

# The Long Black Key

By : **Juggernaut**

St. Anthony School was a place of conformity. To protect the school yard from roaming street cows and goats, wide shallow pit with metal grates were installed at the entrances. Stray animals wouldn't dare to walk pass the metal grate from fear of slipping. Even school children have trouble walking pass the metal grate since the space in between the steel bars were too wide. Large Poinciana trees with its bloom of bright red flowers lined the entrance to the school buildings. Another entrance led to a large church, a picture of serenity.



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Subba Rao

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In between the high school building and the grade school was a large playground. At the center of the ground, a humongous Banyan tree, perhaps over a hundred years old with huge roots as thick as small tree trunks, grown down from the branches into the ground providing enough space for children to play hide and seek. Since the school was in a close proximity to the ocean, the ground surface was loose brown sand making it difficult to walk let alone run on it.

There was a small courtyard in the center of the grade school with two or three concrete posts with a distinct purpose and drinking water pots.

Juggernaut attended the grade school at St. Anthony's. He didn't like it, particularly the morning Christian prayers. During the prayer, he kept his head down and lip synched the song and faked right through it.

During lunch break, some children played under the huge Banyan tree while others indulged in sword fights using dried long pods dropped on the ground from the Poinciana trees.

Father Gopi was the principal. The Father was a handsome man, tall with bald head. His skin was so fair, in his white garb he could be easily mistaken for a foreign missionary. In his white robe, Father Gopi did his morning rounds walking through every classroom, sometimes touching the head of a student with his palm as if giving some blessing. A large metal ring carrying several steel keys hung from his waist, the one that got the full attention of all the students was a long black steel key. Students were alert when Father Gopi was in the vicinity just from hearing the sound from the dangling keys like a wind chime.

Almost all the teachers at the school were Christians with names so different as if artificially made up. If it is Paul or David, one can understand, but the names were more colloquial and descriptive in nature like 'Daiva Sahayam.' Juggernaut understood the meaning of the name but couldn't comprehend that a person could have such a name.

Small statues of Jesus Christ were placed strategically in the school. After watching these statues on a regular basis, Juggernaut came to believe that Jesus was more a God person than Hindu Gods like Vishnu and Brahma, appeared unreal with more than two hands and heads, too much jewelry and unusual clothing, only look good in movies, particularly when portrayed by famous South India movie actor Ramarao. At home, a small statue of Jesus Christ crucified on a cross made of plaster of Paris was hung on the wall just above Gerard Gramophone, an automatic records changer that can play multiple records. Every time, Juggernaut played records on the gramophone, he felt that Jesus was looking down upon him. One day he locked himself in the room just looking at the Jesus for a long time hoping Jesus would manifest in front of him as a result of Juggernaut's intense concentration. As nothing happened and all the records in the stack were done playing

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automatically, he realized that just concentration and devotion do not make a difference whether it for Jesus or Krishna, though Jesus was more human like.

On some Mondays, Juggernaut felt like not going to school after lazy weekend, he played sick. When he presented a letter from his father to the teacher, for his absence. "Your father wrote the letter like a medical prescription, I could never figure it out you know," "all I understand from your father's writing was your name somewhere in it," said the teacher.

Almost every student in the school was scared of Peddamma or elder mother. She was a short, middle aged teacher, dark skinned with grey hair pulled back to make a small bun at the back of her head. In her hand was always a cane. If a teacher calls sick, his or her class students were sent to Peddamma's class, since she only could handle the extra load of students. Everybody in Juggernaut's class were terrified one day when their class teacher called sick, they all understood where they would spend the rest of the day.

For any violation, Peddamma will either cane the student or if the violation was significant, she will tie the student to the concrete poll outside in the courtyard for everybody to see and serve some lashes. It was terrifying to watch let alone experience it. During the class, Peddamma caught Juggernaut day dreaming and asked him to stand up. Scared to look at her, Juggernaut got up slowly. After a minute of watching him, she said "Are you the son of doctor so and so?" "Yes teacher," said Juggernaut. "Sit down and pay attention," said Peddamma. Everybody in the class was shocked; they all expected that Peddamma either hit Juggernaut with the cane or tie him up to the post outside. Juggernaut thanked Jesus for the break he received.

One day during school recess, Juggernaut and his friend were entertaining their class mates with sword fight using the long dried pods of Poinciana tree. All of a sudden, the students were scattered and ran away towards the classroom leaving Juggernaut stand still with sword like pod in the hand. He recognized that Father Naidu was behind him. Father Gopi appeared suddenly from nowhere like travelling sage Narada Maharshi in Hindu mythology, who was known to manifest himself at every critical juncture. Juggernaut stood in silence frightened only to receive a severe hit on the head from the tip of the long black steel key. He threw the sword and walked slowly towards the classroom rubbing his head to soothe the pain. Nobody knows which door the long black key opens at the school but everybody understood that it could hurt badly.

After five decades, Juggernaut went back to St. Anthony's just to look at his old school. The cab driver drove straight through the gate over the wide metal grate into the school yard. The school yard changed significantly, a new two-story grade school was built. The old school was in the process of demolition, the only small section remained intact was his old classroom. "Is it a miracle or what?" Juggernaut shouted loudly as the taxi driver looked puzzled and confused. Juggernaut walked pass the debris to reach the classroom with only two walls remaining. The dreaded concrete posts were gone and so as the Peddamma's classroom, the chamber of horrors. Across the play ground, the old Banyan tree was still standing, big.

Juggernaut requested the taxi driver to take a picture of him leaning on one of the remaining walls of the old class room. When the camera flashed, Juggernaut involuntarily touched the spot on his head, the landing site of the dreaded long black steel key, Father Gopi's choice weapon of punishment.

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