

# The Hope Factory

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## Excerpt from The Hope Factory

Anand K. Murthy had two windows in his office. The first, narrow and with a stiff latch that he struggled to open, provided a glimpse of the factory campus. The second, his favorite, was a soundproofed scenic window that overlooked a production bay. Anand was long past the stage where he needed to supervise the workings of the factory floor in minute daily detail, but it was a sight that gave him an unflinching sense of satisfaction.

He stood there now, the weight of the approaching day settling about him. He was not prone to nervousness, no, certainly not, but today he was unquestionably experiencing a phantom version of it: dry mouth, quickened breathing, a pulse that danced uncontrollably up and down his spine. He reached for a glass of water set on a plastic coaster that had the words *cauvery auto* embossed in orange letters upon an indigo blue background.

A knock on the open door; he put down the water glass and smiled in welcome.

"Come in, come in, good morning." The sight of Mr. Ananthamurthy did something to soothe him.

The operations manager had worked with Anand since the early years of the company. Fifteen years previously, Ananthamurthy had been an older man whose quiet manner belied years of operational experience; now Anand realized, with a sudden shock, that he was looking at someone approaching retirement. Physically, the years had not changed Ananthamurthy beyond turning the few long hairs combed over the bald surface of his head a little grayer and lining the outsides of his eyes. Otherwise, he was still the same: lean, upright, with that quality of absolute reliability, like an old Swiss watch, forever accurate and unflinching.

"Good morning, sir. You have eaten?" For fifteen years, Ananthamurthy had started their workday with this ritual query.

"Yes, yes," said Anand, though that was rarely true. He was never hungry in the mornings. Later, he might have a glucose biscuit with his coffee. "And you?"

"Yes, sir, thank you." Ananthamurthy did not, as was his wont, turn briskly to the work ahead. Instead, with a shy diffidence that overlay his usual gravity, he ceremoniously placed a plastic box on Anand's table.

"My wife and daughters insisted, sir," he said. "Such an important day for the factory, we visited the temple in the morning and they have sent this prasadam for you. Please take, sir."

Anand obediently placed a tiny morsel of the sanctified sweet halwa in his mouth, feeling the sugar and wheat dissolve across his tongue. "Please thank your wife for me."

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"I will, sir. She has plans to continue prayers through the day."

Ananthamurthy would not say so, but Anand saw in his eyes a reflection of the same eager hope that burnt within him.

Anand pressed a button on his phone to speak to his secretary. In a fantasy world, this would be a young woman, perhaps from Goa, who answered to a name like Miss Rita and sported daring short skirts and blouses that clung to her bosom. Reality, however, was Mr. Kamath, bald and so frighteningly efficient, he was one of the bulwarks of Anand's professional life, never to be voluntarily sacrificed. "Kamath? Where is every- body? And later, I want to see that computer fellow."

His words served as an automatic trigger to Ananthamurthy.

"That fellow," he said, referring to the newly hired computer service engineer, "is not able to take direction." Anand listened patiently, knowing that Ananthamurthy's complaints were not really against the person but about the process. The increased automation in the factory premises was spreading with virus-like pervasiveness, to the great perturbation of Ananthamurthy, who, with aging consternation, was still unsuccessfully grappling with the notion of email, tapping out his correspondence letter by letter, glancing feverishly between screen and fingers with every stroke. Anand often thought it was time to organize a mandatory course on word processing for all his employees.

Two more people entered his office, and Anand assessed them with new eyes, as though seeing them for the first time.

Mrs. Padmavati of the accounts department was the first to arrive. She walked in as she usually did, with a brisk air and a quick step. Her efficiency was legendary—as was her quick temper at the careless mistakes of others. Her appearance, like her work style, was excessively tidy: her cotton saree neatly folded and pinned at the shoulder, her long hair severely quieted with coconut oil and tied into a braid that lay in a thick line from her neck to the base of her spine. Her decorative accessories were few and not beyond the obligatory: small gold earrings at her lobes, a thin gold chain with her marriage mangal-sutra at the end. No rings, no bangles, all her accessorial energies seemed to revolve around the enormous handbag that accompanied her to every meeting, a bag so capacious that awed male colleagues had witnessed the emergence of infinite objects from within, from wallets to a laptop, magazines, a present for a colleague, and, improbably, a tiny videogame console that Mrs. Padmavati claimed belonged to her nine-year-old son but in fact was spotted feverishly attacking on the commute home on the factory bus. She had worked with the company for five years, gaining seniority, and this was the first time Anand had invited her to a senior--level management meeting.

If he was honest, it hadn't been very often that he had had a management meeting. Until recently, "senior management" had consisted of just himself and Ananthamurthy, each of them undertaking a variety of tasks.

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But it was time to change all that. He had broached the idea with Ananthamurthy a few weeks previously, and Ananthamurthy, who had recently been gifted a management book by his son-in-law and was reading it in his spare time, had agreed with him: "We must professionalize, sir. That is the key."

