

Bethel Lodge

Bethel Lodge

By : Juggernaut

A trip to temple town 'Tirupathi' and later to Madras or Chennai, a metropolitan city with older cousin Laxman was an eye opener to young Juggernaut.



Published on
Booksie

booksie.com/Juggernaut

Copyright © Juggernaut, 2015
Publish your writing on Booksie.com.

Bethel Lodge

Bethel Lodge

Subba Rao

Visiting maternal uncle and grandmother in Hyderabad in summer was only vacation Juggernaut with siblings experienced each year away from their home. The carefree vacation lasted almost two months into summer each year since Juggernaut knows himself until he was in late teens. Unable to leave his medical practice for such a long time, Juggernaut's father joined his family only at the end of the vacation to bring his family back home. Over a period of time during the annual summer vacations, Juggernaut learned from his cousins how to ride a bicycle, fly a kite, and tasted meat and beer for the very first time and learned to understand local language of Urdu.

On occasions, Juggernaut visited his paternal uncle living in a nearby town on weekends. The trip was short, just over 30 miles; as the bus enters the small countryside town, the air was full of sweet sugarcane that predominate the fields on both sides of the road. In the small town known for producing sugar Juggernaut's uncle was well known doctor. He was as protective of his children as Juggernaut's father; nevertheless, Juggernaut enjoyed spending time with his cousins on weekend trips under the strict supervision of his uncle.

Unexpectedly, one day Juggernaut's father announced that Juggernaut with his older brother Srinivas were taking a trip with their cousin Laxman to Holy City - Tirupathi to visit Lord Venketeswara and then travel to nearby metropolitan city of Madras (now Chennai). Juggernaut was then in early teens and his brother Srinivas was 3 years older than him; cousin Laxman was 25 years older than both Srinivas and Juggernaut. Apparently Laxman was planning to make a pilgrimage to visit Lord Venketeswara and Juggernaut's father in spite of his over-protective tendencies trusted his nephew Laxman to take along his two young sons to the Holy place - Tirupathi.

Juggernaut and Srinivas were excited about the trip though were not sure about cousin Laxman; unlike with other cousins they never spent that much time with him. On occasions, Laxman visited his uncle particularly when he needed free medical care for his family. It was only on those occasions, Juggernaut and his older brother Srinivas met cousin Laxman. Armed with an aura of self confidence, Laxman spoke softly and on occasions burst into a loud laughter while listening to others.

Cousin Laxman was tall, fair skinned man in late thirties with wavy black hair covering his large forehead, and with sharp long nose and thin lips was handsome. He looked too urban for his wife from a village; she was known in the family for obedience and competent domestic duties. Laxman learned typewriter and shorthand writing skills from his father who owned and operated a small school to train students in shorthand and type writing to be employed as stenographers.

Laxman was a very lucky to be employed as a stenographer by an American oil refinery outside the town. He was very good in writing shorthand; while most Indian stenographers were good in Pitman system of shorthand, Laxman was also good in Gregg system of Shorthand preferred by the Americans that got him the Job with the American refinery. Laxman lived with his wife and young daughter in the company exclusive housing colony. The American housing colony, a gated community was clean and well kept; just outside the gates, the place was untidy and slum like. Laxman's young daughter was always well dressed like an American kid with long socks and boots, perhaps living among Americans, Laxman emolliated some of the American ways.

Bethel Lodge

It took a two-day train trip to reach the temple town Tirupathi; hundreds and thousands of pilgrims visit Tirupathi everyday to visit Lord Venkateswara, the God known for making the devotees' wishes come true; then there is this belief among the believers that the Lord demands the devotees' payback in kind whenever their wishes were fulfilled. This mutual satisfactory relation between the Devine and millions of believers grew into a multi-million dollar enterprises in the temple town. On annual basis, the temple takes in over hundred million dollars worth of donations from the devotees satisfied with the outcome of their wishes. The Temple spends much of it on the development projects around the temple for the convenience of the millions of devotees visiting each day from all corners of the country.

The temple authorities were flushed with so much money from the devotees, they provide free lodging and meals to all the visitors for a day or two. From several lodges, one can see the surrounding hills known to be seven around 3000 feet above sea level; on one of the hills was the main temple with the famous deity of Lord Venkateswara or called Balaji in short.

Laxman received a free room for two days in one of the lodges. The room has two wooden cots, a small table and two chairs. "Well, I forgot to pack a bar soap, Srinivas you go buy one at a nearby shop," said Laxman giving a small change to Srinivas.

When Juggernaut complained that the cots were too hard to sleep without mattress. "Well, remember you were not in your luxurious large home, you better used to sleep on these cots you know," Laxman was little harsh.

Then suddenly, Srinivas came running into the room screaming "a monkey jumped on me and stole the soap from my hand."

"What happened?" Laxman shouted.

