*Storytelling. Project 2. Get personal*

**My Satyamangalam elephants**

How many of us remember Veerappan, the dreaded bandit?

Remember the time he held for ransom matinée idol Raj Kumar in his Satyamangalam hideout?. That was the time, twenty of us landed in the same Satyamangalam forest, for an outbound training, said to be good for office goers, to exercise their unused muscles and minds. We were two in a tent that hardly barred the night’s cold or the sounds, of elephants roaming, romping, chomping, outside our camp. In the days that followed, I was to come face to face with a few huge elephants in the room I had failed to notice until then!

Good morning TMoD, fellow Toast Masters and ever welcome guests,

I remember Day one, which was great for me!. I was the fastest in rope walking and rappelling, though both were new experiences for me and I was the oldest in the pack. I felt like a born leader leading by example. I felt like He man.

My troubles began when I had a professional tiff with Srinivasan, our Chief Trainer. A short man in his mid-60s, he was an ex SBI hand. Myself an ex- Bank officer, I wasn’t impressed one bit. After dinner on day one, he addressed us. After introductions, he started bad mouthing our company. “The writing on the wall is clear for your company”, he thundered like a prophet of doom. The He-man and the ultra loyal employee in me was provoked. I led the defence of my Company. As the Communications head, I had the facts to rebut. As the only DGM I was also the senior most. However, Srinivasan had the last word. He was the boss. He silenced the challenger, in true jungle style.

There on, I sensed something odd. There was a coldness from the group. Palpable when we played this game where one person stands in the middle, four around him and he has to fall in any direction and someone would catch him. Many rounds passed and I found nobody was falling in my direction. No one wanted to be seen to be close to me even in a game. I felt bad. I felt let down by the team.

The next day, we went on a forest walk, each carrying a pole. We were shown scratch marks on trees, made by resident leopards. We also saw steaming elephant dung which meant the mobile factories that produced those cakes were not very far from us. We felt as if we were being watched!

We hit the narrow trail, in single file. Some of us were gagged. As an experienced husband, I could take that. After a while, I was blindfolded. I liked the challenge of feeling the terrain with the pole, to find my way. Then I felt the pole being snatched from my hands. I didn't let go. I opened my eyes: Srinivasan

“Give me the pole”.

“Why?” Why single me out? No one else is both gagged and blindfolded and the pole taken away”.

“Give me the pole, otherwise, you can’t come with us. You can stay back”

What?

PAUSE. I was bristling with rage. Unfairly targeting me. Belittling me in front of my juniors… Ever protective of my rights and my independence, I had it with him. Yet, I had to give up my pride and the pole, than face the jungle residents.

I was led by someone who was not gagged or blindfolded. I felt deeply humiliated, like a king defeated, taken prisoner and blindfolded, in the midst of friends who seemed not to care.

At the end of the walk, I caught up with Srinivasan and told him, “Look, this is not fair”. Srinivasan put his hand on my shoulder and said softly, “Thomas, Cool down! Everything is not always fair. It is not a perfect world” and walked on.

PAUSE. It is not a perfect world. It took me 50 years to see that huge elephant in the room, the obvious truth, the no brainer. The trouble is, spoilt by good bosses and an honest work place, we come to expect mathematical accuracy and fairness from life. We expect a perfect world. That knock on my head from Srinivasan woke me up from my pure idealism.

My second learning. Don’t judge a book by its cover. Let me explain. Srinivasan was the most unlikely messenger of such a profound message. Srinivasan’s droopy diction, his greying mop of hair, his ungainly paunch and ill-fitting round neck inner wear pretending to be a T shirt – all this didn't fit my templates for a psychologist. How biased I was to judge him just by his looks!

Lastly, Srinivasan delivered a specially devised and enacted message for me the He man, proud of my physical and mental prowess. The message was this: however smart we are, we are all interdependent.

Three elephants in the room, meaning three obvious truths, I had failed to notice in 50 years! At Satyamangalam, I came face-to-face with them in a way I will never forget the rest of my life.