

LIGHT
By M Navin

Translated by Charles Nilbert

Thurga posed for the photographers with a blue dress she had borrowed from her friend. *I might look like an angel in this dress*, she thought to herself. It seemed to her that if swirled around, the dress would spread out like an umbrella and make her fly.

The by-election for the Ladang Durian constituency would take place tomorrow. In conjunction with that, an event was held by the ruling party candidate, Mr. Guna, to present Thurga, a first year student living in Ladang Durian, with a free laptop.

Since the election was tomorrow and the Ladang Durian school was one of the polling centres, the atmosphere around the estate was frenzied. Tents were put up everywhere and posters of the candidates plastered all over. People who had left the estate to live in a nearby modern settlement were also present at the event. The people made good use of the slight relaxation given for the by-election.

After the event, Mr.Guna met with the plantation people and listened to their grievances. He vowed to paint the estate's ruined Mariamman Temple if he won. He also offered to buy a new chariot to carry the Amman statue around town for the next festival; his suggestion was met with applause.

After receiving the laptop, Thurga sat silently in the living room of her house, not knowing what to do with it. She lifted the silvery lid of the laptop. The surface of the laptop was neat and smooth, like the wings of a rooster. Unsure of how to use the laptop, she stared at her reflection on the black screen. She wondered if she even looked like an angel; she saw no angelic joy on her face.

Two weeks ago, she did not have such a problem. Thurga was happy not to attend school due to the coronavirus pandemic. The estate, which was mostly inhabited by Indonesians, had only four Indian families. Out of those, two families consisted of elderlies abandoned by their children, and another was a young couple. Thurga was the only child at the estate, therefore she became everyone's favorite. Like the birds that roam freely, she would run and dance her way around the estate. She enjoyed the snacks offered by every household. Somedays, she would even sleep at a neighbour's.

Her days passed in a whirl of fun. However, and unexpectedly, her happiness was short-lived by the sudden resignation of the local Member of Parliament.

The opposition candidate Mr. Rajendran, who arrived at Ladang Durian to present his manifesto for the by-election, was at first disappointed by the turnout. The estate was deep in the interior, requiring them to travel about seven kilometres on red dirt roads. Mr. Rajendran could not bear the red muddy stains on his brand-new Camry. Vexed, he was about to leave when Thurga caught his attention and he casually inquired about her education situation. Thurga told him that she could not attend classes as she did not have suitable means for online learning.

“THE PLIGHT OF A POOR GIRL UNDER THE RULING REGIME!” was the headline in all three Tamil newspapers the next day. All media attention turned towards Ladang Durian. Videos criticising the ruling party made their way to social media. Subsequently, the act of the opposition candidate gifting Thurga a brand-new Samsung mobile became viral too. The presentation was held in the town hall adjacent to Ladang Durian. The hall was decorated well with banana trees and hanging *thoranam*. Mr. Rajendran appeared in a white dhoti and shirt. “If I win the by-election, I will alleviate the learning situation of all children, just like this,” he vowed. Thurga was again wearing her blue dress that her father hastily borrowed from her friend Prema, who lived in the town. Prema provided the dress as she knew that it would appear on TV.

The headmaster, who was present at the mobile phone presentation ceremony, explained in detail how Thurga could join the online learning. The normally stern and fierce man provided the explanation with grace and eloquence for the camera. Thurga took notes on her Google ID, password and so on. She was excited to see her teachers and friends through her cellphone. The thought of what her friends would say at the sight of her in a blue dress thrilled her. Unlike her father’s old-school buttoned cellphone, she was surprised she could activate the screen with her fingers. Like an insect floating on a stream, her fingers hovered over the touch-screen. It was only when she went back home with her cellphone that she faced a new problem.

The following day, Thurga made headlines again under the title, “DECEPTION OF THE OPPOSITION.” The ruling party candidate Mr.Guna had accused the opposition of seeking free publicity by giving a cellphone in an estate with no internet facilities. The headlines were accompanied by an unflattering image of Mr. Rajendran, the opposition candidate. Many were aware of the influence Mr.Guna had in the party. Since he was likely to become the Minister of Communications in the future, a telecom company immediately provided the estate with internet access. Local Tamil poets

started to pen praises of the company and Thurga, but neither party could understand the poems.

