



Domain of the Devil – A Satire on Indian Publishing

By BS Murthy

When at length, Suresh was finding his moorings at Tihar; Subba Rau was brought in to a near stampede there. Why not, the whole nation knew him by then as the man who had pricked at the Premier's face. When Suresh enquired what the fuss was all about, Rau said it was but a 'literary coup'. Probed by Suresh for an account, Rau unfolded the story of his life and times as an unpublished writer.

In his mid-forties, Rau was seized with an urge to bring himself onto the fictional stage. So to lend scope for his boundless creativity, he chose the vastness of the 'novel' as the setting. And for the medium of expression, he bypassed his mother tongue, Telugu, the Italian of the East. Instead, he chose English not only for its ability to nuance the complexities of life but also for the flair of expression he had in it. Drawing from his examined life, he set out to portray a young woman's life on the male canvas of India.

Ironically, it was his love for language that impeded the start, but soon enough he got his poetic prose right for the narrative in mind. With his creativity in command over the unique plot he conceived, he wrote with gusto and had his dream novel for his debut in nine months flat. After toiling for a while, for that 'apart title', he pitched in for 'Tangent of Fate'. Then, with a top-of-the-world feeling, he dispatched the manuscript to a leading publisher in New Delhi. While he took the publisher for granted, he received his manuscript post-haste. And that made him see the irony of the title he had chosen for his novel!

This bolt from the blue shook Rau to the core, and he came to doubt his abilities as a novelist. Thus, holding the manuscript, as one would his dead child, he had a last look at it, as the father would, before the burial. But seeing it as crisp on its return as it was when he had posted it, he felt cheated. As he realized that none at the publisher's end had an open mind, he saw the rejection letter all again. He felt sad at the ungracious averment of unsuitability on the designer letterhead.

Impulsively, he felt like resubmitting the manuscript with a rejoinder that the concerned editor could take her own time to read and reject it, if it were a must. But, on second thoughts, he realized

that it would be treated as sour grapes, and thus kept his own counsel. Anyway, he tried his luck with other Delhi publishers, this time, all at a time. To his distress, it was like the quote of a cartel: Read your manuscript with interest but found it unsuitable for our publication.

As a last resort, in what was a reverse phenomenon, he looked Westward for salvation, only to be informed that unsolicited souls wouldn't be baptized there. Though he felt it was cruel, he thought it was an honest averment nevertheless. Could it be the unstated policy of the Delhi operatives as well, he suspected, but, couched by the pretentious unsuitability labels!

To get a feel of the publishing scene back home, he pored over the periodicals and the newspaper supplements in right earnest. What amused as well as frustrated him was that while some publicized the published titles to the hilt, the others debunked them as junk in the reviews. Taking the reviewers seriously, he forwarded his manuscript to them, indicating that it had all the ingredients they believed a novel should have in it. And as none of them responded, he wondered whether the critics were more interested in condemning a work than commending any.

And, to find the pulse of the Indian writing in English, he picked up some of the well-hyped novels. As he scanned through them one by one, he was amused to find the two basic features of the published kind: if it was not a case of the Western characters on the Indian stage, then it must be the Indian Diaspora in the Western setting. It appeared to him as though writing about the Indians in India was passé for the publishing world.

In that he saw a literary conspiracy — inducing Indian writers in English into churning out self-deprecating stuff to cater to the prejudices of the Western readers. Well, the aspiring authors too went along to provide vicarious pleasure to the Western readers by negating India. That was why, realized Rau, the tent of the Indian novel in English laid with the worn-out Western pegs in the loose native soil came flat at the whimper of a scrutiny. When it came to the Diaspora produce, it was the wont of the Western media to launch it in India in the haze of publicity to dazzle one and all. Well, but, for a novel to impact its readers, it must be the soulful tale of a people steeped in their native soil, isn't it?

But then, why the guys should go to such lengths after all? Well, wouldn't have they sensed the potential of the myriad hues of Indian life to shape fascinating pictures of fictional world? What if, in time, some Mahabharata-like creativity resurged in Indian writing in English? Would not the emerging Indian enterprise commercialize it by inundating Western markets? If that were to happen, wouldn't the public there lap up the same and give up on the Western pulp fiction?

So, reckoned Rau, the Western publishers had set up shop here to avert that eventuality. And the tactic employed by them was to encourage hybrid fiction through publication and dissuade the genuine novel by its rejection. Understandably, Indian writers fell into the trap and began inking hotchpotch on the Western dotted lines. Moreover, to ensure that none deviated from the set course, the publishers had seen to it that the shape they gave it became the norm of the Indian novel. This they could achieve by picturing in the local media that the Indian writing in English was making waves everywhere in the West. Yet, taking no chances, they would keep the bait dangling by doling out hefty advance, on and off, to an odd insider to keep up the farce. It was thus that, the vested interests of the West managed to nip in the bud the genuine Indian novel in English, and averted its challenge to their commercial writing.

However, raising Rau's hopes, as some literary luminaries projected themselves as Man Fridays of the budding authors; he became expectant and felt the world of writing was not all that rough. But when they too cold-shouldered him, he realized that they were only at self-image building, knowing fully well that someone calling their bluff was remote enough. Thus, he realized that the media was but a manifestation of the make-believe at its best. Nevertheless, he philosophized that all could be expected to be busy, getting on with their lives, besides pursuing their own interests. He felt at length that it would be a futile exercise on his part to seek help from any quarter.

