

LINE: A Play In One Act

By

Soam Acharya¹

And

P. Subrahmanya

April 9, 2004

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

NIKHIL: Young NRI (Non Resident Indian).
PRIYA: NIKHIL's wife.
OFFICIAL: The gatekeeper.
UDAY: Seasoned politician.
REEMA: UDAY's wife.
ANAND: Suave middleman.
RAJ: ANAND's friend. White collar worker.
BHIMA: Slightly eccentric man.
MANISH: Upper-class well connected man.

¹ © Soamdev Acharya. The author can be reached at <http://www.dishumdishum.com>

(Scene - The stage is empty except for a door on the leftmost side. We hear the sound of footsteps in the distance.

Entering from the right are NIKHIL and PRIYA, a young couple. They are in a hurry. NIKHIL is dragging PRIYA by her hand.)

NIKHIL. Hurry, we'll be late!

PRIYA. Stop it. You're hurting me!

NIKHIL *(Stops and looks around)*. Almost, we're almost there...

PRIYA. *(Points with her one free hand)*. There is the entrance.

NIKHIL. *(Pretends not to listen. Looks around some more)*. Found it! *(They walk up to the door. He tries twisting the handle but no luck.)* It's locked.

PRIYA. Great. You dragged me out here for this?

NIKHIL. I am sure they will open soon.

PRIYA. When? I don't see anyone.

NIKHIL. Isn't that great? We are here first!

PRIYA. I don't care! I wanted to try that blue top I bought yesterday! Did it matter if we were late by five minutes?

NIKHIL. Can you, can you stop for a second? You've been yelling the whole way.

PRIYA. And to make matters worse, there is no one here.

NIKHIL. Right! That is exactly what I am trying to say. We are first in...

PRIYA. That is your problem. You are obsessed about being punctual and it doesn't matter whether it's for a party or for a dental appointment! Ever heard of anyone being on time to get their teeth drilled? No, you have to be there

exactly on time and it's always hell if we don't. Wake up!
You're amongst Indians now. Everybody is late here!

NIKHIL. Calm down, calm down. There is no need to...

(Door opens and OFFICIAL emerges.)

PRIYA. Oh look!

(NIKHIL turns around, sees the OFFICIAL and the open door. Both NIKHIL and PRIYA try to bypass the OFFICIAL and walk through the door. OFFICIAL blocks their attempts).

OFFICIAL. You can't go in.

NIKHIL. Why not?

OFFICIAL. We're not open yet.

NIKHIL. When will you open?

OFFICIAL. Soon... soon... Wait in line!

(Door shuts. NIKHIL and PRIYA form a line and start to wait.)

LINE STATE: NIKHIL PRIYA)

PRIYA. Happy now?

NIKHIL. But look!

PRIYA. Yes?

NIKHIL. We are first in line! We get in first!

PRIYA. Five minutes more and we would have been second.
What's the difference?

NIKHIL. It's not the same.

PRIYA. Why?

NIKHIL. It's the difference between the first man on the moon and the second. It's the difference between being the first to ... to touch a *(whispers loudly)* virgin ... and the second. It means not having to wait behind anyone else.

PRIYA. But we are waiting! Where is this ... uh ... virgin?

NIKHIL. OK sorry! Look, how would you understand? You are late for everything. Remember that show? We couldn't get in because you were late!

PRIYA. No, you drove like a maniac and we came so close to a nasty crash! You know you can't drive that fast around here!

NIKHIL. You! You never met a mirror you didn't like. If you had finished your love affair with your mirror a little earlier, I wouldn't have needed to speed.

(Meanwhile, another more elderly couple, UDAY and REEMA, enters the stage from the right. They pass in front of NIKHIL and PRIYA, feigning they don't exist. UDAY tries the door.)

UDAY. It's locked.

REEMA. Try the other way.

UDAY. No, it's not working. They are not open yet.

PRIYA. Ahem. The line is here.

