

Soda Ramana

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By : **Juggernaut**

A fictioanl character "Soda Ramana" was created based on childhood observations of a person selling soda pop in Allipuram area of Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh, India. Author



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Subba Rao

Ramana sold soda pop from a tiny shop alongside of an open sewer drain. The shop, just ten feet high was built with used metal sheets.

The soda shop was Ramana's full-time residence and business place. From a squatting position inside the shop, he sold all kinds of beverages, but mostly plain soda or carbonated water prepared on-site using a small hand operated soda making machine.

On the shop floor, the sodas were kept cold in wooden crates covered with blocks of ice wrapped in gunny bags, and rice husk to prevent ice from melting in perpetual south Indian hot weather.

A trap door on the floor functioned as the secret exit and entrance to the shop above. While sitting inside the shop doing business, Ramana kept the trap door open to keep an eye on the stuff below.

Besides sodas, he sold other sundry items such as cigarettes, bananas, soap and other toiletries. But, he was known for making and selling sodas on-site. People knew how strong the Ramana's soda was just by the popping sound it produced every time Ramana opened the soda bottle by pressing the ball stopper with force using a round-wooden opener to let the gas (carbon dioxide) out. The 'fizz' in the soda water that tickles the tongue made Ramana famous for his soda and earned him the nickname Soda Ramana. If the popping sound was feeble, he discarded it, and replaced with a better one to the customer to maintain his reputation.

Whenever the business was slow, he would jump to the floor through the trapdoor to make more sodas using a hand-operated soda machine. The machine is simple to operate with a wooden handle to rotate twelve soda bottles at a time. The empty soda bottles of varying shades of light green were first filled with tap water. Carbon dioxide gas was pumped from a small cylinder into the bottles, and the bottles were rotated upside down several times to charge the water with carbon dioxide gas, and pressurize the bottle to seal itself with glass marble inside. Unlike other soda makers, Ramana never shortchanged on the amount of gas per bottle to get maximum amount of 'fizz' in the soda water. He kept the soda bottles in invert position to keep the marble stopper wet, and prevent excess gas escaping the bottle thus maintaining its freshness. Ramana conducted the entire soda making operation like a step-wise scientific experiment. For him, the quality of soda he sold is a gauge of his personal reputation.

Besides plain soda, Ramana also sold flavored sodas such as ginger and lemon sodas. People suffering with common cold and sore throat preferred ginger soda, hoping it would cure. Drinking plain soda was a daily habit like drinking coffee in south India particularly among thirsty rickshaw-pullers; some drink to quench their thirst, and others as an aid for good digestion after a heavy meal.

The brisk business hours for selling sodas were generally when cinema shows were closed between 5 and 11 PM. The movie patrons on their way home would stop by soda shops for bananas, cigarettes, and a strong soda. Some people belch loudly after each gulp of soda, a sign of freshness of the soda pop, and a relief from accumulated unwanted gases in the stomach.

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For years, when Juggernaut was young he observed Ramana's daily chores from his house front porch. Not that he spent all the time watching him, but watching him over a period of time he concluded that Soda Ramana did chores mechanically as if he was programmed to carry out his chores at a certain time of the day.

Early in the morning before sunrise, Ramana would clean his teeth using forefinger as a toothbrush and dark-colored medicinal ash as cleansing powder. A wooden plank placed across the open sewer served him as multi-purpose washroom. Wrapped in loincloth, he would take a quick bath over the plank, wash his shorts and undershirt and hang them at the back of the shop to sun-dry. In dripping wet clothes, Ramana would turn to the east to face the rising sun for a short prayer. If he were to notice a passing cow, he would touch its butt with palm of his hand and then carefully draw his palm back to touch his forehead, as if he was receiving some kind of blessing from the sacred animal. Inside the shop, he would light-up few incense sticks to place near a picture of goddess Lakshmi, the Hindu deity known for improving business and providing wealth. This more or less concluded his daily morning prayer ritual.

Opening his shop was quick; he would unlock the front metal cover, and rested it opposite the wall next to the sewer drain. Then, he hung-up two large bunches of bananas, one at each end of the shop. Since he always slept in the shop, his soda machine, and other contents of the shop were secured against theft. He kept a long bamboo stick inside the shop to discourage wondering street cows from grabbing bananas using their long tongues. The wandering goats never bothered Ramana; in fact they kept the area around the shop clean by munching on waste papers, banana and orange peels. Once a week, either Friday or Saturday, both auspicious days for Hindus; he would donate a small amount to beggars. He was generous in that way but he did not like beggars bothering his customers. If they were persistent, he used his bamboo stick to drive them away.

He bought breakfast; rice pancakes or flat deep fried wheat bread called puri. He would shove them into his mouth hurriedly with coconut chutney, and potato curry to enhance the taste. He threw the large dry leaf in which the breakfast was packaged into the sewer drain and drank his coffee, a concoction of black coffee boiled with milk and sugar, a kind of sweet tasting coffee stew. A cheap, nearby street-side restaurant supplied lunch and dinner for him on a regular basis. The soda business provided enough profits to support his simple and inexpensive needs.