"While walking back from the store, a large monkey from nowhere jumped on me and ran away with the soap."

"Don't you know this place was famous for monkeys, stealing things?" Laxman was mad at Srinivas. As usual Srinivas did not reply, only looked dejected.

"Then why don't you go and get yourself soap?" Juggernaut shouted back at Laxman.

Juggernaut and Srinivas went to bed that night without any other incident. Next day morning, the visit to the temple ended with long waiting for hours in the queue; the time spent inside the temple in front of the deity lasted only few minutes due to pushing and shoving of devotees. Any simple complaint of discomfort by Juggernaut was met with Laxman giving a long lecture on how his uncle spoiled his kids with too much luxury. "Because your father was a big doctor you live in luxury you know, many of your relatives do not live like you in big house and all that," Laxman behaved as if he has a gripe against his uncle, Juggernaut's father.

After two day train trip to the Temple town, endless waiting to get a free room and more waiting in the queue to get inside the temple for worship that lasted less than few minutes, the monkey incident reestablished a fact that no pilgrim leaves the temple town without being robbed by a temple monkey. Only Srinivas in our family had the honor of being robbed by a temple monkey. This could have one of the cherished landmarks in his life though he never expressed it openly.

On completing the temple visit, Laxman along with the youngsters took a train to Madras, a large city in neighboring state, known for big buildings and marvelous "Marina Beach". All the movies produced in

Bethel Lodge

South India were shot in Madras and so it was home for all the movie stars.

When the train reached the Central Railway Station in Madras, the platform was chaotic with porters carrying baggage on their head and some in their hands, It was confusing for Juggernaut and Srinivas to see such a large crowd speaking loud in a foreign language, and to avoid being lost in the crowd, they kept close to Laxman appeared bewildered for the first time. From the crowd, a silver haired old man, small in stature with a friendly face pushed himself towards Laxman and started talking in familiar language as if he knows him well; â You folks from Andhra Pradesh, welcome to the Big City, if you are looking for a safe and cheap place to stay I will take you there in a bus, it takes just over few minutes only,â the old man was very friendly and took the bag from Juggernautâs hand in a friendly gesture as if helping the young one. Appeared relieved from moments of uncertainty, without asking any questions, Laxman followed the old man to the outside the railway station; followed closely by Juggernaut and Srinivas.

The old man was talking as if he knows Laxman for a long time; the bus stopped in front of a small hotel on a busy street. A large sign board on the hotel building read â Bethel Lodge.â It was a two story building on a busy main road. As quickly as he met at the railway station, the old man disappeared after introducing to somebody at the front desk. Laxman paid for a single room for two nights stay.

The room was on the second floor; there was a small courtyard in the center of the hotel that opened to the outside into the backyard, and the rooms were all around in the rectangle shaped building on two floors. The steps to the first floor were steep and dark with musty odor. While walking towards the room, people inside the rented rooms with doors open were arguing loud while playing cards or some betting game of some sort.

The designated room for Laxman was small with two narrow beds with thin mattress and a wooden table with one chair. On the table were a black telephone and a thick telephone book. Laxman ordered room service for lunch from nearby restaurant, while waiting for lunch Juggernaut and Srinivas fell asleep and only get up to see very little food Laxman left for them. The noise from the next room was very loud as if some sort of fighting taking place between angry men. Laxman was irritated for the nuisance and started cursing the old man for bringing to a bad place. â I am going to talk to them to be quiet otherwise we couldnât sleep tonight,â muttered Laxman getting to leave the room.â

â Are you sure you want to talk to them, they sound pretty scary,â Juggernaut expressed fear.

â I am telling, you both behave like sissies, I blame my uncle for this,â Laxman left the room to calm down the rowdy behavior next door only to come back running into room to shut the door closed and started dialing the front desk for help with no response. Then, few men shouting obscenities started banging the door to open it up to confront Laxman physically. Juggernaut and Srinivas went hiding below the cots and Laxman dialing another telephone number and stated talking to somebody introducing himself as an old friend begging him to come to hotel to rescue. After brief scary moments, the banging on the door stopped though the noise in the next room was still loud and disturbing.

After few anxious hours of waiting, somebody knocked the door softly and identified with a name that Laxman identified to open the door slowly to let the man enter and closed the door immediately after him. The man was lanky, with brown skin and thick glasses with friendly face. The dark thin mustache above his thin lips looked artificial and comic like.

After exchanging pleasantries with his friend whom he met after several years, Laxman said â we were duped into renting at this unsafe hotel by an unscrupulous broker met at the station talking in our native language.â

Bethel Lodge

“ In big cities like Madras you have to be careful with strangers otherwise you will get into more serious troubles than renting a hotel room in a rundown gambling hotel like this,” said his friend in a sympathetic voice.

“ I am wondering if you could accommodate us at your place for two nights since we cannot stay at this place any longer and I have already paid for the hotel,” Laxman sounded sad.