(UDAY and REEMA turn around and pretend to see NIKHIL and PRIYA for the first time.)

UDAY. I am sorry.

REEMA. Oh hi!

(They try to wedge themselves in front of NIKHIL and PRIYA. PRIYA doesn't move. It is NIKHIL who, though stunned, steps back, pushing PRIYA to give room.)

LINE STATE: REEMA UDAY NIKHIL PRIYA)

UDAY. Thanks! How long have you been waiting?

NIKHIL. We ... we just got here.

UDAY. Do you know when will they open?

NIKHIL. He *(pointing towards the door)* said "soon."

UDAY. Ah! I am Uday by the way and this is my wife, Reema.

REEMA. Namaste!

(UDAY and NIKHIL shake hands. REEMA and PRIYA exchange awkward namastes.)

UDAY. Did you have any trouble finding this place?

PRIYA *(Sarcastically)*. Oh no, we were first.

NIKHIL. Yes ... first!

UDAY. That is so admirable! I keep telling Reema that everybody is late these days. No professionalism. No wonder this country is going to the dogs.

REEMA. He is always nagging me to hurry up and not waste time and I keep saying to him, "Relax, relax, don't get so worked up. Remember what the doctor says: 'stress is the silent killer!'"

UDAY. Arre darling, you worry too much for me.

REEMA. Why shouldn't I? Who else will look after me when you go? (*During this conversation, two guys, RAJ and ANAND, enter the stage, again from the right.*) So that's why I always tell him to slow down. Why take so much tension over little things like who's first and who isn't?

(*ANAND and RAJ are looking around. They stand at the back of the line.*)

LINE STATE: REEMA UDAY *gap* NIKHIL PRIYA *gap* ANAND RAJ)

UDAY (*With some bombast*). Reema, don't worry. Haven't I served my land all these years? The country will take care of you after I go.

ANAND. Hey Uday-ji, is that you? Long time no see! Where did you vanish?

(*ANAND walks over to UDAY.*)

UDAY. Have we met before?

ANAND. Don't you remember me? I'm Anand! We met at that Non Resident Indian Convention. You had just given a speech on the brilliant potential of this country. Inspiring stuff!

UDAY. Oh, I see. Glad to meet you. This is Reema, my wife.

(*ANAND and REEMA exchange namastes. ANAND fills the gap between UDAY and NIKHIL who starts to say something but stops.*)

LINE STATE: REEMA UDAY ANAND NIKHIL PRIYA *gap* RAJ)

ANAND. I have to say, I am surprised to see you here. A man of your importance standing in line? What is the world coming to?

REEMA. Oh, he's a man of the people. He would never take advantage of such little things.

ANAND. Of course not! By the way, let me introduce you to a friend. Hey Raj, don't just stand there. Come over here!

(ANAND calls out to RAJ with his hand displacing NIKHIL who stands back. ANAND steps into this vacated space and RAJ walks over to fill the space vacated by ANAND.)

LINE STATE: REEMA UDAY RAJ ANAND NIKHIL PRIYA.

REEMA through ANAND engage in silent conversation amongst themselves.)

NIKHIL *(to ANAND)*. Hey, that wasn't...

PRIYA *(to NIKHIL)*. What's the matter with you?

NIKHIL. What?

PRIYA. Why are you letting all these people in?

NIKHIL. Me?

PRIYA. First you drag me out when I am not ready, now I have to stand and watch while you let all these people in!

NIKHIL. Aha! So you admit it!

PRIYA. Admit what?

NIKHIL. That you hate standing in line as much as me.

PRIYA. No, I hate standing in line with you! You are always complaining people are getting in front of you but you can't do anything about it. Why can't you manage things like other people?

NIKHIL. I...

(Door opens. Everybody, including NIKHIL, turns around. OFFICIAL emerges. Everybody gets ready to rush forward.)

OFFICIAL. Wait, wait. Not yet. The line will be moving shortly.