Ramana was middle aged around 55 years or so, short around five feet, bald headed with a nose that could only be compared to a small pickled cucumber. His face, shaved once or twice a week at a nearby barbershop gave an appearance of a man in perpetual somber mood. Tight lipped and somber faced, he sat in his semi-dark shop most of the time, nobody could identify him outside his shop or on the street. Many a times, Juggernaut failed to identify him outside his shop though he watched him for years. He always wore khaki short, and a white sleeveless undershirt that partially covered his pot belly. Very rarely, Juggernaut saw him wear anything different. The white canvas shoes, khaki shorts and white undershirt gave him the appearance of an off-duty cop. In his younger days, Ramana worked in reserve police force, a kind of police only called upon in emergencies like crowd control during national election campaigns and natural calamities. In any event, he never showed his attachment to his past profession either by talking about it or wearing his old uniform, except, he would salute in army style whenever he came face to face with Juggernaut's father, an ex-army official.

His family details were sketchy, neither women nor children came to his shop to see him. The only contact he had with a woman was a coolie (porter) woman who brought water from a nearby well in the morning to fill a large earthen container near the shop for making sodas and other uses. It was rumored that he had an illicit relation with her though they never went out openly.

Playing brackets was only activity Ramana indulged outside his soda business. A bracket was an illegal gambling racket run by Mafia based in Bombay, the commercial capital of India but syndicated throughout the country. A bracket is like lotto ticket, except when purchased, no tickets were issued, and the winning

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numbers (three numbers in a sequence) were announced neither on TV nor in the newspapers. People could bet on three numbers in sequence from zero to one hundred. Nobody in the country knew how the winning numbers were selected or who controlled it. Anybody can place a bet or buy brackets from street corner hooligans, and illicit liquor storeowners. The only attraction was, there is no minimum amount to place a bet. By chance, if somebody would win big, the vendor could disappear for good without paying the winning money. Playing brackets is poor man's gambling at a roadside casino. The actual excitement was anticipation for the winning numbers to arrive through word of mouth at early morning hours just after 1 AM. Rickshaw-pullers, coolies, and small soda shop owners like Ramana wait for the winning numbers at the street corners where they bought the brackets.

On some occasions Juggernaut saw Ramana examining cartoon strips in local newspapers with a hand-held magnifying glass for clues in his dimly lit shop. Numbers associated with or depicted anyway in a cartoon such as a character uttering few numbers, or fruits on ground below a mango tree or birds flying in the sky or peculiar shaped clouds in the sky depicting some odd shaped numbers, or finger or toes conspicuously shown on any cartoon character were considered as a clue for selecting winning bracket numbers. Between preparing and selling sodas, Ramana wasted no time for examining closely the cartoon strips for clues to gamble on brackets. For coolies, rickshaw-pullers and small shop owners, selecting numbers to play brackets was challenging; they needed some sort of divine help in form of cartoons rather than random numbers. When they lose money, which was very often, at least they have some thing to fallback on; their fate. After all the numbers they picked were from the sky above appeared in form of figurines in the newspapers.

One morning, Ramana did not open his shop, and that was the very first time his shop was not opened in the morning. Then, the shop was kept closed for three days in a row. Though Ramana's patrons went to other shops around to buy sodas, they were curious what happened to him.

Rumors were abound on Ramana's disappearance; some said that he ran away to escape debts, some thought he ran away with the coolie woman although she was spotted carrying water to other shops, the following day. Eventually one day the shop was reopened but with a new owner, a Muslim man from a neighboring state of Kerala.

The man from Kerala was dark skinned with well-greased curly hair. He wore a traditional dress, a striped wrap-around long cloth called lungi. Since it was hot inside the kiosk, he wore sleeveless undershirt. Juggernaut went to the soda shop to buy a banana, an excuse to find whereabouts of Ramana. The bad news was that Ramana pawned his shop to gamble on brackets with the entire money just to lose it all overnight.

The Kerala man removed the Hindu deity pictures and replaced with pictures of Mecca and Madina, the holy sites for Muslims. For some reason, he developed a liking towards Juggernaut and gave two bananas for the price of one. The new owner spoke with an accent since he was not originally from the local area.

Few years passed, all of a sudden Ramana re-appeared in the area making sodas using a small hand operated machine placed on the roadside since he had no shop. Juggernaut was so excited to see him, he told his parents several times that Soda Ramana was back. They never paid that much attention to him when he had his business in the past, and did not showed much enthusiasm now either. Juggernaut went running to Soda Ramana to buy a soda just to get his attention, and strike a conversation. But, he was as usual, in somber mood, he appeared as if he did not recognize Juggernaut. May be he was ashamed for selling sodas from roadside. During night times, he stored his soda machine and a small cylinder of soda gas at the nearby street corner restaurant.

That night, Juggernaut prayed goddess Lakshmi and Lord Vinayaka the god with the elephant-head to deliver confidence and bless Soda Ramana in his come-back attempt to re-establish his old soda business not that the Kerala man was a bad person. Somehow, Juggernaut never accepted misfortune even if it struck a distant

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acquaintance like Soda Ramana. Juggernaut wished that Ramana would buy back his old shop and starts selling sodas, and performs his daily rituals for juggernaut to see. But the Kerala man was fastidious in his work and improved the business by selling several varieties of flavored sodas with crown-cork seal that attracted more customers. Ramana had no chance to get back his business from the Kerala man. People slowly forgot about Ramana and his reputation for strong plain carbonated sodas, so he moved away from that area. Juggernaut saw Ramana a couple of times outside cinema theaters carrying a wooden crate on his shoulder, and yelling loudly to sell sodas. Juggernaut prayers to goddess Lakshmi and Lord Vinayaka did not bring back his business. â May be I was too emotionally involved by just watching him too long and him going down the tubes,â thought Juggernaut.

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