



Divya Vani

Saligrama K. Aithal

Whenever the grandchild crawled/ ambled into his room, the grandma rushed to take the child away from him on one pretext or the other—that it was time for the child to eat or rest or something else important—an old ritual she picked up again after practicing it years ago when their daughter was growing up as a child. She also found ways to convince the child that she was the child’s protector from the hostile world, even from child’s own mother. In order to provide the new child a loving environment, Pradip Pandey decided to remove himself from the scene. He took a flight to New Delhi and to anonymity.

He walked past crowds of people in Janpath, past the swanky buildings on both sides, and the noisy traffic. Absorbed in thought

how to make it in the world during his second childhood in his eighties, nothing drew his attention in particular.

Sitting at the edge of the sidewalk of the street was a little girl. He had passed by her, but quickly retraced his steps and looked around.

There was no elderly person nearby. He stopped a few minutes hoping to see someone attending to her.

She was barely three to four years old. Surprised by the child being alone on a footpath of a crowded Delhi street, he saw her face more closely. He found there a clear reflection of his own—a picture of sadness and gloom. She must have cried for hours, judging from her swollen eyes and signs of dried-up tears on her cheeks.

She was not really alone. A young calf sat next to her and it appeared that the calf sat helpless unable to comfort her companion in any practical way.

The two—the child and the calf-- sat alienated from the buzzing crowd around.

Being a self-chosen alien himself from life and family, Pradip went close to the child. He smiled hoping to see the child smile in return. The child looked at him, anxiously hoping to get something more than a mere smile.

The calf moved closer to the child, perhaps to indicate that she was a part and parcel of the team, not someone apart.

Careful not to arouse suspicion of any parent or guardian who might be around, Pradip kneeled down and gently caressed the lower part of the calf's neck with his hand.

Pleased by the gentle stroke, the calf extended its neck. The child also patted the calf on the neck, and moved her hand over his.

Encouraged by the girl's trust, Pradip took the girl's hand by both of his hands.

Pradip asked a series of questions to know her name, what she was doing there, who was accompanying her, and so on, but got no answers to his police-style interrogations.

He quickly changed his communication mode. He bought a bottle of water from a nearby vendor and a packet of biscuits. He opened the bottle and asked her to drink, lifting her face and mouth and holding the back of her head with his hand. After she took a few gulps, he opened the packet and gave a couple of biscuits to her. Then he attended to the calf. Although no word passed between the members of the assembly, all the three felt a sense of solidarity.

After some effort, Pradip was able to know her name: Vani—Divya Vani. No further information he could extract, except she wanted to meet a person with a name that sounded like Riti.

At a loss as to what to do, Pradip thought of taking her to a nearby police station. He stopped a passing cab. Before he led the child into the cab, the calf leaped in. All the three sat—the child and the calf in one seat, and Pradip in another.

Amused by one of his passengers, the driver wanted to know where they wanted to go. At the spur of the moment, Pradip changed his original destination plan and asked the driver to take them to the residence of the Cabinet Minister in Charge of Childcare—Smriti Irani. The newspapers were full of stories about the minister since the new parliamentary election and swearing-in of the new cabinet, so it was no surprise that he thought of her considering the nature of the problem on hand.

On the way, Pradip was lost in thought. His mind slipped from meditation on his own personal experience and observation of childcare into a nightmarish vision.

He sees two parents engaged in a fight.

The mother asks the baby to eat.

The child says no.

The father takes the child's side. He wants to take the child away from the table and give her a bath first.

The mother wants the child to eat first before taking bath, and won't let the father take the baby away.

The exchange of words soon turns abusive and loud, followed by screaming, shouting and yelling, throwing of dishes, smashing of chairs, turning of table. The topic of debate shifts to a host of unresolved issues of the past years.

Neither pays attention to the heartbreaking cries of the child.

Noise awakens the whole neighborhood.

Slowly, neighbors step in one by one to intervene, as usual, --some keen to douse the fire, others to inflame it and enjoy the fun.

Pradip woke up from his nightmare when the car stopped at the minister's residence. As he got out of the car, his two companions followed.

Luckily, the minister was home, and was, in fact, in a hurry to leave.

When she appeared at the door, the child jumped into the minister's arms shouting in joy and uttering the name *Riti Ma*.

Smriti Irani was quick to recognize the child, and was relieved to hear the child's name—Divya Vani.

She was overwhelmed by the safety of the child from Amethi, her constituency. For the past couple of hours, TV was full of news of a missing child from Amethi and the exchange of fears between parties of kidnapping, and possibly of rape and murder.

She was about to leave for Amethi to attend to the case, and, lo and behold! the child was safe and sound in her arms of all people in the world!

Holding the child in one arm and the calf in the other, Smriti Irani looked at Pradip to know who he was and where he found the child.

Unaware of the recent events, Pradip was at a loss what to make out of Smriti Irani's surprised and happy look.

Without waiting to hear the story, Smriti Irani said that he could narrate the story on the way, so took all the three in her car, and drove off to the airport to take a special flight to Amethi.

On the way, Pradip narrated where he found the child and what story he could weave to make sense of it all. His imagination combined with Smriti Irani's own now, however, failed to account for the transportation of the child all the way from Amethi to Delhi—how, who, when, and with what purpose. Coming to general matters of childcare, the two agreed that parental role had a vital part in childcare, the foundation on which are built a child's wellbeing and future prospects of happiness.

A huge crowd had gathered in Amethi to witness the safe return of Divya Vaani, and also national and international TV crew.

As the car from the airport reached the town, people greeted their representative, "*Chowkidar Smriti Z Irani amar rahen!*"

The parents rushed to the car and took the child in their arms and begged for the child's forgiveness for their violent behavior in her presence. They appealed to the parents in the crowd not to follow their example, --make their child a helpless witness to their angry exchanges on any issue.

Giving the part played by Pradip, a total stranger, and also the angelic calf, Smriti Irani elaborated upon the universal significance of the words *Main Bhi Chowkidar!* and warned that the words not to be taken for a mere election slogan and forgotten. She concluded her speech saying, "Your child needs your love protection most of all. Charity begins at home."

She looked around for the calf, which had by then sneaked through the crowd to the barn to her mother for milk.

After a short rest, Smriti Irani drove back alone. Pradip excused himself and stayed back, to make Amethi, New India, his home.



Saligrama K. Aithal

Saligrama K. Aithal has published six collections of short stories *Many in One*, *One in Many*, *Inside India*, *Overlapping Worlds*, *Passage to More than India*, and “*Make in India*” and *Other Short Stories*.

His publications include a literary biography *Riyana: The Child Once Everyone Was*, and a study of Toni Morrison’s fiction *Toni Morrison Novelist*. His fictional writings have appeared in *Critical Quarterly*, *Short Story International*, *Unlikely Stories*, *Long Story Short* (where his “*Enter, Search, Select, Click*” appeared as the **STORY OF THE MONTH** for February 2012), *Journal of Postcolonial Societies and cultures*, *Indian Literature*, *Warscapes*, *Projected Letters*, *New Quest*, *Contemporary Literary Review*, *Sci Phi Journal*, *Journal of South Asian Literature*, and *eFiction India*, *Indian Ruminations*.

Likewise, his scholarly articles on authors and books -- Indian, British, and American—have appeared in a host of journals.

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