NIKHIL (*Leaving the line, dragging PRIYA by her hand*).
Officer! Wait!

PRIYA. What are you doing?

(*They reach the front of the line and face the OFFICIAL.*)

NIKHIL. Look, we were here first, but all these people got in front of us. You remember us, don't you?

(*While they are talking, BHIMA comes at the end of the line, effectively taking their place. BHIMA starts fiddling with his backpack like he's getting ready to stay awhile.*)

OFFICIAL. I don't know what you are talking about. Please get back in line.

NIKHIL. You don't remember? We got here and we were arguing?

OFFICIAL. Don't waste my time. Other people are also waiting.

NIKHIL. What's your problem? Are you blind?

PRIYA. Let's go.

(*It's PRIYA's turn to drag NIKHIL back to the end of the line. They see BHIMA occupying their place.*)

NIKHIL. Sorry, you are taking our place.

BHIMA. I ... I don't see your name anywhere.

NIKHIL. We were here first.

BHIMA. Go on, do what you like. I am not moving.

(*NIKHIL and PRIYA go stand behind BHIMA. They start talking amongst themselves in a very animated way.*)

LINE STATE: REEMA UDAY RAJ ANAND BHIMA NIKHIL PRIYA)

BHIMA (*to ANAND*): Can you believe some people? They come in late but are already trying to get to the first position in line!

ANAND. You're right. Us Indians have no discipline.

UDAY. No wonder we're falling behind China at every level. These Chinese - look at them! From the top society to prison labor - it's discipline and hard work every day.

BHIMA. You took the words right out of my mouth. We should do something about this.

RAJ. What's the point yaar? We're like this only.

(Lull in proceedings.)

BHIMA *(to UDAY)*. Do I know you?

UDAY. I am just an ordinary man.

BHIMA. No, no, no. You look familiar.

RAJ. Of course he does. All you have to do is to open the newspaper.

BHIMA. Oh wait, you are in politics! My lucky day.

(BHIMA tries to move up front. NIKHIL grabs him from behind.)

NIKHIL. Oh no you don't.

BHIMA. Let me go!

NIKHIL. Trying to jump to the front of the line, eh?

REEMA. What are you doing?

PRIYA. Stop it!

ANAND *(to BHIMA)*. Enough, enough. No need to go. You can pay your respects from a distance.

(NIKHIL lets BHIMA go. BHIMA composes himself.)

BHIMA *(to NIKHIL)*. Crazy man!

NIKHIL. You can say whatever you want but you're not going up there.

BHIMA. I will! Who are you to stop me?

RAJ *(to BHIMA)*. Bhai-saab, careful! There are lots of lunatics around these days. I myself was lucky to escape from a bad situation the other day. Why make a fuss?

UDAY. Thousands of years of foreign rule, you think we would have learned something by now. But we can't even form a line without fighting.

BHIMA. If you are such a big shot, why are you waiting?

REEMA. Mind your own business! Why are you dragging him into this? His health is not good!

RAJ. OK, OK everybody. Cool down.

ANAND (to BHIMA). But you look very familiar too. I know I've seen you somewhere.

BHIMA. No yaar.

ANAND. I am positive.

BHIMA. Can't be. (Pause) What are we waiting for by the way?

RAJ. Wha... what do you mean? You don't know?

BHIMA. No. I was just passing by. (Smiles) I didn't want to miss out.

NIKHIL (Shaking his head). Miss out!

PRIYA. So you just go around standing in random lines. How strange!

BHIMA. Look memsaheb, these days there are lines everywhere and for everything. You never know when you might need something.

PRIYA (to NIKHIL). And I thought you were crazy.

BHIMA. Not crazy, madam. Practical! "Always be prepared." That's my motto. For good people, I have this. (BHIMA opens his backpack and takes out a handful of sweets which he passes on to everybody in front of him. Meanwhile, NIKHIL and PRIYA are deep in discussion. It looks like they are coming to an understanding.) And for bad people, (looking at NIKHIL) I have this. (He pulls a knife out of the backpack before putting it back in.)

