

## POETS AND PANCAKES

By ASHOKMITRAN

This piece, Poets and Pancakes, has been taken from Asokamitran's book 'My Years with Boss'. He was a Tamil writer, writing about his years in the company. He worked in The Gemini Studios. His duty was to cut out newspaper clipping on a wide variety of subjects and preserve them in files.

Gemini Studios was located in Madras (Chennai). Film making was its infancy in India. Asokamitran writes humorously in a rambling style. To begin with he talks of the make-up department of the studios. It was at the up-stairs of a building that was popularly supposed to have been Lord Clive's stables. Then there are quite a few buildings which were supposed to have been Clive's residences. Asokamitran does not believe all this to be true. Lord Clive's stay in India was very short. He lived in Madras for still shorter time. He couldn't have lived in all these houses.

'Pancakes' was a strange brand name for a make-up material. The Gemini Studios bought truckloads of this material. It was used by the make-up department. The author humorously says that it made decent looking boys and girls ugly.

Talking about the make-up department, he talks of his office boy. He was in fact a grown-up man of forty. He aspired to be a director or a top star. But he remained an office boy. He blamed his neglect on Subbu, who was considered to be No. 2 in The Gemini Studios.

Now the author tells us about Kothamangalam Subbu. He was a talented person. He was a poet, novelist, actor and film maker, all rolled into one. But he had no aspirations. He was loyal to boss.

Then he tells us of the legal advisor who was a member of the story department. He wore western clothes and looked odd among khadi-clad writers and poets, who were averse to communism. The legal advisor ruined the career of talented actress unwittingly.

Talking of communism the, author speaks of the arrival of Moral Re-armament Army at the studios. It was a sort of counter-communism movement. It presented plays in the studios. Their plays influenced Tamil dramas but their anticommunism had no effect. Later an English poet paid a visit to the studios. But nobody could understand what the poet said or what the purpose of his visit was.

The poet, which the author discovered, was the editor of the periodical, The Encounter. He wrote an essay on his disillusion with communism. His visit to the Studios had been in this connection.

### Multiple Choice Questions

**1. Which department did Subbu work for in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

- (A)Lights department (B)Story department  
(C)Camera department (D)Production department

**2. What did the story department also consist of in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

- (A)Lawyer (B)Scriptwriter (C)Dialogue writer (D)None of the above

**3. How was Subbu amidst a room full of dreamers, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

- (A)A logical & neutral man (B)A daydreamer himself  
(C)A legal practitioner (D)A friend, philosopher cum guide

**4. What chance did Gemini Studios get in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

- (A) to host a group of international performers
- (B) to release movies under their banner
- (C) to sponsor the filmfare awards
- (D) None of the above

**5. What were the international performers called, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

- (A) Moral Rearmament Army (B) Moral warriors
- (C) Moral Army (D) Moral saviours

**6. What was the specialty of the Moral Rearmament Army, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

- (A) their plots and messages were not complex
- (B) their sets and costumes were near to perfection
- (C) their style of shooting was very different
- (D) Both (A) & (B)

**7. What did the Tamil plays display for many years, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

- (A) the artwork of international performers
- (B) sunset and sunrise in a way inherited from 'Jotham Valley'
- (C) names of international performers (D) None of the above

**8. Who visited the Tamilians after international performers, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

- (A) Robert Clive (B) Stephen Spender (C) Ruskin Bond (D) Robert Frost

**9. Why couldn't people connect with Stephen Spender, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

- (A) Because of cultural difference (B) Because of linguistic barriers
- (C) Because of caste difference (D) None of the above

**10. Why had Asokamitran joined Gemini Studio, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

- (A) To become an actor (B) To become a screenwriter/lyricist
- (C) To become a director (D) All of the above

**11. Where did the author work in earlier days, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

- (A) in an office (B) inside a cubicle (C) in a centre (D) None of the above

**12. Why did the author think that Subbu had an advantage, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

- (A) Because he was an office boy (B) Because he was a born Brahmin
- (C) Because he knew a lot of people (D) None of the above

