

## Number two!

There is number one and there is number two! Of course, there are other numbers too. But in human discourse these two numbers appear much more often. For certain age groups (such as babies and really old folks) these numbers even take an out-of-proportion importance.

The Indian prime minister Narendra Modi launched his "Clean India" project during his first term (2014-2019). One big goal of this project was to address the acute shortage of toilets all over India by building thousands of toilets. During one of his press conferences, he was asked about this project. The questioner asked if building toilets was the "number one" priority of his administration. Modi replied, tongue in cheek, "No. It's number two!"

Number one and number two occupy a special place in the world of humor. Here is one of those "uncouth" gems: A boy was asked to count numbers and no matter where he started he would always stop counting at 239. When asked why, he sheepishly revealed his hesitation: "if I continued, that would be too farty!"

Now, you might be wondering where this article is headed. Fear not, dear reader, as I intend to delve into more serious matters.

In the real world, number ones are the winners—the richest individuals, top scorers in exams, or Olympic gold medalists. Their stories are well-known; they are celebrated, publicized, and their names etched into record books.

Imagine that you are running the 100-meter sprint in the Olympics. Secure the first position, and you earn the coveted gold medal, with

your smiling face gracing media coverage. Inspirational quote requests flood in, and companies, whether selling sports equipment or anything else, clamor to sign lucrative deals with you.

But what happens if you lag in this 100-meter sprint even by a fraction of a milli-second and come out "number two"? Yes, there's the silver medal, but that's essentially it. No interviews or lucrative commercial deals come your way. The world nearly forgets you even ran the race. While close friends and family might console you for the millisecond miss, the world moves on. They assure you that next time, the gold will be yours.

That's pretty much how the world works. You are either "number one" or you are nobody.

If you ask me, I find this fact of human existence quite interesting and really not so troubling. Because I reflect on the flip side of all the publicity and fame enjoyed by number one. I consider the loss of privacy number ones have to endure. I think about the fear they constantly feel of getting dethroned from their number one position. I think about the inevitable jealousy and envy heaped on them by everyone around them. I think about their loneliness caused by their own arrogance and distrust.

I think being "number two" is a much better situation. You are practically number one anyway, just short by a tiny distance. Who cares if others don't see it that way! I prefer to be number two because I get to retain my anonymity and privacy which are much more valuable to me. I can move around freely without getting pestered by envious people. It keeps me humble and grounded without the fake celebrations, undeserved felicitations, and showers of gifts.

In the animated movie "The Incredibles" a family of "supers" is trying to blend in with the commoners. "Dash", who is their 8-year-old son, is a "super" too and can run lightning fast, which of course is a problem because they are trying to blend in. At the 100-meter race at his school, every other parent is shouting "Run baby! Go faster!" etc. while Dash's parents are screaming "Slow down! Not so fast!" Dash is confused – naturally – and he ends up coming second in the race. The joy on his parents' faces is pure joy to watch, even in the animated form.

We are all incredible in some way too but let us all strive to be number two in whatever we do and give the aspiring "number ones" a run for their money!

*Author: Abhay B. Joshi (abjoshi@yahoo.com)*

*Last updated: 25 December 2023*