ANAND. Hey, go easy with that!

BHIMA. You never know when you'll need it. People can get very emotional when they wait. You know, I had a really close shave the other day.

ANAND. My name is Anand, by the way. Here is my card (*Pulls out a card and gives to BHIMA.*) If you ever need anything - anything fixed, bought, or sold - I'm your man.

BHIMA. Ah, you're a middleman.

PRIYA. A dalal, eh? Tell me something - if you wanted something foreign twenty years ago, say Johnny Walker Black Label whiskey, I can see your use. But these days, all I have to do is to go to the local shopping center and it's all there. I should know, I used to live abroad. So tell me - what do we need you for?

ANAND. You misunderstand my profession. What - you think I sell liquor out of the back seat of my Maruti? (*Laughs.*) Please! But, if you want a permit to build that shopping center, you talk to me.

RAJ. Arre yaar, (*Indicating the line*) why don't you do something about this. Every day, it gets longer and longer. It just seems we spend most of our lives waiting these days. Why, there must be a queue to get into hell too!

REEMA. Don't joke about such things. (*Pointing to UDAY.*) Be patient! Learn from his example. (*PRIYA and NIKHIL roll their eyes. BHIMA rummages in his backpack, pulls out a small radio and puts it to his ears. He twiddles the knobs.*)

BHIMA. Damn batteries! Guys, do any of you know the score?

ANAND (*Pulls out a handheld electronic gizmo, taps on it.*)
Five down, five to go.

RAJ (*Pumping his fists*). Come on guys, come on!

BHIMA (*Clapping his hands*). So close!

NIKHIL. Yes!

UDAY. That's not too bad!

REEMA. Don't get excited.

(MANISH enters from the right, talking loudly on his cellphone. He walks to the front of the line, pretending not to notice anybody there.)

NIKHIL. Hey!

RAJ. Where do you think you are going?

ANAND. This is not your home!

REEMA. You think you own this place?

(Smoothly, MANISH does an about turn, going back the way he came. He exits, still talking on his cell.)

REEMA. Some people!

ANAND *(to RAJ.)* Save my spot! *(Runs after MANISH.)*

RAJ. Go easy on him!

(NIKHIL comes forward to the front of the stage.)

LINE STATE: REEMA UDAY RAJ BHIMA PRIYA

NIKHIL)

NIKHIL. Ladies and gentlemen, this is precisely the problem! Look at you! Look at us all! Do I like this standing around? Do any of you? Things have become so bad *(points at BHIMA)* that if we see a line, we have to go stand there automatically!

RAJ. What do you want to do about it?

NIKHIL. So you would rather spend your whole life waiting?

(ANAND returns looking disappointed. He re-takes his spot next to RAJ.) Hey you, where did you go?

ANAND. None of your concern!

NIKHIL. You went to make a deal, didn't you? I bet you were trying to sell your spot over here.

ANAND. So what if I did? Anything is negotiable as long as it has value!

RAJ. Hey jaar, did that fellow bite?

ANAND. No.

REEMA. Selling your position? Shame, shame, what is the world coming to?

UDAY. This is our biggest problem. We talk and give speeches and no one does anything.

ANAND. Oh that's rich! That guy found it quite funny seeing you stand there. He said you were kicked out of the Party for taking bribes.

(PRIYA, meanwhile, goes backstage, behind everybody, and starts to move slowly towards the head of the line.)

REEMA. The nerve! That video was processed. It obviously wasn't him! It was a conspiracy!

ANAND. Reema...

REEMA. Let me handle this!

ANAND. That's enough!

NIKHIL. Stop it! You're getting sidetracked. Look, here's your chance to make a difference. I say we get together and say we won't take it anymore!

RAJ. Why?

REEMA. We're ok here.

NIKHIL. That's easy for you to say. You're at the front.

ANAND. Sore loser!

