you ask them to write exams for three hours. One can witness three-fourths of the exam halls in Colleges empty even by the first ninety minutes. The same students in their Higher secondary goes to coaching classes where they are made to practice and work out problems for hours but when they come to Colleges the pen had become an outdated instrument to them.

At the end of the day smart phones have ruined our creativity as we always google any information. Even the 'mouse' had become dispensable as your finger tips 'touch' and reaches the corners of this universe. The pen is also likely to become

yet another victim as competitive online exams, scanned signatures, smart digital pens and other devices are becoming the order of the day. The strokes of pen, the different shapes of alphabets all these will vanish. As we look at stone inscriptions we will shortly gape at papers where somebody had written with a pen.



Dr Chitra Seshadri

Dr Chitra is Associate Professor and Head Department of English at Bharathi Women's College, Chennai. Her Doctoral Thesis was on Partition Literature. Her areas of interest include Tamil Women Writers of the Colonial and Post Independent period, Vaishnavite Literature, Ecocriticism, Disability Studies and Translation. Currently Translating Lectures for NPTEL course on Disability studies into Tamil. Also translated the play "Pacha Mannu" by A. Mangai.

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