

FICTION

The Tiffin Carrier Man

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The Tiffin Carrier Man arrived around noon. You could not set your watch or be sure of the exact time he arrived, but the noise of his arrival, the clanging of the metal food carriers and the way he pushed open the gate to the office, announced that the lunch hour was near.

In the office, Muthukannu and the other clerks sitting huddled over their desks, become restive, stirred by the noise and the hunger-arousing aroma of freshly cooked food flowing out of the tiffin boxes. Their eyes turn furtively to the clock hanging over the Chief Clerk's table. The Chief Clerk, sitting on a raised platform with a view of the whole office, scrapes his chair on the floor in warning. Not time yet, not time yet for lunch.

The lunch hour divided the working day, it was a respite from the tedious hours spent posting on stock cards the movement of supplies between a multitude of branches and divisions that made up the organisation. The one hour away from the desk was a liberation from tedium and not just a time for sustenance or the exercise of an employment right.

It was the Sixties. Not everyone had their lunch in the office canteen. In those days, for Muthukannu and others like him, the home was where the food was cooked. Eating in a shop food that was cooked by strangers went against their beliefs and rituals about cooking and eating. How would you know who cooked the food, what utensils were used, and what hands had touched the food that you put into your mouth? The Tiffin Carrier service was the answer to their needs. Food cooked in their homes was sent in tiffin carriers to their workplace.

There is no better contraption to transport food over distances without the food spilling. When travelling, the tiffin carrier is a larder in the hands of the traveller. It is a simple design that stacks several deep trays, one on top of another and held together by a steel frame that also serves as a handle. Each tray in the carrier contained a different part of a full lunch; the rice in the bottom tray, over it, the tray with the curry, then the vegetables, and above that, the condiments, and the fries. The Tiffin Carrier man collected the carriers from the homes, placed them in a large basket attached to the back of his bicycle and delivered it to the office in time for lunch. With the delivery,

as part of the service the purveyor of the lunch also supplied a rolled-up banana leaf with each tiffin carrier, which became the disposable plate on which the tiffin was eaten.

There was a time when office workers went home for their lunch, had their meal, and got back to work before the end of the lunch hour. There were office buses that ferried the workers to and from their workplace. For those choosing to stay in the office, but still only wanted home-cooked food, there was no choice but to either bring their lunch with them when they came to work or had it delivered by the Tiffin Carrier Man.

Muthukannu and others like him were a diminishing group even in the Sixties. Workplaces and homes were getting further apart. The new phenomenon of the rush hour at noon made it impossible for a worker to go home and return to the office in the one hour given for lunch. Office buses disappeared. Traffic jams and an expanding city with receding suburbs, marooned people in their workplace during the lunch hour. Taboos about eating outside the home were slowly eroded and replaced by the growth of a lunchtime fetish of eating in public eateries.

At the time of the events narrated here, only three tiffin carriers were delivered to the office where Muthukannu worked. They were always delivered promptly before the lunch hour. Most of the other twenty or so people who worked there, ate at the office canteen where Gomul Naidu cooked breakfast and lunch and rustled up a variety of snacks for tea. There was a rumour once spread that Gomul Naidu was a night-soil carrier by night and the canteen was his second job. When someone asked him if this was true, Gomul Naidu threw a whole ladleful of cooked cabbage on the man's face. "Next time you ask me that question, I will throw on your face, not cabbage, but that which you say I carry in the night", Gomul Naidu warned. There was an inquiry into the altercation, but Gomul Naidu got off with just a warning. The rumour, however, remained as a caution to those who ate from shops.

Another incident that happened around that time continued to be whispered in the office for years after the end of the era of the Tiffin Carrier Man. As with all such incidents, there were several versions of what happened, but one fact that was common to all, was that on one afternoon, the Tiffin Carrier Man delivered not one but two tiffin carriers to Muthukannu.

