Once upon an Indian Potluck

B A Krishna in his ‘Once Upon an Indian Potluck’ presents to the reader the thought process of the corporate world through the informal environment of a potluck party. The potluck party stands for the mingling of the Indian community in a western environment and reveals the mental set up of the managers as well as their families. Potluck is used here as a metaphor for different tastes, different attitudes, different approaches and different perceptions of the corporate world. Rajat, the protagonist, presents these perceptions to the reader in a style tinged with subtle humour.

At the very beginning of the party, we come to know how the senior managers in the corporate world perceive the trainees – as monkeys - to be trained. They are primates in dire need for training and once trained, they go to the higher realm where they can do minimal damage. The good ones on the other hand need to be ’babied’ with their creative egos to be nurtured with caution and care. Rajat then proceeds to talk derogatively about the middle management level where according to him, there is diminished brain activity and so they are not able to keep pace with the latest technology. According to Rajat, the average manager is inept and does not have the basic skills needed to survive in the Silicon Valley.

Rajat’s monologues bring to the reader clearly how the corporate world looks at its managers; the perception that these managers are not upwardly mobile as far as technology is concerned. He meets different managers in the party; one of them is a man of few words and Rajat has his crude comments about him. He is not very comfortable with Niraj, since there is a cold war between his wife and Niraj’s wife; this shows us how the wives as well their Facebook accounts affect relationships in the corporate world evn in an informal atmosphere !

Rajat introduces us to Vivek next; a successful manager and IPO-ed denizen whom Rajat is not very friendly with. Vivek is obviously the target of everyone’s jealousy since he has made his money and built his mansion, Hearst castle style. The Vive-esque life style may be unique to him, but finds a critique in managers like Rajat. His caustic comments about Vivek’s wife are a testimony to this.

Rajat next presents the reader with the Aunty-phylum category; which, in the Indo-American corporate world, stands at a higher level than the Uncle –phylum. We get a glimpse of one such lady who has managed to get an exceptionally efficient nanny and is the cynosure of all gossip for all other women in the group.

After a short chat with Mr. Gupta, Rajat meets Ashok, a manager who is, in most ways like him; Ashok injects variety into the formula conversation of potlucks. Ashok reveals to Rajat how he managed to get his raise; he planned a strategy wherein he told his superior that he wanted a 15% raise; if not given, he would keep a cheerful face and announce to everyone that he got a 30% raise, which would be damaging the morale of the organization; the VP did not have any other option but to give Ashok a 15% raise. Another nugget of wisdom that Ashok gives Rajat is this; if one does not get a raise, the tactic is only to work slower, produce less staggering output so that one can ‘break even’ with the pay and the work done. Ashok also tells Rajat how to manage lay off and plan it before so that one does not suffer. Sundar was one such manager who relocated to Massachusetts before getting laid off since this state offered employment disability compensation for two years, while other states gave only for one year. To relocate solely based on post-termination benefits seems like an act of sheer genius!

The potluck party ends with Rajat and Ashok having their plates full but not their hands; they have to help their wives with carrying all the paraphernalia brought for their children.

The essay is an eye-opener about the way the corporate world works; some are geniuses, who manage to get a raise while others don’t , with a simple tactic. Some are like monkeys to be trained; some more suffer from diminished brain activity, but carry on. All of them demonstrate awe and respect for their wives; they become submissive to them. Some are chatter boxes, enjoying their own ill-advised monologues like Rajat; there are managers like Vivek who are pompous with their IPO status. And there are shrewd managers like Ashok and Sundar who overcome hurdles intelligently. The Corporate world, in a nutshell, is a world full of varied managers with varied mental capabilities.