“ Well, my wife was away for a short visit to her parents and I live in a small rented space, a cheap accommodation since I cannot afford a better place in this expensive city, but for you, an old friend from my native town, I can share for two nights,” his friend was very kind.

Laxman followed by Juggernaut and Srinivas travelled on a bus with his friend to his place. Juggernaut never saw people living in a place like that before; a small part of an open space on a flat roof top of a concrete house was converted into living quarters by putting up a tin roof. The covered space was divided into a large room, small kitchen area and bathroom. Laxman was very happy to drop the bags on the floor and sat on the bed with pure satisfaction of safety under the tin roof on top of a building terrace. The tin-roof place was very hot for Juggernaut and Srinivas; they wandered around the terrace roof looking around several potted plants along the walls of the terrace. At least, the place was safe from noisy and violent crowd at Bethel Lodge.

Laxman took Juggernaut and Srinivas on a bus to see the tallest building in the City Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) building on Mount Road, one of the main thoroughfares. The building was so tall, Juggernaut and Srinivas has to walk across the street to get a good look at the top floor. After counting the total number of floors several times, they could not agree on the exact number of total floors. Then, they saw a postcard with LIC building at a street vendor. Juggernaut begged Laxman to buy the card so they can count the floors on the post card picture. After counting carefully the number of floors in the building on the postcard and again the real building, they came to a conclusion the building has 14 or 17 stories, the tallest building they ever say in their life. The next stop was Parris Corner a busy intersection of several cross roads with huge building that housed the High Court. Lastly, in the evening they visited the Marina Beach. “ The beach in our town is better than this,” said Juggernaut. “ This is the world famous Marina Beach,” “ you cannot compare beach in our town;” Laxman dismissed Juggernaut’s comments and walked up and down on the beach though it was hot followed by Juggernaut and Srinivas.

On the last day in Madras, Laxman went on shopping spree buying all kinds of gifts to his wife and young daughter. This became a tiring chore for Juggernaut and Srinivas, as the bags and the small boxes piled upon them to carry as Laxman visiting shop after shop. Then it started raining; when it rains, it pours in Madras; the rain was intense downpour turning the streets into streams with water standing two-feet high on the street. With bags and boxes piled high in both hands, Juggernaut couldn’t take anymore, so he dropped a box in the water to get Laxman’s attention. Laxman noticing one of the gift boxes dropped into the water, jumped forward to pick it up and screamed at Juggernaut to be careful with his gift boxes. Again, he blamed his uncle; Juggernaut’s father for poor upbringing of Juggernaut and Srinivas.

Laxman expressed his gratitude to his friend from his childhood for giving shelter for two days in difficult situation before leaving for home.

“ You both don’t mention to your father about Bethel Lodge incident,” “ if my uncle knows that I foolishly put you both at danger, he will kill me, you hear,” Laxman begged Juggernaut and Srinivas.

“ How about monkey incident in Tirupathi?” inquired Juggernaut.

Bethel Lodge

“ You can tell monkey story, your father likes animal stories,” Laxman was more comfortable with the monkey story.

Laxman continued his good relation with his uncle, visiting often more so for free medical care than anything else. Either Juggernaut or Srinivas never mentioned their father what happened in Madras at “ Bethel Lodge.” . They did tell him about monkey stealing soap from Srinivas hand, which he asked to repeat several times to his amusement.

Several decades after “ Bethel Lodge” experience, in his rare trips to his native land, Juggernaut met his cousin Laxman, now retired from operating his own stenographer training school inherited from his father. Totally bald with hearing totally shot and vision declining, Laxman appeared like a ghost of himself.

“ Do you remember “ Bethel Lodge” shouted Juggernaut into Laxman’s ear since he was totally deaf now. He didn’t get it at the first instance. Juggernaut shouted again with his mouth close to his ear “ Bethel Lodge in Madras.” Laxman smiled with his mouth wide opened with several teeth missing and shook his head. “ Have you met your old friend from Madras again? Juggernaut was curious. Laxman shook his head sideways and made a hand signal to say no. “ I am sorry I dropped your gifts in the rainwater on the street in Madras,” Juggernaut expressed sorrow belatedly well over 5 decades. Laxman waived his hand dismissing it as a minor event and gave a big affectionate hug to Juggernaut. “ I have an axe to grind against your father then but could never confront him directly, foolishly I took it upon you and Srinivas, I am sorry,” he murmured into Juggernaut’s ears.

Some years ago, on checking into a room with family on a vacation to New York City, a hotel near “ Times Square” with daily rate above \$350 with view from single window was concrete buildings only few inches away brought back memories of “ Bethel Lodge” in Madras with window so close to the neighboring building. At least, for the price paid for the hotel in New York, the hotel was safe.

Bethel Lodge

Created from Booksie.com

Generated: 2015-02-01 13:19:32