

LESSON – 6

POET AND PANCAKES

About the author

Asokamitran (1931), a Tamil writer, recounts his years at Gemini Studios in his book *My Years with Boss* which talks of the influence of movies on every aspect of life in India. The Gemini Studios, located in Chennai, was set up in 1940. It was one of the most influential film producing organisations of India in the early days of Indian film-making. Its founder was S.S. Vasan. The duty of Asokamitran in Gemini Studios was to cut out newspaper clippings on a wide variety of subjects and store them in files. Many of these had to be written out by hand. Although he performed an insignificant function he was the most well-informed of all the members of the Gemini family. The following is an excerpt from his book *My Years with Boss*.



INTRODUCTION

Gemini Studios of Madras (Chennai) and its founder, S. S. Vasan lent substance and quality to the a fragile and unpredictable movie business. *Poet and Pancakes*, an excerpt from the book 'My Years' with Boss brings to life, the leading members, their talents and roles, their frustrations and ambitions. It gives a **panoramic (wide)** view of the impact and affiliations of those parts of Gemini Studios with regard to Independent India in its infancy, communism and its counter productive anti-communism.

THEME OF THE LESSON

The theme of the prose is basically set around personalities and events that used to take place in Gemini Studios where the author used to work when Indian Cinema was still an infant as an industry. The author also talks about a new India immediately after Independence and also makes generalized comments about the country. Asokamitran talks about the make-up department, the office boy, Kothamangalam Subbu and the legal adviser and his deeds. He also makes comments about Communism that was prevalent in India during those days.

TITLE OF THE LESSON

The title 'Poet and Pancakes' is both interesting and amusing. It arouses the curiosity of the reader because there seems to be no connection between the two words poets and pancakes. But as the reader reads the lessons, he discovers that there is a subtle and humorous link between the two words. The two words joined together in a humourous way indicate that the content of the lesson are going to be humourous. By describing the **follies (the trait of acting stupidly)** and **distinctive (typical)** and peculiar personalities of the characters to an individual, the writer justifies the title.

Gist of the lesson

- The Gemini studio was located in Madras (Chennai)
- The writer recounts his years in the company
- The make-up department was in the upstairs of a building that was believed to have been Robert Clive's stables.
- Pancake was the brand name of the make-up material used by the artists in Gemini studios.
- The make-up room had the look of a hair-cutting salon with incandescent lights at all angles around half a dozen large mirrors, writer speaks about the 'fiery misery' 'of those subjected to make-up.
- There was a great deal of 'national integration' in the department and a strict hierarchy was maintained there.

- The players who played the crowd were the responsibility of the 'office boy' in his early forties, a frustrated person, who turned all his anger towards Kothamanagalam Subbu.
- The author's job was to cut out newspaper clippings and store them in files.
- Most people including the 'boy' thought author was doing 'next to nothing'.
- S. S. Vasan (editor of Tamil weekly Ananada Vikatan') was the owner of the studios. Subbu was No.2.
- Subbu-a Brahmin, had the ability to look cheerful at all times, could be 'inspired when commanded', was tailor -made for films, had a separate identity as a poet and actor, had genuine love for others, was charitable, always seen with The Boss, attached to Story Department.
- Story Department-assembly of poets and writers, wore khadi
- A lawyer(legal adviser) -referred to as 'the opposite'-caused the end of a brief and brilliant career of a talented actress, looked 'alone and helpless', man of cold logic in a crowd of dreamers, close to the Boss, wore pants, coat and a tie, attached to Story Department, lost his job when the Story Department was closed down.
- Gemini studios -favorite haunt of poets, excellent mess which supplied good coffee, Congress rule meant prohibition, almost everyone radiated leisure, wore Khadi and worshipped Gandhi, averse to Communism.
- Visit of MRA (a kind of counter movement to international Communism) in 1952-presented two plays 'The Forgotten Factor' and 'Jotham Valley' in a professional manner, impressed Madras and Tamil drama community
- Another visitor-a poet from England, tall man, very English, addressed 'a more dazed and silent audience', visit remained an unexplained mystery, staff did not know whether he was a poet or an editor
- Author's conviction about prose-writers-'prose writing is for the patient, persistent, persevering drudge', short story contest by a British periodical 'The Encounter'-found in the British Council Library almost 'untouched by readers', discovered Stephen Spender was the editor
- Author bought 'The God That Failed' years later-six essays describing the disillusionment of six eminent men of letters with Communism, Stephen Spender one among them, author suddenly realized the relevance of his visit to Gemini studios.

BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF GEMINI STUDIOS (CHARACTERS AND PLACE)

Gemini Studios: Gemini Studios was one of India's pioneer movie factories. Situated in the present day Chennai, owned by S. S. Vaasan and worked by over 600 staff, the GS made movies for Tamilnadu and other southern Indian states. Pancake was the makeup material used by the GS.

The Office Boy: Office Boy was a grown up man in the Makeup Department of the GS. He was in charge of the crowd make-up. He applied pancake on their faces with the help of a dipped paint brush. Though his job was quite an easy one, the office boy considered himself to be a greatly skilled artist.

Asokamitran: Asokamitran was one of the staff whose job was to collect information such as news events from newspapers and magazines and to paste them in files. The other staff considered his job out of place and most of them thought so high of themselves. Here are some of the interesting staffs of GS.

Kothamangalam Subbu: Kothamangalam Subbu was another clerk. He was not as educated, as fortunate and as supported by as the Office Boy, yet he reached the top of the GS. He was a man of amazing genius. He was able to direct the directors. He suggested dozens of ways to shoot a certain scene when the director failed to find one. He acted better than the heroes. He wrote incredible poems. Though he was able to write more complicated ones that could raise him to the status of a great poet, Subbu preferred writing them in simple Tamil to enlighten the majority of Tamil people. The world of his time and later never recognized Subbu as a poet yet he was a great unknown poet. Besides, he supported his far and near relatives. But he had only enemies everywhere because he was very much close to the boss, Vaasan.

Legal Advisor: The legal advisor worked in the Story Department. He was a lawyer and provided legal advices to the writers yet he was known as the illegal advisor. The following incident is one reason that gave him that name. Once a shooting was under progress. The heroine, a highly emotional girl, got angry with the director and producer. While the whole set stood stunned at this, the legal advisor recorded her voice without her permission and made her listen to the playback, thus resulting the end of a rising actress.

Poets and writers: Gemini Studios had some great poets like Harindranath Chatopadhyaya and a few others. Most of the insignificant poets considered so great of themselves. They had no great talent, no great creativity, no political views yet they assumed the airs of the greatest poets, wasting Vaasan's money and time. They believed Gandhiji to be the last word of politics and had developed an aversion to Communism.

Communism and MRA: Communism was a new political order that was spreading throughout the world, especially in Asian countries. Communism preached equality of people and abolition of poverty and class divisions while it discouraged private ownership. But Communism won a negative impression due to the Capitalistic countries such as America. MRA (Moral Rearmament Army) was an international team of actors and actresses that spread anti Communist feelings throughout the world. The MRA came to Chennai and saw how influential was Gemini Studios in the south of India. The team got permission from Vaasan to stage their plays. Vaasan was only happy to give them permission because he hoped that his staff would get inspiration from the international team. But little did Vaasan know of their intentions. MRA staged their plays with hidden anti-communist messages and went away and it was yet after some time that Vaasan realized that he had been fooled.

Stephen Spender: Anyway, Stephen Spender, who was once a prominent communist editor and poet from England, came to the studio and gave his speech. His lecture was about Communism on one side and about his struggles to establish as a poet on the other. Whatever he spoke was great, exciting and inspiring, but no use because his accent was so terrible that none of the Gemini staff could clearly understands what Spender had spoken. They fell into shame for not being able to understand the poet and wished not to meet him again.

Asokamitran's meeting with Spender: The lesson ends with two incidents in which Asokamitran, our author, met Spender; not face to face, but in two different ways. While attempting to send his short story to England to participate in a contest, Asokamitran happened to read The Encounter, a magazine that had Stephen Spender as its editor. On another occasion he happened to read the book, the God that Failed, an article by Spender.

Answer the following questions in 30 – 40 Words.

1. How does the writer describe the make-up room of Gemini Studios?

Ans. The make-up room of Gemini Studios looked like a hair cutting salon. It had around half a dozen mirrors with incandescent lights at all angles around them. The artists would feel the heat emanating from these lights. Thus, the writer uses the term 'fiery misery' to denote the uncomfortable situation of those subjected to make-up.