**13. What was Subbu, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

- (A) Subbu was a resourceful man whose loyalty made him stand out
- (B) He was tailor-made for films and it was difficult to imagine film-making without him
- (C) He was very welcoming and was known for his hospitality
- (D) All of the above

**14. What does 'truck loads' mean, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

- (A) large amounts that could fill a truck (B) in very large quantities
- (C) things to be loaded in a truck (D) None of the above

**15. Why does the author feel that Rati Agnihotri may not have even heard about the brand 'Poet & Pancakes'?**

- (A) as she entered the industry late
- (B) probably, the brand was no longer in use then
- (C) she used a different brand of cosmetics (D) Both (A) & (B)

**16. Who was Robert Clive, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

- (A) the English soldier and statesman (B) he expanded British power in India
- (C) he was a nobel writer (D) Both (A) & (B)

**17. How did the make-up room look, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

- (A) It had the look of a hair-cutting salon
- (B) with lights at all angles around half a dozen large mirrors
- (C) they were all incandescent lights (D) All of the above

**18. Who was the make-up department first headed by, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

(A)Maharashtrian (B)Bengali (C)Dharwar Kannadiga (D)None of the above

**19. Who was the make-up department second time headed by, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

(A)Bengali (B)Gujrati (C)Marwari (D)Maharashtrian

**20. What was the style of shooting films in the earlier days, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

(A)mainly indoor shooting (B)only five per cent of the film was shot outdoors

(C)limited artists (D)Both (A) & (B)

**21. What strict hierarchy was maintained in the make-up department, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

(A)The chief make-up man made the chief actors and actresses ugly

(B)his senior assistant the 'second' hero and heroine

(C)the junior assistant the main comedian (D)All of the above

**22. What was the idea behind applying make-up on the crowd player's faces, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

(A)to close every pore on the surface of the face(B)to make them look ugly

(C)to make them look beautiful (D)all of the above

**23. What was present on both the sides of the cubicle in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

(A)Lush green trees (B)Snow clad mountains

(C)Pretty lakes (D)French windows

**24. What does 'barge into' mean, as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

(A)dig into Something fishy(B)to walk into a room quickly, without being invited

(C)deliberately trying to prove something (D)None of the above

**25. What was the plight of actors & actresses as in the chapter 'Poets & Pancakes'?**

(A)They had to face a lot of cosmetic issues as makeup quality was bad

(B)They had to bear too many lights on their face while getting ready in the make-up room

(C)They did not get high end brand dresses

(D)All of the above

#### **ANSWERS:-**

1. (B) story department 2. (A) Lawyer 3. (A) A logical & neutral man

4. (A) to host a group of international performers5. (A) Moral Rearmament Army

6. (D) Both (A) & (B) 7. (B) sunset and sunrise in a way inherited from 'Jotham Valley'

8. (B) Stephen Spondor 9. (B) Because of linguistic barriers10. (D) All of the above

11. (B) inside a cubicle12. (B) Because he was a born Brahmin13. (D) All of the above

14. (A) large amounts that could fill a truck15. (D) Both (A) & (B) 16. (D) Both (A) & (B)

17. (D) All of the above18. (B) Bengali19. (D) Maharashtrian 20. (D) Both (A) & (B) 21.

(D) All of the above22. (A) to close every pore on the surface of the face

23. (D) French windows24. (B) to walk into a room quickly, without being invited

25. (B) They had to bear too many lights on their face while getting ready in the make-up room

### Extract Based questions

*Read the extracts and answer the questions that follow.*

**1. ‘... This gang of nationally integrated make-up men could turn any decent-looking person into a hideous crimson-hued monster with the help of truck-loads of pancake and several other locally made potions and lotions ... ’**

**(a) What is implied by ‘gang of nationally integrated make-up men’?**

**Ans:** People in the make-up department were from different parts of the country.

**(b) What was the job of the make-up artists?**

**Ans:** Their job was to beautify the actors and make them look presentable.

**(c) Bring out the irony in these lines.**

**Ans:** The job was to beautify the actors but they turned any decent-looking person into a tedious monster because they overdid the make-up to make them look presentable in films.

