

Bhaasha

“Good morning, everyone! My name is Miss Shala.”

Miss Shala was a small Pakistani woman in a hijab. I sat on the floor, one among seventeen fresh-faced toddlers unsure of what to expect from this day, this year.

“Good morning, Miss Shala!” we sang-yelled in a cacophony that anyone would have considered sarcastic had it not come from a group of four-year olds.

“Welcome to Walnut Park Montessori School. Let’s start by taking attendance. Raise your hand when I call your name.”

Thus began the first test of my young educational career. I looked over at my brother and swallowed, arm ready to go up at a moment’s notice. Was she going by first or last name? Didn’t matter either way, my initials were firmly at the front of the alphabet. But maybe someone had an earlier second letter? Was there an Adams? An Allen? An Accomazzi?

“Aneesh Anand.”

The words were clearly foreign to her mouth- weighed down by the unwieldiness of English vowels and the imprecision of its consonants. I wondered why this woman, an immigrant from the same subcontinent as me, had difficulty pronouncing my name. Was she putting on an American persona for these American children, complete with fake sweetness and mispronunciations? Regardless, what came out of her mouth was unmistakably my name. My hand shot up. Miss Shala gave me a quick nod and smiled. I

let out a small sigh- I had succeeded. The first exam was over. Logically, it was my brother's turn next.

"Grithor Anand."

Confused, I looked at my brother to find the same puzzled expression on his face. Some of the letters were similar, but his name was Giridhar: Giri from the Sanskrit word for mountain, dhar from dharati, which means to hold. It referenced a story about Krishna, who, as a child, when confronted with a rainstorm conjured by Lord Indra, effortlessly lifted a mountain with his pinky finger, protecting the entire village of Brindavan from Indra's watery rage. But Grithor? It sounded like a villain from He-Man, complete with a flowing cape and ominous hood. I pictured waking up on a Saturday morning to tune into "Grithor: Master of the Universe." My brother must have had the same idea, because instead of raising his hand, he pointed to me.

Aneesh

Every September, as the leaves became crunchier, and students scrambled to finish summer reading assignments, my family got ready for the holiday of Krishna Jayanthi. My father, who claims he would have been an architect if he hadn't gone down the path of academia, painstakingly assembled displays reenacting stories from Krishna's life. One year, he created my brother's namesake story from scrap materials, bringing the Govardhan Mountain to life from spare cardboard, PVC pipe, and one of my grandmother's old saris. My mother always cooked my favorite snacks- crunchy chokli

that melts in your mouth, warm sweet mithai delicately wrapped in silver leaf, and perfectly fried vadai.

On the night of Krishna Jayanthi, aunties and uncles from the farthest corners of the Greater Boston Indian community would pour into our house, admire my father's decorations, and compliment my mother's cooking. Growing up, I always enjoyed the event, welcoming the prospect of eating good food and running around the house with kids my age. However, my least favorite part of the night was when the adults would halt the festivities to sit cross-legged on our red Persian rug in front of the display and chant the Vishnu Sahasranamam. Sahasra is the Sanskrit word for thousand, and namam means name. Vishnu is an Indian god, one of the Big Three, who apparently was important enough to get a thousand different names. A statue of his likeness, with baby blue skin and red lips, stared out the bay window of my living room, while 50 middle aged Indians sat in front and began to chant those names. I never understood why this was a necessary part of the evening- it seemed to me that it always killed the buzz.

On one of the Krishna Jayanthi nights, after saying goodbye to Sridhar Uncle and Uma Aunty and Ramesh and everyone else, Paati beckoned to me to sit on the ground in front of her.

"Let me show you something."

I mentally rolled my eyes. Paati worked as a teacher for years in India even after getting married and giving birth to my mother at the age of 19. I was in for another one of her lectures. She tousled my hair and began to recite one of the verses from the

Sahasranamam:

“Udirnasarvata chakshuranishah shasvatastiraha. What about this line do you notice?”

I shrugged. It was complex gibberish to me.

“Listen to the words. Udirnaha. He who is superior to all beings. Sarvata-chakshur. One who, having a pure consciousness, is omniscient. Anishaha”

Anishah. Aneesh. This was my name. I had just received my first Sanskrit lesson.

