



**INDIAN SCHOOL MUSCAT  
SENIOR SECTION  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
CLASS XII**



**FLAMINGO  
POETS AND PANCAKES  
ASHOKAMITRAN  
Worksheet/ Study Material**

As a film script writer who had a stellar career in Tamil films, Ashokmitran takes us on a journey to a time when studios were the stars more than individuals. The narration speaks of his time at Gemini Studios of Madras under the tutelage one of the pioneers of Tamil and Indian cinema, S.S. Vasana.

As one of the huge team, the writer discusses and describes various other individuals that made Gemini studio as the front running film company in the country as well as South Asia. He begins with the office boy who was responsible for painting the people in the crowds and which he did with pride.

The makeup department he used to work in always worked with a company called 'pancake'. Then he moves to K. Subbu who is the lieutenant for Vasana. He is a humble and family man with a penchant for poetry. He loves sharing his words with common people. He was not very educated but has learned a lot on the job and with the industry experience.

The next person is the litigator who is known for his notoriety and tricks. He is always up to some mischief with the actors and staff. Then he goes on to describe the writers who lack a sense of originality and critique. They are lazy in their attitude and uninspiring in their works.

Next, the writer describes a group of international performers called Moral Rearmament Army who are invited to perform on the studio. However, they have an ulterior motive of triggering anti-communist sentiment in a place where communism was a strong force.

Vasana who himself was a communist sympathizer realizes his mistake and persuades Stephen Spender, a renowned communist poet to come and address the situation. Stephen, although eloquent with his words, fails to connect with the listeners who do not understand his language and diction.

The predominantly Tamil speaking audience does not even realize the stature of the poet. Even the writer did not recognize that it was some famous English litterateur and poet. It was not until a few years later when the writer came across Spender in one of his prose competitions, that he realized the magnitude of the man's work.

### **Gemini Studios**

Gemini Studios was one of India's pioneer movie factories. Situated in the present day Chennai, owned by S.S. Vaasana and worked by over 600 staff, the GS made movies for Tamilnadu and other southern Indian states. Pancake[TM] was the makeup material used by the GS.

### **The Office Boy**

Office Boy was a grown up man in the Makeup Department of the GS. He was in charge of the crowd makeup. He applied pancake on their faces with the help of a dipped paint brush. Though his job was quite an easy one, the office boy considered him to be a greatly skilled artist.

### **Asokamitran**

Asokamitran was one of the staff whose job was to collect information such as news events from newspapers and magazines and to paste them in files. The other staff considered his job out of place and most of them thought so high of themselves. Here are some of the interesting staffs of GS.

## **Kothamangalam Subbu**

Kothamangalam Subbu was another clerk. He was not as educated, as fortunate and as supported by as the Office Boy, yet he reached the top of the GS. He was a man of amazing genius. He was able to direct the directors. He suggested dozens of ways to shoot a certain scene when the director failed to find one. He acted better than the heroes. He wrote incredible poems. Though he was able to write more complicated ones that could raise him to the status of a great poet, Subbu preferred writing them in simple Tamil to enlighten the majority of Tamil people. The world of his time and later never recognized Subbu as a poet yet he was a great unknown poet. Besides, he supported his far and near relatives. But he had only enemies everywhere because he was very much close to the boss, Vaasan.

## **Legal Advisor**

The legal advisor worked in the Story Department. He was a lawyer and provided legal advices to the writers yet he was known as the illegal advisor. The following incident is one reason that gave him that name. Once a shooting was under progress. The heroine, a highly emotional girl, got angry with the director and producer. While the whole set stood stunned at this, the legal advisor recorded her voice without her permission and made her listen to the playback, thus resulting the end of a rising actress.

## **Poets and writers**

Gemini Studios had some great poets like Harindranath Chatopadhyaya and a few others. Most of the insignificant poets considered so great of themselves. They had no great talent, no great creativity, no political views yet they assumed the airs of the greatest poets, wasting Vaasan's money and time. They believed Gandhiji to be the last word of politics and had developed an aversion to Communism.

## **Communism and MRA**

Communism was a new political order that was spreading throughout the world, especially in Asian countries. Communism preached equality of people and abolition of poverty and class divisions while it discouraged private ownership. But Communism won a negative impression due the Capitalist countries such as America.

MRA or Moral Rearmament Army was an international team of actors and actresses that spread anti Communist feelings throughout the world. The MRA came to Chennai and saw how influential was Gemini Studios in the south of India. The team got permission from Vaasan to stage their plays. Vaasan was only happy to give them permission because he hoped that his staff would get inspiration from the international team. But little did Vaasan know of their intentions. MRA staged their plays with hidden anticommunist messages and went away and it was yet after some time that Vaasan realized that he had been fooled.

## **Stephen Spender**

Anyway, Stephen Spender, who was once a prominent communist editor and poet from England, came to the studio and gave his speech. His lecture was about Communism on one side and about his struggles to establish as a poet on the other. Whatever he spoke was great, exciting and inspiring, but what use, his accent was so terrible that none of the Gemini staff could clearly understand what Spender had spoken. They fell into shame for not being able to understand the poet and wished not to meet him again.