**2. ‘.....On the days when there was a crowd-shooting, you could see him mixing his paint in a giant vessel and slapping it on the crowd players. The idea was to close every pore on the surface of the face in the process of applying make-up. He wasn’t exactly a ‘boy; he was in his early forties, having entered the studios years ago in the hope of becoming a star actor or a top screenwriter, director or lyrics writer. He was a bit of a poet ...’**

**(a) Who is the ‘him’ in these lines?**

**Ans:** ‘Him’ is the office boy. He was junior-most in the hierarchy of people in the make-up department.

**(b) What was his job?**

**Ans:** He had to put the make-up on the crowd players when a crowd scene was to be shot.

**(c) Why was he ‘a bit of a poet’?**

**Ans:** His ambitions of becoming a star actor or a top screenwriter, director or lyrics writer had been thwarted so the circumstances had turned him into a poet.

**3. ‘.....The “boy” in the make-up department had decided I should be enlightened on how great literary talent was being allowed to go waste in a department fit only for barbers and perverts. Soon I was praying for crowd shooting all the time. Nothing short of it could save me from his epics ... ’**

**(a) Who is the ‘I’? What was his job?**

**Ans:** He is the narrator/ writer. His job was to extract the relevant newspaper clippings and file them.

**(b) What did the ‘boy’ talk to him about?**

**Ans:** He told him how his ‘great literary talent’ was being allowed to go waste.

**(c) Why did ‘I’ wish for crowd shooting?**

**Ans:** That was the only time that the ‘boy’ was occupied and so the writer was saved from his lectures.

**4. ‘....He could look cheerful at all times even after having had a hand in a flop film. He always had worked for somebody—he could never do things on his own—but his sense of loyalty made him identify himself with his principal completely and turn his entire creativity to his principal’s advantage. He was tailor-made for films. Here was a man who could be inspired when commanded ...’**

**(a) Who is the person being talked about?**

**Ans:** Kothamangalam Subbu.

**(b) How was he viewed by the others employed in the studio?**

**Ans:** They were generally angry with him and blamed him for all their woes and humiliation.

**(c) What were the strengths that endeared him to his seniors?**

**Ans:** He was a Brahmin and had exposure to more affluent situations and people. He looked cheerful and was creative. Moreover, he could be inspired when required. He was loyal to his seniors and assisted them when they had a problem. He could suggest fourteen alternative ways of shooting a scene. He was also a great actor.

5. ‘... Often he looked alone and helpless—a man of cold logic in a crowd of dreamers—a neutral man in an assembly of Gandhiites and khadiites. Like so many of those who were close to The Boss, he was allowed to produce a film and though a lot of raw stock and pancake were used on it, not much came of the film. Then one day The Boss closed down the Story Department and this was perhaps the only instance in all human history where a lawyer lost his job because the poets were asked to go home ...’

(a) Who is the person being talked about?

**Ans:** The legal adviser is being talked about.

(b) Why was he a misfit in the studio?

**Ans:** Unlike the rest, he was logical, while the others were poets/dreamers. He wore a pant, coat, and a tie in an assembly of Gandhiites and khadiites.

(c) Why did he lose his job?

**Ans:** He lost his job because the Boss decided to close down the story department.

6. ‘.....A Communist was a godless man—he had no filial or conjugal love; he had no compunction about killing his parents or his children; he was always out to cause and spread unrest and violence among innocent and ignorant people. Such notions which prevailed everywhere else in South India at that time also, naturally, floated about vaguely among the khadi-clad poets of Gemini Studios. Evidence of it was soon forthcoming ...’

(a) What ideology did the people in the Gemini Studios align with?