Both Indian languages I speak are essentially useless in conversation. The first, Sanskrit, the Indian analogue to Latin, is a dead language. Sanskrit whispers the Vedas, holy secrets of my learned Brahmin caste. When I was young, I would devour Amar Chitra Kathas, beautifully illustrated comic books that depicted scenes from Indian mythology. In the comics, the Vedas manifested themselves through a white smoke that would emanate from the mouth of one learned sage and enter another’s. It puzzled me that that was all it took to transfer such important and secret information, as simple as Neo downloading files from the matrix and saying *“I know the Vedas.”* I always wondered what it would be like, to inhale this smoke and unlock the secrets of the universe. I didn’t realize that it would involve mastery of a dead language.

After teaching English and Sanskrit for years in Bangalore, Paati was summoned to Boston in 1995 to help take care of my mother's three bundles of tears that decimated diapers. She started a Sanskrit class at MIT, and another at Chinmaya Mission, the Hindu Sunday school that my siblings and I attended. She got involved with an organization called Samskrita Bharati that devotes itself to restoring spoken Sanskrit in India and America. Paati started traveling across America, conducting workshops and speaking at various Samskrita Bharati events. After a few years, Paati decided that her grandkids should start learning the language that had held so much importance in her life.

As we made our way through middle school and high school, Giri, Suma, and I spent every week completing our regular schoolwork, and then moving on to our Sanskrit assignments. We read stories in the Devanagari script, conjugated verbs, and memorized declensions. Through the years, our assignments became more complex, and I was able to understand prayers I heard around my house. I realized that the reason we ate a mixture of bitter neem leaves and jaggery on Ugadi, the day of the South Indian New Year, was to remind us of the bittersweet nature of life. I learned that the English word juggernaut comes from the Sanskrit word jagannath, which means master of the universe, and is another name for, of course, Lord Vishnu. Sanskrit gave me the tools to make meaning of the language and culture that flowed through me, including the etymology of my name.

Aneesh comes from an, a term of negation, and isha, which means lord. Isha also makes up Ishwara, another one of the Big Three. One of Ishwara's other names is Neelakant, which means, "blue throat." There were many bedtimes when my mother told me the story of that name. In those moments, the harsh and grating voice Amma reserved for lazy graduate students and the artificially high voice and forced American accent she used when talking to her white friends disappeared, replaced by a soft whisper that made every worry in the world melt away.

"The devas and asuras were in a big, big war," Amma said with wide eyes, gesturing wildly. Giri, Suma, and I lied down on one queen-sized bed, fighting over the opportunity to take the spot on the blue and red Tommy Hilfiger comforter next to Amma. As Mickey Mouse's arms and legs made their way around the Disney themed clock on the wall, Amma continued, *"They went to Lord Vishnu for advice, who told them to churn-"*

"Why were the devas and asuras at war?"

"Shut up, Giri!"

My mother shushed me and calmly answered Giri's question, explaining the fundamental divide between the devas in heaven, who shone brightly but often with too much arrogance for their own good, and the asuras, gray-skinned demons with red eyes and big curly mustaches reserved for the villain stereotype.

"Anyway, what happened next?" I asked impatiently, ready to return to the story.

“Yes, so Vishnu told the devas and asuras to work together, to churn the Ocean of Milk to release the Nectar of Immortality. This was no easy task. They used a mountain as the churning rod, and Vasuki, the serpent king that acts as a garland around Ishwara’s neck, as the churning rope.”

I closed my eyes, feeling the nighttime breeze as I imagined this monumental tug-of-war. *“Devas and asuras pulled with all their might, determined to release the sweet nectar from the milky ocean. But something strange started to happen. Rather than nectar, the churning released pohe. Poison!”*

My siblings and I gasped. *“A poisonous gas,”* Amma continued, *“so powerful that it could destroy the entire universe. The devas and asuras were terrified, and approached the only one they could for help- Lord Ishwara. Ishwara knew he had to protect the universe and started to inhale the gas. His wife Parvati, alarmed, cried out and grabbed his throat, to prevent the pohe from entering his body. It remained in his throat, turning it blue and giving him the name Neelakant.”*

Ishwara was the truly selfless hero of the story, but I couldn’t help but wonder about his problems. What about the poison that stayed in his throat? Didn’t he have to deal with that every day? Wouldn’t it hurt to drink water? I cried that night, for Ishwara and the poisonous gas that would remain in his throat forever.