2. What was the great deal of national integration that was prevalent in makeup department?

Ans. The make-up division of the Gemini Studios was an example of national integration. According to the author, this is so because people from different regions and religious groups worked together in the same department. The department was headed by a Bengali who was succeeded by a Maharashtrian. The other helpers included a Dharwar Kannadiga, an Andhra, a Madras Indian Christian, an Anglo-Burmese and the local Tamils.

3. Who was 'office boy' and why was he disappointed with his job?

Ans. The 'office boy' was enrolled in the make-up department for the makeup of the people who formed part of crowd in the films. He used to mix his paint in a giant vessel and slapped

the paint on the faces of the players. He had joined the Gemini Studios years ago, aspiring to become an actor, or a scriptwriter, or a director, or a lyricist. He was disappointed with the studio that failed to recognise his talent.

4. What was the common perception of the staff for the author?

Ans. The job of the author was to cut newspaper clippings and file them. For the other employees, all he seemed to be doing is tearing newspapers, which according to them did not qualify as work.

5. Why was the office boy frustrated? Who did he show his anger on?

Ans. The office boy had joined the studio years ago in the hope of becoming an actor or a screenwriter, or a director, or a lyricist. The fact that he ended up becoming none of these left him frustrated. He used to direct his anger at the author even though it was meant for Kothamangalam Subbu.

6. How was the legal adviser different from the others in Story department?

Ans. The legal advisor was a part of the story department at the Gemini studios. He wore pants and a tie and sometimes a coat whereas everyone else in the Story Department wore similar khadi dhoti with a slightly oversized and clumsily tailored white khadi shirt. Thus, the lawyer stood out from others at Gemini Studios as if he is a dispassionate man who did not take sides. Moreover, he was a logical man with no emotional attachment whatsoever.

7. What do we perceive of the political affiliations of people at Gemini Studios?

Ans. The people at Gemini Studios did not have any particular political affiliations. The common political notions of the day managed to influence them but that was limited to wearing khadi and admiring the Gandhian philosophy. They were averse to the term 'Communism' but had only an erroneous understanding of the concept.

8. Why was the Moral Re-Armament army a welcome change at the Gemini Studios?

Ans. Frank Buchman's Moral Re-Armament army was welcomed at the studio mainly because of their political association. The people at the Gemini Studios were averse to Communism, and hence, were ready to play host to the MRA. Apart from that, the studio people hardly had any occupation and suffered from boredom. The MRA came as a welcome change to their monotonous days at the studio. Madras and Tamil drama community included scenes of 'sunset and sunrise in the manner of Jotham Valley' in almost all of their plays. This shows how the plays, staged by MRA, influenced Gemini Studios.

9. Why is the Englishman's visit referred to as unexplained mystery?

Ans. The Englishman's visit to the Gemini Studios is referred to as an unexplained mystery because no one could decipher his identity, whether he was a poet or an editor. Besides, when he spoke, no one at the studio understood what he intended to say as his accent was beyond their comprehension.

10. What does The God that Failed refer to?

Ans. The God That Failed was a compilation of six essays written by six eminent writers, namely, Andre Gide, Richard Wright, Ignazio Silone, Arthur Koestler, Louis Fischer and Stephen Spender. In each of the essays, the respective writers described "their journeys into Communism and their disillusioned return".

11. What does the writer mean by 'the fiery misery' of those subjected to make-up?

Ans. The make-up room of Gemini Studios looked like a hair cutting salon. It had around half a dozen mirrors with incandescent lights at all angles around them. The artists would feel the heat emanating from these lights. Thus, the writer uses the term 'fiery misery' to denote the uncomfortable situation of those subjected to make-up.

12. What is the example of national integration that the author refers to?

Ans. The make-up division of the Gemini Studios was an example of national integration. According to the author, this is so because people from different regions and religious groups worked together in the same department. The department was headed by a Bengali who was succeeded by a Maharashtrian. The other helpers included a Dharwar Kannadiga, an Andhra, a Madras Indian Christian, an Anglo-Burmese and the local Tamils.

13. Why was the office boy frustrated? Who did he show his anger on?

Ans. The office boy had joined the studio years ago in the hope of becoming an actor or a screenwriter, or a director, or a lyricist. The fact that he ended up becoming none of these left him frustrated. According to him, "great literary talent was being allowed to go waste in a department fit only for barbers and perverts". He used to direct his anger at the author even though it was meant for Kothamangalam Subbu.

14. Subbu is described as a many-sided genius. List four of his special abilities.

Ans. Subbu was a multi-disciplinarian. He could provide solutions to problems and remain cheerful all the time. He was an actor, a poet and a novelist.