**Ans:** Most of them wore khadi and worshipped Gandhiji but beyond that, they had not the faintest appreciation for the political thought of any kind.

(b) What did they think about Communism?

**Ans:** They felt that the Communist was a godless man with no love and was always out to cause and spread unrest and violence among innocent and ignorant people.

(c) What was the ‘evidence’?

**Ans:** Years later, it was found out that MRA was a kind of counter-movement to international Communism and the big bosses of Madras, like Mr Vasan, had played into their hands.

### Short Answer Type Questions (30 to 40 words)

1. What is the significance of the words ‘poet’ and ‘pancake’?

**Ans:** ‘Pancake’ was the brand name of the make-up material that Gemini Studios bought in large quantities. It was used as a make-up base for the actors shooting in the studio. Thus this chapter deals with the people working in Gemini Studios, most of them in the make-up department. The word ‘Poets’ comes from the fact that Gemini Studios was the favourite haunt of poets, who had influenced the thinking of the employees of the Studios. It was also visited by the English poet Stephen Spender.

2. What does the writer say about national integration in the Studio? (Imp.)

**Ans:** The writer says that the make-up department did not have people belonging to the same geographical region. It was first headed by a Bengali who was succeeded by a Maharashtrian who was assisted by a Dharwar Kannadiga, an Andhra, a Madras Indian Christian, an Anglo-Burmese and the usual local Tamils. All this shows that people from all over the country worked together. So, in a light-hearted manner, he refers to this as national integration.

3. Bring out the humour in the job done by the make-up men. (Imp.)

**Ans:** The writer says that the ‘gang’ (not group) of men from all corners could transform any decent-looking person into a repulsive crimson coloured fiend because of the enormous amount of make-up they used on the actor. The chief make-up man made the chief actors and actresses ugly. According to the writer, they used ‘truck-loads of pancake’. Other than the pancake, they used locally manufactured ‘potion and lotions’. He feels with so much make-up, they looked uglier than in real life. This was required to make them look acceptable in the movie.

#### **4. Why was the 'office boy' disgruntled in the Studios?**

**Ans:** The job of the 'office boy' was to paint the faces of the crowd on the days when there was an outdoor shooting. Such occasions in those days were rare as only 5 per cent of the film was shot outdoors. Moreover, he wasn't a 'boy' but a man in his early forties, who had joined the studios years ago in the hope of becoming a star actor or a top screenwriter, director or lyrics writer. He felt that his literary talent was being allowed to go waste in a department that was suitable only for 'barbers and perverts'.

#### **5. What was the writer's job? How was it viewed by the others in the Studio? (Imp.)**

**Ans:** The duty of Asokamitran in the Studios was to cut out relevant newspaper clippings on a wide variety of subjects and store them in files. People who saw him at work felt that he was doing next to nothing. They saw him sitting at his desk tearing up newspapers the whole day long. So anyone, who felt he should be given some occupation, would barge into his cubicle anytime and deliver an extended lecture. More often than not, it was the 'boy' in the make-up department who pushed his way in to enlighten him on how his great literary talent was being allowed to go waste in a department fit only for barbers and perverts.

#### **6. Why was the anger directed at Kothamangalam Subbu?**

**Ans:** According to the writer, whenever people are frustrated, their anger gets directed towards one person, openly or secretly. At Gemini Studios, this man was Kothamangalam Subbu. He had begun his career as a 'boy' in the make-up department. All were convinced that all their sorrow, humiliation, and neglect were due to him. Subbu was the No. 2 at the Studio and was a generous man. It could have been because he seemed so close and intimate with the Boss or because his general conduct resembled that of a flatterer. He was quick to say nice things about everyone.

#### **7. Subbu had made tremendous progress at the Studios. What does the writer feel about Subbu's talent? (Imp.)**

**Ans:** Subbu began as an office boy and had risen to the position of being No. 2 at Gemini Studios. It was even more commendable in his case as he began his career at a time when there was no firmly established film producing companies or studios.