Aneesh, made up of an and isha, translates directly to “one who has no lord.” In the context of the Vishnu Sahasranamam, this applies to Lord Vishnu himself. The definition of a god is one who has no lord above him. However, a second, less common interpretation of the term is to mean “atheist.” After all, an atheist is one with no lord above him. I’ve always found this funny- I imagine the poor religious poet who must have realized just a little bit too late that his devotional description of Lord Vishnu could be twisted to mean the exact opposite. My name is the ultimate contradiction and a source of confusion- I’ve never been sure which of the meanings I identify with.

Mandayam

Hinduism partitions people into castes: Brahmins, the priests, Kshatriyas, warriors, Vaishyas, traders, and Shudras, farmers. There is a sect within the Brahmin caste called Iyengar, a group from South India that places more emphasis on the worship of Lord Vishnu than other gods. Within that group are the Mandayam Iyengars, an aging group of 4000 or so that I belong to- a group that becomes smaller each year. The name comes from the fact that this sect of Iyengars began in the Indian city of *Mandaya*, which translates to a “habitat preceding civilization,” often interpreted as an “ancient abode.”

Tamil is a language spoken by millions in India, and is the most widely spoken language in south India. Unfortunately, I grew up learning Mandayam Tamil, which isn’t even the most widely spoken language in my house. I spent a lot of my childhood angry at my parents- why didn’t they teach me something useful, something that would allow me to

communicate in India with people other than my cousins? I am essentially voiceless in the country that I so strongly associate with my roots.

“What is he saying?” I asked impatiently. My translator, Krishnan Unni, kept nodding at the gap-toothed farmer as he rattled off Tamil phrases that I could barely recognize. It was January 2015, and I was in Coimbatore, India for a volunteer project, gathering opinions of villagers on sanitation and hygiene.

“Toilet...bathing... 5 days... nothing... useless.”

The snippets of Tamil that I did recognize kept me just on the cusp of understanding the farmer’s point, and it didn’t help that Krishnan Unni wouldn’t translate a damn thing.

“You have to tell me what he’s saying next time,” I complained as we walked along the worn dirt road past the rows of towering coconut trees, the only thing protecting our heads from the relentless Tamil Nadu sun.

“I’m trying,” he said, making sure to step carefully over a mound of cow dung, *“but they keep talking and it’s hard to listen and translate at the same time.”*

I sighed in frustration. It was moments like these that made me question whether there was any point in coming to India for this. I was a privileged college kid who only knew enough Tamil to say *“Konjam Tamil puriyum, anaka...”*, *“I can understand a little Tamil, but speaking...”* and smile apologetically. They didn’t need me to fly thousands of miles to ask someone else to ask farmers questions. I was no better than those white tourists

who stayed in Africa for a week, just long enough to get a new Facebook profile picture out of it.

“Can you grab us two alneers?” Krishnan Unni, sporting a pair of knockoff aviators and a plain white kurta, lay down in the car, leaving me with the task of buying the coconut drinks. I took a deep breath and walked over to the seller who held the ripe coconut and machete expectantly.

“Randu alneer kudu” I recited, just like I had practiced in my head five times. He looked at me and said *“Mamsa ode venuma?”* It took some time for me to process the words. They sounded familiar, but I wasn’t sure what they meant. I opened my mouth. The white smoke was materializing in my stomach, chapters of the Bhagavad Gita, the Four Mahavakyas, stories of Vishnu, Krishna, and Ishwara. The smoke made its way up my throat but stopped there. I felt like Ishwara- the smoke was poison now, trapped in my throat, paralyzing me. I tried to force it out, desperately hoping that somehow the seller and I could come to a mutual understanding. But we were in different worlds and nothing came out of my mouth. I gave the vendor an apologetic smile, handed him a 20 Rs. note, grabbed 2 coconuts, and walked away as fast as I could.