Accordingly, Anand, who had kept the company finances under his strict control, was now toying with the idea of making Mrs. Padmavati his CFO. She was pleased to be included in the meeting and, Anand could tell, was both nervous and eager to prove herself. She placed her handbag on the floor and sat erect, holding a notepad, a pen, and a calculator at the ready. In addition, they had hired a new HR person, who trailed into the meeting after her.

"Okay then," said Anand, after they had liberally partaken of Ananthamurthy's box of sweet prasadam. "Let's review our preparations, so we know exactly where we stand." He hesitated, pushed his glasses up his nose, and then stated what everybody in the room already knew. "Tomorrow can be the most important day for our company, I think."

The sheet moldings and pressings made by Cauvery Auto were sold to automotive companies that assembled passenger cars and other vehicles out of them for the Indian market. They had built the business painstakingly over the years, chasing after orders, waiting for hours, sometimes days, for meetings with purchasing managers, godlike beings in sanctified inner offices who were seemingly unaware of Anand in the waiting room, his 9:00 a.m. appointment ticking past lunch and through the afternoon until he was asked, sweaty, hungry, angry, but still patient, to come back the next day. Yes, so sorry, sir is very busy, hopefully he will be able to see you tomorrow.

But now, finally, they were on the cusp of a different phase. The following morning, their largest customers would arrive, bringing with them representatives of the Japanese parent company. They would tour the facilities, scrutinize, inspect, and have endless discussions on production capabilities and future scope. If the day went well, Cauvery Auto could end up supplying the international market as well. The thought of that was unbelievably heady. Anand could not fool himself; this was a rare prize; there would be plenty of other companies competing for it, many of them (he feared) better positioned than Cauvery Auto.

If they won the order, it would transform all their lives. It would spell stability, growth, profits, not just for the company but for all of them—him, Ananthamurthy, Mrs. Padmavati, everyone—easing the financial struggles of their lives and allowing very different futures to bloom for their families.

In the late morning, Anand went on a tour of inspection. The production floor was always kept in good working condition, but some of the workers' uniforms had been replaced, and the accounts department had used the occasion to purchase new ergonomic chairs in a bright orange for their workstations. Anand did not mind; these things contributed to workplace efficiency, ease, and bonhomie, and he had over- ridden Anantha- mur- thy's muttered objections to the expense. "After all," the operations manager had said, "we are not one of those American- style call centers, is it not?" His own daughter worked in one

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such call center in the city, and Mr. Ananthamurthy had visited her workplace one day and come away slightly scandalized. "Too much waste," he said. "And all, for what? For answering a few phone calls. Where is the skill in that?"

Neat flower beds lined the outside walls of the factory buildings; the gardeners were scouring them for weeds. Anand felt the knot in his back ease, an involuntary welling of pleasure within, a shy disbelief that his efforts had yielded this campus, this precision, this grace.

He paused outside one of the warehouses, whose freshly painted sign said: godwon 2.

"That is a wrong spelling, no?" he said. "That is not how you spell godown."

"I'll check, sir," said the painting supervisor and made a note.

The watchmen saluted as he walked past. Their uniforms were in the corporate colors—orange shirts and indigo pants, chosen in line with his mother-in-law's suggestion, in the days when her opinion mattered. "So pretty, these colors," she had said. "Like bird-of-paradise, my favorite flower." Anand had blindly agreed—and was aghast to learn that in her youth she had once been referred to as a bird-of-paradise herself, a compliment never forgotten. She now spent her time telling acquaintances of her son-in-law's delicate tribute. He in turn ignored her arch references to the subject, which, in his mind, made the best of an awkward situation.

The clock ran faster than Anand; he didn't pause for lunch, satisfying his hunger with passing cups of coffee and glucose biscuits grabbed off the plates Kamath supplied for every meeting in his office. They were without end, everyone nervous, running plans and presentations by him relentlessly.

After the initial faux pas with the bird-of-paradise colors, his wife had recommended the anonymous safety of an interior designer who could create for Anand an office as it ought to be: well carpeted and tastefully furnished. Anand had ignored her suggestion. His office was just as he liked it: simple, uncluttered, a large desk, some chairs to one side that could be dragged up for a conference, and best of all, the soundproofed scenic factory window.

At 6:00 p.m., Ananthamurthy, Mrs. Padmavati, the HR person, and Kamath assembled in his office, a collective air of exhaustion about them. They had done all that they could; tomorrow was in the hands of the gods. Ananthamurthy, on the principle of leaving no stone unturned, was detailing the early morning prayers he would conduct on the morrow to ensure divine favors. For Anand, divinity consisted of preparing meticulously and leaving nothing to chance. He did not know quite how to articulate his next concern; he said: "I will be wearing a jacket, I think. And a tie."

"You will be very hot, sir," said Ananthamurthy, with mild surprise at this suggested deviation from the customary dress code of polyester pants and cotton shirts.