Although he barely had any formal education, Subbu was cut-out for films. He could be inspired when desired. When asked by the producer, he would come up with ideas. He gave direction and definition to Gemini Studios. He was capable of higher forms of poetry but he purposely chose to address it to the masses. His success in films eclipsed his literary achievements. He was an amazing actor and whatever role he played, he performed better than the main players.

#### **8. Why was the legal adviser referred to as the 'opposite'? (Imp.)**

**Ans:** The lawyer was also officially known as the legal adviser, but everybody referred to him as the opposite because he did not give legal but illegal and destructive advice. He marred the career of an extremely talented actress. Once, when that actress threw a tantrum on the sets, the lawyer switched on the recording equipment and when she paused for breath he replayed it. It was an outburst against the producer. When she heard her voice again, she was struck dumb. A girl from the countryside, she never recovered from the terror she felt that day.

#### **9. How did the legal adviser look different from the rest in the department?**

**Ans:** While every other member of the department wore a khadi dhoti with a slightly oversized and clumsily tailored white khadi shirt, the legal adviser wore pants and a tie and sometimes a coat that looked like a coat of mail. As a consequence, often he looked alone and helpless. He was a man of logic in a crowd of dreamers; a dispassionate man in a group of Gandhiites and khadiites. Then the Boss closed down the Story Department and this was perhaps the only instance in all human history when a lawyer lost his job because the poets were asked to go home.

**10. What does the writer say about the political leanings of the people at Gemini Studios?**

**Ans:** Barring the office boys and a couple of clerks, everybody else at the Gemini Studios radiated leisure and was a lover of poetry. Most of them wore khadi and worshipped Gandhiji but beyond that, they had no political leanings at Gemini Studios. Since most of the employees were apolitical and worshipped Gandhiji, they wore khadi. However, all of them disliked the term 'Communism'. To them, a Communist was a godless man who had no love and could kill his own family. He was always out to cause and spread unrest and violence among innocent and ignorant people.

**11. What impact did Frank Buchman have on the Gemini Studios?**

**Ans:** When Frank Buchman's Moral Re-Armament army visited Madras, it was given a very warm welcome. They presented two plays most professionally. Their Jotham Valley and The Forgotten Factor ran several shows and the Gemini family saw the plays over and over again. The message of the plays was usually plain and simple, but the sets and costumes were first-rate. Madras and the Tamil drama community were so impressed that for some years, almost all Tamil plays had a scene in the style of Jotham Valley.

**12. What truth about the Moral Re-Armament army disillusioned the writer?**

**Ans:** Initially, when the writer saw the plays staged by the Moral Re-Armament army he was impressed by the message of the plays. Their sets and costumes were first-rate. Madras and the entire Tamil drama community were so impressed that for some years almost all Tamil plays had a scene in the style of Jotham Valley.

Years after the Moral Re-Armament army had come and gone, the writer learnt that it was a kind of counter-movement to international Communism and the big bosses of Madras, like Mr Vasan, had been led into believing them.

**13. Stephen Spender's visit to the Gemini Studios baffled one and all. Why? (Imp.)**

**Ans:** When the Gemini Studios prepared to welcome Stephen Spender, no one knew who he was. They tried guessing whether he was a poet or an editor. Certainly, he was not so well known that his fame had travelled to India from The Manchester Guardian or the London Times. When he arrived, the Boss introduced him but the speech was ambiguous. Then the poet spoke, which confused the audience even more. No one knew what he was talking about and his accent could not be understood. The poet, too, looked equally baffled.

**14. How did the writer discover Spender's identity?**

**Ans:** The writer read an announcement in The Hindu for a short story contest organized by a British periodical by the name 'The Encounter'. The writer wanted to get an idea of The Encounter before he sent his manuscript to England. So, he went to the British Council Library and saw copies of The Encounter almost untouched by readers. He read the editor's name. It was Stephen Spender. The name was familiar and he recalled that this was the man who had visited the Studios.