## **Asokamitran's meeting with Spender**

The lesson ends with two incidents in which Asokamitran, our author, met Spender; not face to face, but in two different ways. While attempting to send his short story to England to participate in a contest, Asokamitran happened to read The Encounter, a magazine that had Stephen Spender as its editor. On another occasion he happened to read the book, the God that Failed, an article by Spender.

### **1. What was the fiery misery inside the make-up department of the Studios?**

The makeup room had a lot of hot bulbs always burning inside and a number of mirrors to reflect the heat. Madras, being a hot city and no cooling at that time at the studio, it was a real misery inside the makeup room.

2. **How was the author's job odd in the eyes of the other staff? How did they respond to this?**  
Asokamitran's job at the Gemini Studios was to collect information from newspapers and magazines and to paste the cuttings in files for reference. This was probably the only work odd in the Gemini Studios while every other staff was some sort of an artist. They therefore advised the author to do some better jobs other than wasting his time cutting papers in a department similar to a barber shop.
3. **In what context did Congress rule mean Prohibition and how was it for the staff of Gemini Studios meeting over a cup of coffee a rather satisfying entertainment?**  
Congress being the ruling party, made the public's life horrible by imposing curfew and emergency in the initial years of Independent India. Citizens were not allowed to gather and hold meetings. While the whole of the nation struggled under emergencies, the six hundred Gemini staff enjoyed freedom inside the studios as their freedom was not restricted.
4. **How was the Gemini Studios a perfect place of nationally integrated Indians?**  
Situated in Tamilnadu's capital Madras, the Gemini Studios was amazement for a number of reasons, one of them being the selection of its department heads and other staff from all over India. For instance, the makeup department was for some time headed by a Bengali though he was later removed from the post. His follower in the department was from Maharashtra and his assistant was Dharwar Kannadiga, an Andra, a Madras Indian Christian, an Anglo Burmese and even the usual Tamilians. The presence of any talented person from any part of India shows that Gemini Studios was a perfect example of unity.
5. **How are poets and prose writers different according to Asokamitran? What personal experience makes him say that?**  
Asokamitran believes in the qualitative difference between prose writers and poem writers. A poem can be written in no time if the poet is a genius while prose such as a novel can be written by a person who has a lot of patience and perseverance. The prose writer's mind should be so shrunken that no rejection can disappoint him but he will be encouraged from failures and rejections.
6. **How did the MRA spread its anti-Communist ideas in South India?**  
Moral Rearmament Army believed that Communism was evil and therefore wanted to wipe it out of the world. This group of 200 men and women from twenty different nations spread anti-communist messages with the help of their stage performances such as dramas.
7. **How was Vasam played into the hands of the MRA?**  
There is no clear indication that Vasam, the owner of the Gemini Studios, was a Communist or not yet there are very clear hints that he was a prominent Communist of Chennai. The MRA spread its anti-Communist messages through their stage programs and made the poets and writers of the South India hate Communism which was a great achievement. Vasam, who knew nothing of their intentions, was indeed fooled by MRA at his cost.
8. **Spender's Speech was a shock for him and a matter of utter shame for the literati of the Gemini Studios?**  
Stephen Spender was called to the Gemini Studios to talk to the staff there about Communism but what he spoke was of his struggles as a poet. Whatever he spoke, his talk was not followed by practically anyone. When Spender realized that his audience didn't follow his talk, he stopped in utter

shame to have made a talk to a deaf audience while the Gemini staff got dispersed in great humiliation because Spender's accent failed them.

**9. How does the book, 'The God That Failed' deserve its title? OR Justify the title, 'The God That Failed.'**

The 'God That Failed' was written by six eminent writers who were attracted to Communism and abandoned it because they hated it later on. Communism was in its beginning, a God because it stood for equality and removal of class systems and poverty. While the Gods or incarnations before it achieved their goals, Communism failed in attaining its goals as it was a failure in itself.

**10. What made Asokamitran hope Stephen Spender too would be singing the same song at the same time when he sealed the envelop of his manuscript?**

Asokamitran had been struggling to establish as a writer when he came across the magazine, The Encounter. When he saw that the editor of The Encounter was Stephen Spender, the same poet who came to Gemini Studios and talked about his struggles to become a poet, Asokamitran felt as if he had found a long lost brother.

**11. 'In a moment I felt a dark chamber of my mind lit up by a hazy illumination.' What was the dark chamber? What did light up the darkness?**

Due to Spender's British accent the normally educated staff could not understand his speech and therefore his speech remained an unsolved mystery for the staff including Asokamitran. This mystery was the dark chamber of his mind. When Asokamitran saw that Spender was the editor of The Encounter, he understood that Spender's speech was all about stories and poems and suddenly he related this to his speech he made years ago in Gemini Studios.

**Answer the following questions in 30-40 words:**

1. All this shows that there was a great deal of national integration long before A.I.R. and Doordarshan began broadcasting programs on national integration. Explain.
2. Why did the author pray for crowd shooting?
3. Subbu excelled as an actor too. Discuss.
4. How did Subbu surpass the office boy despite his limitations?
5. The staff of the Gemini Studios attributed Subbu's success to his being a Brahmin. Why?

**Answer the question in 120 words:**

1. Taking a careful reading, one sees the tremendous struggle that Asokamitran underwent to surface as a writer par excellence. Discuss.