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It was Mrs. Padmavati who grasped the underlying point Anand was trying to make. "Everyone should wear ties, sir, is it not? Or, in my case, a silk saree. For smart appearance."

"Yes," said Anand in relief. "Yes. I think so."

Ananthamurthy stood next to him, gazing down at the large, high-ceilinged bay, the machinery gleaming, the room flooded with light, so clean, so sterile; the very air seemed subdued and devoid of the dust particles that circulated outside the factory. The others had filed out, leaving the two of them alone.

Anand was normally the one to energize, to reassure, but now he gave way to sudden doubt. "We are ready, no?"

"I think we're ready, sir," said Ananthamurthy.

"A great success if it comes through," said Anand. "A great success for us, Ananthamurthy."

"If it comes through," said Ananthamurthy, prosaically, "we will be in urgent need of more land, sir. At least ten acres. Without it, we will not be able to proceed. As it is . . ."

Anand sighed. "Yes, yes." Land outside the city for industrial development was notoriously difficult to organize. "I'll get on to it right away, Ananthamurthy."

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On the way home, on a sudden impulse, Anand took a small, unplanned detour into a low-grade industrial area. It was just a few kilometers from his factory, but it was an entry into a different, desperate world. The roads were hasty-made, unplanned, unpaved, and ravined by the rains. There were no large, graceful factory compounds here, no high-roofed shop floors, no landscaping. These factory sheds were little more than utilitarian shop floors built in desperate confinement, cheek by jowl, not wasting space, aesthetic-free, populated by workers who wore no uniforms and belonged to no unions. Anand's low-bottomed car was out of place here; this was an area frequented by scooters and hardy transportation vans.

He parked on a muddy side slope, setting his hand brake, ignoring the few curious glances he received, and made his way to a shed in the distance. It was indistinguishable from its peers, tin-roofed, coated with grime and soot, the dark enfolded within barely alleviated with a few tube lights. He ignored the somnolent watchman who sat on a stool below a board bearing the name of the current proprietor and peeped in.

The hot-oil odor of the place, the clangorous noise of overworked secondhand machines remained unchanged. He didn't know the present owners, whoever they were, but this shed held the history of his first years as an independent businessman. He could not afford a car then and had driven to work through mud and rain on a sky-blue scooter, license number KA O4 R 618, which, by the end of its days, had sported dents and a long rip on the backseat.

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Anand had recently watched, mesmerized, a National Geographic television program about early American pioneers pressing into the hostile western regions of their country—and had thoroughly identified with them. Like those pioneers, he had survived an unimaginably hostile world. A world where everything had to be fought for, every detail planned. Things that could go wrong, would. Things that shouldn't go wrong, did. Add to that the Indian government, a strange, cavernous beast that lay hidden in grottoes and leapt out, tentacles flailing, suckers greedy for bribes. When things broke down, one kept moving, for to stop was to signal the end. To complain was to waste breath. To fuss was a luxury. And the next time around, one planned even more cautiously, as best as one could, creating backup at every level, for untrained workers that the law did not easily allow to fire, for insufficient power, for no water, for no sewerage, for telephones-on-the-blink, potholed roads, disintegrating ports, for whimsical suppliers, careless of quality, who had to be chased and cornered to deliver on their promises—yes, sir, of course, sir, I am delivering today, sir. Oh, sir, don't say that, of course I am delivering today. God promise, sir. Problem is, sir, my sister's husband's niece's wedding.

There were times, in the early years, when the battle fatigue hit Anand so hard he would almost stop, dreading the next phone call, harbinger of trouble, of something gone wrong, of chaos unanticipated. But something in him had clung on, blindly, and he had managed to pull himself out of the primordial slime and say, very simply, yes, we can do it. We can produce things of world-class quality, and we can deliver them on time. And in him lay the strength that comes from such alchemical magic, the power discovered within himself to take environmental dross and turn it into pure gold.

He walked back to his car and reversed slowly out of the area. He would mention this visit to Ananthamurthy, who had toiled in this old, greasy shed by his side. Or perhaps not. Neither of them was particularly given to romanticizing their past; Ananthamurthy would probably stare at him in surprise and wonder why Anand was telling him things he already knew.

On the drive home, Anand found himself rehearsing parts of the speech that he would be making the following day. "Welcome," he said, to the steering wheel. "Welcome." He fell prey to his usual insecurities for a fleeting moment and wished that he had certain natural advantages: of height, a better speaking voice, the ability to size up people at a glance and the charisma to instantly win them over. "Welcome," he tried. The highway bestrode a gentle ridge, covered by the rising tide of the endless city, colored cinder-block houses topped with black plastic water tanks racing up the slope in a wave. His car nudged past stained city walls layered with cinema and political advertisements, the film actors posed with an engaging artfulness not quite mastered by the politicians: plug-ugly, with odd hair and shifty smiles like wanted crime posters gone coy and desperate to please. "Welcome," he said, in passing. Not. Motherfuckers.