Others sitting in the canteen having their lunch noticed the two carriers on the table where Muthukannu sat. Oblivious to the stares, Muthukannu simply served himself from both boxes and then invited one of the Office Boys to share the food with him. Every working day after that,

Muthukannu received two tiffin carriers for lunch and it became his practice every day to share his food with one or both of the Office Boys who worked in his office.

There was of course much speculation among the other staff about why one man received two lunch boxes. Muthukannu did not bother to explain anything. The boxes arrived without fail every day, and every day Muthukannu shared their contents with the Office Boys. He offered no explanation to anyone, including the boys, about why he received two sets of lunch. The boys were smart enough to not let their curiosity get the better of a good home-cooked lunch.

Muthukannu was not a gregarious fellow. He had few friends and it was unlikely that he would confide with anyone on the matter. Pillay, one of the older clerks, who was in charge of the staff files, said that Muthukannu had told him that the second daily lunch was from his mother. Whether or not Pillay was to be believed, his explanation had a ring of possibility about it. Two years before the event, Muthukannu had married a girl of his mother's choice but the marriage had been a disappointment to the mother. The girl she had chosen for her son apparently had her own mind about marriage and life in general. When things got bad between the two women, Muthukannu's wife, against the conventions of the community, insisted on moving out of his mother's house and setting up home with her husband. In the absence of a more convincing explanation, people were content to assume that the second box was the mother's way of holding on to her son.

As the days passed, interest in the two tiffin carriers ebbed; no one noticed or was interested in the anomaly anymore. The office boys made it their habit to claim the second box, ate whatever there was in it, cleaned it and had it ready for collection at the end of the day.

Muthukannu continued to remain aloof from his colleagues. He had no interest in getting close to the others in the office. If he spoke to any of them at all, it was only about matters that concerned work. He was sociable enough to take pains to attend office functions, and to eat with the others whenever a festival was celebrated in the office. And when it was his birthday, he dutifully bought chicken pies for his colleagues from a posh western restaurant in town, a tradition that was observed by the others on their own birthdays. Such social exchanges were, however, only gestures without any deeper significance.

In all the years that he was employed in the office, only once did Muthukannu speak about matters that did not concern his work in the office. This happened at a forum organised by the employees' union on a proposed new law to make all marriages in the country monogamous. The

law as it stood at that time recognised a man's right to marry more than one spouse if it was permitted by the customs of his community or religion. The new law was to change all that. A married man would be prohibited by law from taking another wife while the earlier marriage subsisted. If he married against the law, the second wife would be denied any rights to the pension derived from the man after his death. Muthukannu spoke with great passion about the unfairness of the changes that were being proposed. How can the law determine who a man's wife is, he asked? How can the law choose one only if a man had other wives? Who is the law protecting and who is it punishing? What business is it of the law to peer into such personal matters as marriage, he demanded. Those who heard Muthukannu at the meeting were astonished, not by what he had said, but the force and eloquence of his speech. He was cheered widely after his speech, but before his colleagues could talk to him about his oratory, he had slipped out of the hall where the meeting was held. The new law was eventually passed. It became an offence to take a second wife during the tenure of the first.

The people in the office changed over the years. Some were transferred to other offices; others were promoted to new positions; some died and some retired. New employees, young men and women with a Senior Cambridge School Certificate, took over their positions. The office building was demolished and a new one erected that had many floors and several lifts. The office of the posting clerks was moved to one of the many floors in a new building. A new canteen was established on the top floor of the new building. Time passed. The Tiffin Carrier Man not only disappeared, but was forgotten altogether.

Many years later, Muthukannu's death was announced in the back pages of the newspaper where the obituaries are usually published. There were, in fact, two announcements of his death appearing on the same page. The details of the message in both announcements were the same; the name of the deceased, the date of his demise, the office where he had worked and retired from and the far away country where he lived his last years, these were all the same. What was different in the two announcements were the names of the widow and the children.