BHIMA. Damned NRIs! Just can't stand waiting, can you?

NIKHIL. That's not the point, don't you see? Today it's me, tomorrow it could be you! We need to ask for our rights!

(Meanwhile, PRIYA has quietly headed to the front and is now standing behind REEMA.)

LINE STATE: PRIYA

REEMA UDAY ANAND RAJ BHIMA

NIKHIL

OFFICIAL comes out of the door.)

OFFICIAL. What's going on? Calm down everybody. Form a single file, please.

REEMA (to PRIYA). What are you doing here? Go back!

(PRIYA moves to the front of the line.)

REEMA (to the OFFICIAL.) Look, we were here first. She shouldn't be here!

OFFICIAL. Why do you keep complaining? Just form a single line, OK?

REEMA. Officer, you may not remember me but definitely you know (*indicating* UDAY) my husband. Let us in. It'll be to your advantage. He knows people...

OFFICIAL. Sorry, too late. (OFFICIAL goes back in. NIKHIL triumphantly moves in next to PRIYA.)

LINE STATE: NIKHIL PRIYA REEMA UDAY RAJ ANAND BHIMA.)

RAJ. Desis!

ANAND. Full of dirty tricks!

BHIMA. No wonder our country is in such a state!

UDAY. What do you expect? Backstabbers, the lot of them!

REEMA. What did he mean, "too late?"

(MANISH, still on his cell phone, again enters the stage on the right and proceeds to the front as before.)

NIKHIL. What's going on?

PRIYA. Back again? You just don't learn, do you?

(MANISH unconcernedly reaches the front door and as if by magic, the door opens. The OFFICIAL is all smiles. Manish walks in still talking on his cellphone. The OFFICIAL opens a big ledger and ticks off a name. The door closes.)

NIKHIL. I can't believe this!

UDAY. I keep telling you - this country has gone to the dogs!

PRIYA. We've been waiting for so long and now this...

BHIMA. Connections, it's all connections...

(OFFICIAL comes out again. Everybody tenses to get in.)

OFFICIAL. Everybody! Come back tomorrow!

NIKHIL. What do you mean?

PRIYA. After all this?

OFFICIAL. Sorry, there's nothing I can do. It's not your time, yet.

(The OFFICIAL shuts the door. Everybody dejectedly turns around to leave.)

UDAY (to NIKHIL). Listen... (NIKHIL turns around.) Can you save me a space in line tomorrow?

(NIKHIL and PRIYA start laughing. Lights fade out. Everybody walks off. Lights fade in again. Stage is empty.

NIKHIL and PRIYA enter the stage, again from the right.)

NIKHIL. Hurry, we'll be late!

PRIYA. Stop it. You're hurting me!

NIKHIL (Stops and looks around). Almost, we're almost there...

PRIYA. (Points with her one free hand). There is the entrance.

NIKHIL (Pretends not to listen. Looks around some more). Found it! (They walk up to the door. He tries twisting the handle but no luck.) It's locked.

PRIYA. Great. You dragged me out here for this?

NIKHIL. I am sure they will open soon.

PRIYA. When? I don't see anyone.

NIKHIL. Isn't that great? I... I...

PRIYA. What?

NIKHIL. Somehow, I've seen this place already. Were we here before?

PRIYA. I don't remember. I don't think so.

NIKHIL. Strange, very strange.

PRIYA. Are you ok?

(ANAND enters the stage, looks around, and stands behind NIKHIL and PRIYA.)

ANAND. Hi, I'm Anand. Have we met?

NIKHIL. You look familiar. I've seen you before.

PRIYA. Wh... where is your friend?

ANAND. You mean Raj? He got into an accident. He'll be here soon.

NIKHIL (to PRIYA). How do you know he had a friend?

PRIYA. I don't know ... I'm scared. Where are we?

NIKHIL. I don't know.

(They stand holding each other. ANAND waits behind them.)

UDAY and REEMA slowly enter the stage from the right.)

The END