The administration of the Ladang Durian school, with fewer than twenty students, had applied for internet access for many years to no avail. The teachers expressed their gratitude to Thurga for solving this issue in a single day by calling her cellphone and thanking her. They were overjoyed as things in school would now move smoothly. Thurga's friend Punitha, who came over to congratulate her, also took back her blue dress. Thurga was dismayed as she felt she would no longer appear like an angel on the phone screen. But in the following days, Thurga's problems multiplied.

Thurga's house had two rooms. The small house was inhabited by seven people including her parents, two uncles and two aunts. Her father got the house for free by taking up a job as a tractor driver in the estate. The management was initially reluctant to allow seven people in a single house, but relented due to the shortage of new tractor drivers in such a remote area. But that in itself became a huge challenge for Thurga's teachers.

Every time a class was held, the teachers found it difficult to teach Thurga because of the commotion in her house. Due to the pandemic that led to many retrenchments, Thurga's uncle found themselves out of work. So they consumed cheap alcohol and fought with their wives from time to time. Curse words were thrown around freely at home. Unable to bear the noise, the teachers ordered her to turn off her microphone on her cell device. Thus making it impossible for her to answer her teacher's questions. The teachers instructed her to only listen to the lesson. She was never allowed to activate her microphone to speak.

Two young female teachers encountered a different problem. During their lessons, Thurga's uncles would sit next to her and disrupt the session. Sometimes they would flex their arms and twirl their moustaches in an attempt to flirt with these young teachers. Thurga was uncomfortable with her uncles' newfound enthusiasm since their retrenchment. They would douse themselves with cologne just to sit next to her for classes. Thurga held back a snarky comment about how the person on the other side could not smell them. Both teachers tried to deal with it patiently but her uncles did not seem to listen. So Thurga was ordered to listen to the lesson with her camera turned off.

She was actually happy not to use the camera. She didn't have nice new clothes like her other friends. So she got used to attending classes without the camera. Thurga looked at everyone's faces and got used to staring silently at the cell phone for long periods of time. Even when she felt sleepy, she did not take her eyes off the screen. There was great joy in seeing the faces and clothes of her friends.

With the by-election due in a week, the opposition candidate Mr. Rajendran returned to the estate once again. The *vibuthi* on his forehead made his face glow. Thurga's mother decorated the front of her house with a beautiful *kolam* as Mr. Rajendran's visit had been announced prior. This time he wanted to wipe out the bad publicity that had affected him. A small television set was taken out of Mr. Rajendran's car. He instructed his men to install the television set in front of his eyes; the work went by fast. Thurga's family was overjoyed to have access to channels on ASTRO, especially her aunts who were looking forward to Tamil serial shows.

Apologising for his mistake, Mr. Rajendran told the gathered reporters that Thurga could continue learning through the free education channels on the television provided. Reporters took pictures of Thurga sitting in front of the TV, watching a lesson broadcast on *Didik TV*. Thurga was still wearing the blue dress. Party workers also captured the moment and spread it on social media. Thurga's aunts were disappointed that the television equipped with ASTRO had no other channels installed except for the education ones. Mr. Rajendran begrudgingly promised to add in more channels should Thurga do well in her exams.

After the visit, Thurga's playtime was cut short. She was forced by her aunts to spend two hours on a government channel and an additional four hours on a private channel for her daily lessons. She also participated in all her online classes as per her school schedule. For twelve hours a day, her eyes were exposed to the harmful light emitted by the devices. As a result, her eyes ached severely within three days. Tears trickled down incessantly. When she arrived at the government clinic in town to get her eyes checked, she was instantly recognised by everyone including the doctors. She was surrounded by a crowd of people who forgot to obey the one-metre gap rule. It was then that she realised how popular she was. Thurga once again made the papers, this time stating that her eyes were affected by the mobile and television devices.

The ruling party candidate blamed the opposition candidate for damaging a young girl's eyes. He gave an interview stating that he had found the solution to Thurga's problem and awarded her a brand-new laptop equipped with high-end technology that filters the colour blue which affects the eyes. The statement was met with a loud cheer.

The cheers echoed outside. Thurga stared at her shadowy figure for a long time on the black screen on the inactive laptop. She was bewildered by the idea that the laptop would filter the colour blue.

Today, she borrowed the blue dress from her friend for the fourth time. She wondered if this laptop would also filter the blue colour on her dress. She wondered if she would

even look like angel in a blue-less dress. The blue of her dress slowly faded on the black screen of her dormant laptop, Thurga was left feeling disappointed and bereft.

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