Just the same, the irony of the writers' plight pained him. While the 'hard to please' editors reduced the aspirants to the ranks of unpublished writers, the 'harder to amuse' reviewers seemed to wait in the wings to turn the published ones into failed authors! Anyway, while tending to debunk the book on hand, Rau had observed that most of the reviewers aired their grandiose views on the

book's topic or tried to exhibit their profound scholarship and/or both. It was as if the book under review provided a stage for their literary exhibitionism!

What distressed Rau most about the reviewers though was the tendency of some to wonder why the book was written at all! And it was in the advice of the reviewers that the author should cease writing that he saw the hand of cruelty in the world of letters. He wondered why they wouldn't realize that their advice was inimical to their own interests, for without books, where would be the need for reviewers? Wasn't there a felt need for the prevention of cruelty towards the writers? Above all, the publishers and the reviewers alike appeared unconcerned about the hapless readers for whose sake the show was supposedly run.

It was then that he turned to God in desperation. As though addressing his prayers, He appeared in his dream and expressed His helplessness. God said that as publishing was in the devil's domain, there was nothing that He could do to help his cause. Thus, abandoning his further forays into the publishing world, he decided that if he were ever to write again, it would only be for the pleasure of writing, never mind the publishing.

When he could put his bitterness behind, his muse moved him all again. Weaving a story in an intricate plot, he completed his second novel in double quick time. It was as if his bottled up creativity was too eager to find its way out. Naming it as the 'Consigned Conscience', he nevertheless sent the manuscript to all the *Delhi-wallahs* at one go, though with a sense of resignation. And as another subject with a new dimension infused his urge to write, he plunged himself into his third novel.

As he was in the thick of action by the time the expected rejections arrived, they failed to dampen his spirit. And, one publisher's missive that the theme was interesting but they wouldn't be interested in publishing the same amused him as well. And that made him wonder as to how to write a theme-less wonder for their approval, that was, if they were serious!

When in time, he completed his third novel; he realized that he was back to the reality of life. By then, however, he realized that to be published, one needed either a reference or a recognizable name. As he knew none who ever stepped into the corridors of a publishing house, he thought, before submitting his fresh manuscript, it was an idea to make a name for himself.

Realizing that in the media world, the divider between notoriety and fame was rather thin, he wanted to turn notorious to help the cause of his writing. So he came to New Delhi, to be a part of the crowd that greeted the Prime Minister on his birthday. With a rose with thorns in his hand, he had no problem with the security personnel there. It was thus, he found himself in the queue and waited for his moment. And when the Prime Minister came near him, he pricked at his face with that rose of thorns. When the security detained him for wrongful assault, the media picked up the story to splash it on the front pages.

And that gave him the much-wanted name, didn't it? Even before he could grasp the import of his notoriety, every publisher in Delhi approached him to commission him into writing 'Why I pricked at the PM's face!' Though vindicated, he experienced the problems of plenty as all pressurized him to sign for them. But, for sentimental reasons, he opted to write for that book house, reading whose publications helped him mature into a writer. Though he wrote his three novels at breakneck speed for they carried conviction, he found himself struggling to put a sentence in place for the commissioned work.

When in the end, Suresh wanted to know how he believed his rejected works were worth their effort, Rau said that it was a good question, and mulled over for an answer.

"If only you know," said Rau, "why a hand-to-mouth someone, neglecting his means of survival, wrote ten hours a day for years on, that would answer your question. But as that is too abstract to carry conviction, let me draw your focus on my body of work. Well, all my novels were products of original ideas from the plot downwards. Good or bad that makes them works of art. After all, what is a novel but a creative idea that ever holds in the context? Besides, the beauty of fiction in part is that it tends to lead towards the fact."

"Why did you write the second and third novels when there were no takers for the first one?"

"In its essence, writing is primarily an art of self-expression," said Rau. "And about novel writing, didn't Jane Austin say that 'in a novel the greatest faculties of human mind are on display.' Only after handling a couple or more themes would a novelist come to know about the true capacity of his creative mind. Besides, of what worth is a novelist if he fails to make each of his work unique in itself. But, the bane of the modern world of letters is that many are writing though they have no business to write. But with so many imitating the existing, or writing out of the libraries, there is a surfeit of pseudo fiction. But, a novel is the brainchild of imagination and not a hotchpotch of all that's known. And it is this narrative routine that makes the genuine readers skeptical about the novels in general. And that's how the classic novel and the genuine novelists have come to grief alike."

Finally, Suresh wanted to know how Rau handled the failures.

"The beauty of the endeavor obliterates the ugliness of the rejection," said Rau. "As I was ever engaged in trying, I had no time to masticate my failures."

"All said and done," said Suresh, "what sense does it made of being a writer?"

"If anything," said Rau, "writing a book is like planting a seed. And if it gets published, it's like the sprouting of a plant. If not, it's a lonely furrow in a no-man's land. Like the gardener tends the plant into a tree, it's the readers who help the book grow in stature. Blessed are the authors who would be able to live long enough to smell that their readers savored the fruits of their creativity. Oh, how that affords such the emotional fulfillment associated with original writing and the ego gratification that applause accords! And in spite of the media hype to the hilt, I'm not sure if all the writer-celebrities derive the emotional fulfillment associated with creative writing. Whatever, in my case, the pain of rejection made me immune to frustration."

After having heard Rau, Suresh felt that in the world of letters, the published and the unpublished writers, being free, were alike condemned.

This is the eponymous chapter in the author's second novel, *Jewel-less Crown: Saga of Life, a free ebook in the public domain*.