**15. How did the writer discover Spender's identity?**

**Ans:** When Gemini Studios prepared to welcome Spender, they did not have any clue about the identity of the visitor. All they knew was that he was a poet from England. However, he was not one of the poets from England that they had heard of. Later, they heard that he was an editor. But again, he wasn't the editor of any of the known British publications. When the gentleman arrived, the mystery of his identity deepened. He spoke but none understood because of the British accent.

Much later, when The Encounter, a relatively unknown periodical, announced a short story contest through The Hindu, the writer went to the British Council Library to find out more about the periodical. When he read the editor's name, it sounded familiar. It was the poet who had visited the Gemini Studios. His name was Stephen Spender.

## **HOTS QUESTIONS 100 -150 words each**

### **1. Describe the make-up department in Gemini Studios.**

**Ans:** The make-up department of Gemini Studios was on the upper floor of a building that was supposed to have been Robert Clive's stables. The make-up room had the look of its hair salon with lights at all angles around half a dozen huge mirrors. They were all glowing lights that made the place so warm that the person on whom make-up was being done, had to undergo a great deal of inconvenience. The make-up department had people from various parts of the country, who were adept at painting faces. The chain of command in the make-up department, distributed the duties of the employees, by their position in the hierarchy. The chief make-up man did the makeup for the main actors and actresses; his senior assistant worked on the second hero and heroine, the junior assistant on the main comedian, and so on. The players who played the crowd were the responsibility of the office boy, who was the junior-most.

### **2. The 'office boy' of the Gemini Studios was not as blessed as Subbu. Explain.**

**Ans:** In the make-up room, as per the hierarchy, the 'office boy' was the junior-most and hence, was responsible for the make-up of the players who played the crowd. He wasn't exactly a 'boy'; he was in his early forties and had entered the studios years ago in the hope of becoming a star actor or a top screenwriter, director, or lyrics writer. The 'boy' felt that his great literary talent was being allowed to go waste in a department fit only for barbers and perverts.

On the other hand, Subbu had risen to the position of No. 2 at Gemini Studios only by his being a Brahmin. He had joined the films as a make-up boy. He must have had to face more uncertain and difficult times because when he began his career, there was no well-established film producing companies or studios.

### **3. Write a brief character sketch of Kothamangalam Subbu.**

**Ans:** Kothamangalam Subbu was universally hated by all in the make-up department. He had a modest beginning as an office boy and had now reached to the position of No. 2 at Gemini Studios. He was a Brahmin and hence, had contacts with affluent people. He looked cheerful at all times. He could never do things on his own but his loyalty endeared him to the Boss. His creativity surfaced when commanded. He could come out with various alternatives for enacting a scene. He gave direction and definition to Gemini Studios during its golden years. Subbu was also a poet and capable of complex and higher forms of poetry but he purposely addressed it to the masses. His success in films overshadowed his literary achievements. He composed several 'story poems' and also wrote a novel, Thillana Mohanambal. He was an amazing actor and performed better than the main players. He loved people and his house was a permanent residence for guests. Despite this, he had enemies. It could be because he seemed so close to the Boss or because he seemed like a sycophant.

### **4. The Gemini Studios was the haunt of poets and it had its due effect on the employees of the Studios. justify. (Imp.)**

**Ans:** Gemini Studios was the favourite hang-out place of poets like S.D.S. Yogiar, Sangu Subramanyam, Krishna Sastry and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya. The employees wore a khadi dhoti with a clumsily tailored white khadi shirt. It was a crowd of dreamers and an assembly of Gandhites and khadiites. Then, Congress rule meant prohibition and most employees worshipped Gandhiji but beyond that, they had no admiration for the political thought of any kind. They disliked a Communist and to them, he was a godless man with no love. He could kill his parents or his children and he was always out to cause and spread unrest and violence among innocent and ignorant people. Such notions which prevailed everywhere else in South India at that time also, naturally, floated about vaguely among the khadi-clad poets of Gemini Studios.