

MUGLI

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A tallish man in his 40's sitting on the little shadow of a makeshift shelter had his wrinkled eyes fixed on a distant piece of cloud high above the Arabian Desert. The man placed his weathered hand above his black dry eyes, used mainly to keep watch on goats, to examine whether that exceptionally rare piece of cloud was able to soak the coarse sand below, even for some brief moments.

Can you imagine this? If you do, this is Mugli.

Mugli is from a village called Bomenabeli in Karimnagar district of Andhra Pradesh, a short drive away from Hyderabad, thousands of kilometers away from the desert, his work place for the past 11 years.

It was on a flight from Hyderabad to Mumbai where we met Mugli. We wanted the aisle and the next seat. He reached a few minutes later, and with silent dignity, offered us the window seat. Something in him touched both me and my wife, Nandini.

I saw that he had a passport and some forms, apart from his ticket. I was a bit curious, nobody carries passport on domestic flights. On asking, he explained that he is going to take another flight from Mumbai to Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, the same evening.

One word led to another and he started telling his story, interrupted by my occasional questions. He talked in his unique way – neither slowly nor quickly, in the most matter of fact way, as if he was not talking of himself, but of someone else.

Born in a poor farmer's family, Mugli has a home in his village where his wife, his three children and parents stay. His brothers and other family members are also there in the village which he hoped to visit again, not before another four years.

Eleven years back, he had paid a good amount of money to a middleman, to land up this coveted job at a near desert place, where the closest human connectivity is in a village called Al Goya, about 20 km away.

According to his contract, if we can call it one, after he would land at Riyadh, his employer Abdullah would pick him up. Abdullah has a job

and family in Riyadh. But he also has this flock of goats which Mugli looks after. And he is keeping them well for the past 11 years.

“How often do you go home, Mugli?”

“Every 4 years, sahib...My employer takes my passport and other papers and I am totally dependent on him.”

“What if there is case of some emergency back home?”

“Nothing, sahib. My family can only contact Abdullah. He meets me once in 10 days or so, when he brings rice, flour, and some vegetables for me... Oh yes, he also brings drinking water”.

Mugli has around 350 goats under his care. He gets up at 5 am, makes the kids suckle and then leaves his shanty to take the herd for grazing. There are places in the desert where shrubs grow and the animals feed on them. After working from 5 am till 1 pm, he takes a one-hour break for cooking and lunch and some rest. Then again from 2 pm to 7 pm, the farmer from India manages the grazing goats on the Arabian Desert and then calls it a day, only to start the same routine the next morning, day after day, year after year...

Once he fell ill. And he walked 10 km to reach the nearest highway, stopped a car going to Riyadh and requested those on board to pass on a message to Abdullah along with his phone number. Medicines came nine days later, along with the routine stuff.

When the familiar faces of the goats become unbearable and even the occasional visit of some snakes become routine, Mugli goes out to meet some human souls. Managing a little time to go the village 20 km away, Mugli calls on some people and sometime, if he is lucky, he gets to meet some other goatherds on the way. Otherwise, the stars give him company at night in the dark dry desert.

“If you don't mind Mugli, how much do you get?”

“I had started with 500 Riyals when I had joined, 11 years back. Now I get 700 Riyals. Abdullah sends 500 Riyals to my family, and I manage with 200 Riyals for a month. Seven hundred Riyals are around Rs 8400, Sahib.”

It's not much money to spend such a life in exchange for, Mugli knows that. But he had not got any chance to study nor had any money. He did not have much alternative.

Mugli knows a little driving. He sometimes uses the vehicle of Abdullah to get some commodities from the village, when he comes down to pass him his food. But that is not experience enough nor relevant to get him a driving job at Hyderabad. And so...

Our plane was mid-way between Hyderabad and Mumbai. We had gone from Mumbai to Hyderabad for some work, and the phenomenal growth of Hyderabad has struck a deep cord. The new airport could compete with any airport in the west. I could not absorb the absurd situation of this fellow passenger for an hour and five minutes, who is calmly living a life in an absurd condition.

Mugli had an aura of calmness around him. I asked him that is this the life what he is going to lead for the next many years. "I will come back after four years, Sahib, and I will not go back this time. I think I will do some farming in my village."

Isn't there any rain for Mugli, to drop from the sky on his fried frame or soul? Yes, once or twice a year, there could be some countable drops but the sand sucks that too and nothing remains as a sign of rain after a few minutes.

But Mugli remembers one rain. One night when he was sleeping, about six years back, he felt that it was raining hard outside, the flash of lightning making the vast expanse of sand appear as a gigantic wet carpet. Rainwater was dripping from the porous roof, and falling and caressing his veined forehead, closed eyes and coarse lips. Mugli jumped from his bed and ran outside his hut to get drenched. Outside, he found, it was as dry as ever before. No rain, no lightning. Only the stars were winking at him, mocking him for thinking a dream a reality. That night, the desert goatherd realized his tear glands were yet to get dried up in this barren sea of sand.

The plane landed at the Mumbai airport, I held his hand and bid him good bye. "Lord Shankar will look after you," Mugli had a deep source of inner strength.

It is long past mid-night here in Mumbai. I was unable to sleep as the image of Mugli never moves away from our eyes. I close my eyes for a moment, and I see that a tallish figure is standing on a sand-dune, early in the morning, in a desert of Saudi Arabia. Is he seeking some thing? May be a few drops of water to perch his dry lips. May be not. Mugli has the answer inside; he is content with his lot. He does not have any expectation. He has achieved nirvana.