15. Did the people at Gemini Studios have any particular political affiliations?

Ans. The people at Gemini Studios did not have any particular political affiliations. The common political notions of the day managed to influence them but that was limited to wearing Khadi and admiring the Gandhian philosophy. They were averse to the term 'Communism' but had only an erroneous understanding of the concept.

16. Why was the Moral Re-Armament army welcomed at the studio?

Ans. Frank Buchman's Moral Re-Armament army was welcomed at the studio mainly because of their political association. The people at the Gemini Studios were averse to Communism, and hence, were ready to play host to the MRA. Apart from that, the studio people hardly had any occupation and suffered from boredom. The MRA came as a welcome change to their monotonous days at the studio.

Answer the following questions in 100 to 120 Words.

1. How does the author describe the incongruity of an English poet addressing the audience at Gemini Studios?

Ans. The audience at the Gemini studios was not knowledgeable enough to understand the thrills and travails of an English poet, of which the visitor poet-editor talked about, in his speech. The studio made films for simple people whose limited resources did not provide them with an opportunity to develop a taste in English poetry. The audience failed to understand anything the poet said, all the more, because of the latter's accent. The poet-editor, in turn, looked baffled realizing the utter inappropriateness of his speech being directed to such an audience.

2. What do you understand about the author's literary inclinations from the account?

Ans. Though the author had a very tedious and unchallenging job at the studios, his interest in literature and writing is apparent in his willingness to participate in the short story contest organized by the British periodical, 'The Encounter'. Moreover, the author appears to be a keen reader visiting libraries and buying books on wide-ranging topics whenever he could afford them. The narrative also establishes the fact that the author was one of the most knowledgeable persons in Gemini Studios. His idea about how prose writing was not meant for geniuses but for those with patience and perseverance, highlights his deep thoughts on literature and creative writing.

3. The author has used gentle humour to point out human foibles. Pick out instances of this to show how this serves to make the piece interesting?

Ans. 'Poets and Pancakes' has an underlying tone of humour which is satirical and has been deployed by the author to point out human foibles. It is mainly manifested in his description of the make-up room people. 8 The make-up room, he says, was in a building that had once been the stables of Robert Clive. He further makes fun of the make-up team that slapped make-up.

Ironically, the make-up turned any normal man into a hideous monster, far from being presentable. He also refers to the fiery misery of the actors when their make-up was done under the bright bulbs, large mirrors reflecting blazing heat. His description of Subbu's No. 2 position in Gemini Studios, the frustration of the office boy and the opposite role played by the legal adviser in the acting career of a countryside girl are humorously dealt with but effectively bring out the flaws in the set-up. The showmanship of the boss and what influences his guest list point out human weaknesses in a light-hearted manner. The humour is at its peak in the description of the visit of Stephen Spender. S. S. Vasan's reading a long speech in his honour but he too knew precious little about him. Spender's accent is highly unintelligible. Then the author's establishing long lost brother's relationship with the English visitor is also funny and humorous. All these slight digs at human foibles tickle in us humour.

4. Why was Kothamangalam Subbu considered No. 2 in Gemini Studios?

Ans. Kothamangalam Subbu was on the attendance roll with the story department and was No. 2 at Gemini Studios not by virtue of any merit, but because he was a Brahmin with affluent exposure. He was cheerful and had a sense of loyalty that placed him close to the Boss. He was quick to delegate work to others. As if tailor-made for films, sparks of his creativity showed in his suggestions on how to create shots. He composed poetry, scripted a story and a novel. He gave direction and definition to Gemini Studios during its golden years. He performed in a subsidiary role better than the main players. He had a genuine love for his relatives and near and dear ones. His extravagant hospitality was popular among his relatives and acquaintances, probably that is why he had enemies.

5. 'In all instances of frustration, you will always find the anger directed towards a single person openly or covertly... Do you think it is right to direct our anger towards someone who is not responsible for the cause of anger? Justify.'

Ans. No, it is not right to direct our anger towards someone who is not responsible for the cause of the anger. We become angry when we find obstructions in our path and towards growth, if someone challenges our authority, someone ridicules us and our self-respect is hurt or when things not go the way you want them to be. Weaker people become the target to vent out our anger because it is assumed that they won't retaliate. But this is a wrong practice and one should try to control one's anger as far as possible.