

Calligraphic Calisthenics

The Tribune, April 18, 2023

Mr. Surendra Kumar Apharya from Jaipur has achieved the monumental feat of writing 1749 characters on a single grain of rice. This possibly is worth a mention in the Guinness Book of World Records. And then there is Ms. Ramagiri Swarika from Hyderabad who has written the whole Bhagavad Gita- all 700 verses on 4042 rice grains. As a nation, we seem to be very adept at micro writing. This must be the thinking of the India Post Department.

I recently wanted to open an account in the Post Office Savings Bank. The local post office had run out of forms and so I tried the website. I was pleasantly surprised to see not just the form that I needed but almost every form that one would need on the website. So I downloaded and printed it and sat down to fill the form.

The first page asks you to fill all the usual information-name, father's name, address etc. And therein lies the rub. The form assumes that you, like Mr. Apharya or Ms. Swarika are masters of micro-writing. Thus for instance, the column for Name is 0.4 cm in height and 4 cm wide. Of course one has to write everything in Capital Letters. The E-mail id column has a similar size- too bad if you had to choose an unusually long email id since the usual ones were not available on Gmail!

But it gets worse. The form also, for some reason, wants you to write your Date of Birth in the usual format but also in words. And just in case you thought this was a mistake, it helpfully tells you that it is mandatory. The column provided for this is 0.7 cm by 4 cm. Try writing 15-09-1978 and Fifteen September Nineteen seventy eight in this column.

I tried doing all manner of calligraphic calisthenics with the form for some time but failed; printed another copy from the PDF with the same result. No matter how hard I tried, the information would spill into the next row and column which then had a cascading effect through the whole form.

The Post Office is of course not the only one who has such "user-friendly" forms. The nature of forms, from both private and government agencies is always such that it is not clear how anyone is expected to fill them manually. What always surprises me is that given these forms are obviously designed by someone, has the designer actually sat

down and filled the form designed by him/her? It seems unlikely. Moreover, just like me, the designer also must have had to fill several such unwieldy forms and so should know the difficulties one faces while using them. Given this, why is it that this particular malady is still all pervasive?

After practicing miniature writing for some time, I was able to finally fill the form. Well, almost since there was still some spillover in various columns. Throughout this exercise I was reminded of my grandmother who always used postcards for writing to her relatives. She used to completely fill every available space on the postcard with extremely small writing. I may not be in the running for the Guinness Book but I could certainly be a worthy grandson!

Shobhit.mahajan@gmail.com

April 15th, 2023.