While I’ve felt limited by the small size of the Mandayam Iyengar community, my parents have always looked at it as a sign of distinction, and of exclusivity. My father has a running joke that mainly involves insulting Vadakalai Iyengars, a different sect- this is a joke that has a potential audience of maybe a few hundred. The differences between

the two groups ranges from the ringing of bells during worship (Mandayam Iyengars do not) and the shape of the mark we wear on our foreheads (Mandayam Iyengars have a Y-shaped mark, while Vadakalais wear a U-shaped mark). Apparently these differences mean that I should be constantly derisive and dismissive of non-Mandayam Iyengars.

The exclusivity of the Mandayam Iyengar tradition extends to love. Arranged marriages are the standard, and must be to other Mandayam Iyengars. In the past, this has extended to the point where, rather than look outside the sect; my aunt married her uncle, in order to keep the family line pure. Yes, incest, the perfect embodiment of purity. The result was that their first daughter was born with a speech defect that she's still attempting to recover from. My grandfather has told my father that he will disown my siblings and I if any of us marry outside the Mandayam community. It's not an empty threat- I've never met my cousin Madhu because she chose an "unsuitable" husband and the whole community shut her out. Her parents didn't even attend the wedding. I've been to Mandayam meet-ups where proud old men give speeches on our strong and historic culture, but no one talks about the divisiveness and conflict within our community. Even my parents, who are much more progressive than their ancestors, joke, telling me to remember not to marry "BMW," which means blacks, Muslims, and whites. I've always been confused by the acronym, because it basically excludes any race other than Indian. One of my cousins was dating an African American and consistently got emails from her mother full of articles and statistics, attempting to remind her that all blacks are criminals and thugs. There is an interesting twist to the

deep racism and discrimination in the Mandayam community. Though Mandayam Iyengars are from South India, our skin is noticeably fairer than others from the region. One of the rumors that my mom told me was that an Englishman somehow got in the mix a few centuries back, giving us whiter skin. The irony of the statement made me laugh; the idea that so much effort had gone into preserving the purity of the Mandayam lineage, only for some British guy to fuck his way into my ancestry.

Anand

Anand is the Sanskrit word for happiness. Of course, in my family, no name's story is that simple. Born in the 11th century, Anand became the disciple of Sri Ramanuja, one of the first Mandayam Iyengars, at a young age. Ramanuja asked Anand to go to the remote location of Thirupathi, through thirty miles of inhospitable, dense and dangerous forest, to serve at the temple there. Anand accepted and, in appreciation of his courage and dedication, Ramanuja gave him the name Anandanpillai, which means Anand the brave. The procedures laid down by Anandanpillai in the eleventh century are still followed at the Srinivasa temple in Thirupathi today.

My last name was supposed to be Anandanpillai, but after spending 20 years in the US with the name Mandayam Srinivasan, my dad realized that there was a high chance that name would be butchered in pronunciation. So my last name became Anand, back to meaning happiness and the young boy before any feat of bravery. A-N-A-N-D. The name is pronounced Aa-nund, and the d at the end is soft, like the th sound in "the" or

“father.” Whenever I introduce myself, I say A-naand, stretching out the second syllable and ending with a hard d. I’m not sure when I started introducing myself this way. It doesn’t really make sense- Aa-nund isn’t that much harder to say than A-naand. I don’t remember if there was a time when I said Anand correctly or if I changed it because A-naand got a better response. But I’m aware of it every time I say my name, constantly reminded of this bastardization. I feel like I’m cheating Ramanuja, Ananthanpillai, and Vishnu, betraying my years of Sanskrit education. And yet, I’ve never corrected myself. Saying Aa-nund doesn’t feel wrong, but it definitely doesn’t feel right either. It’s like the convenience store LaVerde’s Market- I started out with a full blown Antonio Banderas impression, “Wanna get a sub at La Verde’s?” and gradually that turned into “Let’s go to Vur-dees.” In the context of English, the natural pronunciation of other languages feels out of place and doesn’t belong.

I’m going to create my own language. Communication will be primarily smoke-based- we will open our mouths and vapor will spill out as others absorb it, understanding instantly what we mean. The divisions between words will be blurred- A-naand and Aa-nund will be lost in the mist, but the ideas transferred will be perfectly clear. Grithor will be a slur, its utterance punishable by imprisonment. And I will point to the blueness of my throat with pride, knowing that what I inhaled was both neem leaves and jaggery, that the poison and nectar are one and the same.